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Just Being Difficult?

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The Metaphysics of Clarity and the Freedom of Meaning

Paradoxes of Clarity

Clarity, as a norm for speech and writing, presents a paradox: although the burden of achieving it falls on the speaker, the achievement itself apparently falls to the hearer. I can labor mightily to produce a clear essay, argument, or sentence. But I have not actually produced it until you agree that I have—if only tacitly, by continuing the conversation. If, by contrast, you tell me that I have not made myself clear, there is no arguing with you about that; all I can do is try again to express what I have to say, in different terms, so that you can understand it. My words are not clear until you have understood what I meant by them.

Other discursive norms are not like this. No one is privileged to judge, for example, whether a given utterance achieves truth. If I tell you something and you tell me that it is false, I can argue with you about that. I can defend my statement, give evidence and reasons for it, and so on—exactly as you can do against it. I am not obliged, just by your reaction, to retract my statement. And it may even be that I am right: that my sentence is in fact true and you were simply wrong to call it false. In any case we are on an equal footing.

To put this into one of the conceptual frameworks that we in the West have inherited, that of Kant: Truth appears to be a cognitive norm, whereas clarity seems to be aesthetic. As a judgment of taste imputes beauty to its object, so I can impute clarity to my words; but this means nothing more than that I expect that others will agree that they are clear. I cannot demonstrate their clarity any more than I can (for Kant) demonstrate that something is beautiful.

But subjecting the paradox of clarity to a Kantian conceptual framework

gives rise to another, more daunting, paradox: if clarity is like beauty, then it cannot be defined. We know it when we see or hear it but cannot say in what it consists. For anyone who knew what the nature of clarity was would not need a hearer to tell her if she had been clear on a given occasion: she could simply see for herself whether her utterance matched the criteria for clarity, as codified in its definition. This is a hard place in which to leave clarity, for it makes of it a self-violating norm: what are we to make of a notion of clarity that itself cannot be defined and so is inherently obscure?

A False Solution: Clarity as Unambiguousness

This pair of paradoxes combines into a rather simple dilemma. If, on the one hand, the nature of clarity were clear, then we would know whether we had attained it when we speak, and the first paradox of clarity would not arise. But if the nature of clarity is unclear, we have a sort of practical version of Russell's paradox: a norm that cannot apply to itself. A given sentence or argument or essay might be clear, but the judgment that it is could not.

Many contemporary American philosophers, bobbing along in the wake of logical positivism, have "solved" this dilemma by denying outright its first horn. They would call a statement "clear" not if it accurately conveyed the thoughts of the speaker to someone else but if it allowed for a single and complete distribution of truth values. If we can say, for every object in the universe, whether a given sentence is true of it or not, then that sentence is clear, and we do not need any hearers to tell us so.

This move, it bears noting, subordinates clarity to truth: a sentence is true (according to a famous philosophical tradition) if it corresponds to reality, false if it does not. It is clear if it permits us to assign one or the other of these two values to it: if it is unambiguous. By reducing clarity to the possibility of truth, this view makes of it what Kant would call a "cognitive" matter, amenable to demonstration. I do not need a hearer to tell me whether my utterance is clear, for I can perfectly well decide for myself whether it allows an unambiguous distribution of truth values. If it does, and you as hearer do not think so, you are wrong. The first horn of the above dilemma has now been legislated away—like drug use, and with approximately equal effect: the behavior still continues. In this case people still feel obligated to reformulate their statements when others do not understand them.

The Metaphysics of Clarity

I have now broached two concepts of clarity: clarity as the accurate conveyance of the thoughts of a speaker to a hearer, and clarity as the un-

ambiguous distributability of truth values. Both of these have to do with various sorts of matching or (more mysteriously) correspondence. On the first concept the thoughts in the hearer's head should match or correspond to those in the speaker's. On the second my words should be capable of corresponding, or not corresponding, to reality.

The traditional way to understand correspondence is as a form of similarity. This is what Aristotle does when he defines sentential truth as the connectedness of subject and predicate. Truth and falsity, for Aristotle, depend "on the side of the objects, in their being combined or separated, so that he who thinks the separated to be separated and the combined to be combined has the truth, while he whose thought is in a state contrary to that of the objects is in error."[1] When the separations and connections in my mind match those presented by the objects I perceive, I have attained "truth."

What leads Aristotle to this view is not its epistemological merits alone (whatever they are) but a problem arising from the fact that he views sensation as the passage of a sensible form or quality of an object from the object to the soul of the perceiver of it.[2] The problem arises because the sensible form that passes from an object to a soul, like any form, cannot change—and so cannot be changed by that passage. Hence, as Aristotle puts it in *De Interpretatione*, the things in my soul must be "likenesses" of the things outside my soul (1.16a7–8).

The problem with this is evident: not all sensory qualities are unchanged by their passage from an object into a soul. The cloud I see on the horizon may look smaller than a dime. Sitting across from Coriscus in a gloomy room, I may not perceive his complexion exactly right. The things in my soul are not, usually, exact likenesses of the things outside it but more or less distorted approximations. How, then, can anything in my mind ever correspond to anything outside it? How can anything be true?

Aristotle's answer is that this whole issue does not affect truth, since the likeness involved in truth does not directly concern concrete sensory qualities at all but is strictly a matter of connection and separation. Although the size of the cloud in my field of vision does not match its real magnitude, I can still truthfully perceive the *connection* between that cloud and its color or between it and another cloud. If Coriscus's complexion has been distorted by the intervening air or even by my eyes, that is no matter because my properly cognitive business is not to perceive his complexion at all but to connect whatever color I do see with his other perceived properties and to separate it from other properties that he does not have. Connection and separation, Aristotle's gloss for what more recent philosophers call "correspondence," are thus special cases of sensory form. They are determinate qualities that (unlike color and size) can pass absolutely unchanged from the object known to the knowing soul. Aristotle thus defines truth as correspondence,

in part at least, because he is committed to the idea that in cognition form must be transmitted from object to soul without change.

This commitment—I will call it the law of the preservation of form—is more than merely epistemological: it applies to all form as such, which passes unchanged from being to being and only looks different, in different beings, because of the unfortunate accretion of matter. Thus, in Aristotelian genetics the human form passes unchanged from the father to his child, who not only will be conspecific with him but should, as Aristotle rather strenuously insists, actually resemble him: "Any one who does not resemble his parents is already, in a sense, a monster; for in such creatures nature has in some way transgressed the genus."[3] Similarly, although hot water does not feel like hot air, the nature of heat is not changed by being communicated from the fire to the pot above it.

The law of the preservation of form structures not only Aristotle's definition of truth but his view of clarity as well. As Aristotle argues at length in book 3 of *De Anima*, knowledge is a quality or form of a mind. A piece of knowledge cannot, then, be changed by being passed from teacher to pupil. Linguistic communication, such as teaching, is in fact for Aristotle one form of motion, which means that the quality (knowledge) imparted to the learner must already be present in the teacher.[4]

When this is extended to the exchange of information that occurs in all speaking/writing and hearing/reading, we get a demand that the knowledge that comes about in someone's soul as a result of hearing the words of someone else should always be formally identical with the knowledge in the speaker's soul; and this is the first of the two concepts of clarity broached above. An utterance is clear if its words, as the material vehicles of its meaning, convey that meaning without change from the mind of the speaker to that of the hearer. All utterances should be clear because knowledge is a determinate quality, or form, in a soul. Form must be transmitted without change from one mind to another because it is the nature of form not to change, and that in turn is a metaphysical thesis.

The logical positivists, like all moderns, were more Aristotelian than they cared to be: they threw Aristotelian form out of nature but retained it as the universal structuring principle of the human world.[5] The second, "positivist" concept of clarity broached in this paper is, predictably, also rooted in what I call the law of preservation of form—and so in metaphysics. On that view clarity means that the sentence is like a clean, flat mirror: it is ready to convey the properties of things well enough for us to be able to tell what is an image of, or true of, what. The "image" of reality that it presents, in other words, should be undistorted.

This concept of clarity thus also goes back to Aristotle's view that language is a matter of resemblances or matchings, that is, of efforts to observe

the law of the preservation of form. His own categories, basic or derivative, are validated, he thinks, as such: they are valid because they (somehow) resemble objects outside the mind. The more they do this—the more they provide headings that group together only things that actually are alike—the "clearer" they will be.[6] The main change from Aristotle to the moderns is the replacement of connection and separation by the much more mysterious, and hence more easily fetishized, relation of "correspondence."

Thus, the category of "slave by nature," which Aristotle discusses in *Politics* 1.5 and which does so much work in legitimating vicious structures of the ancient economy, is valid (in Aristotle's view) because there really is a group of people who have passive but not active reason: they can recognize the right thing to do when someone else tells them but cannot come up with it for themselves. A similar passivity characterizes the seemingly different category of "slave by law," which includes people taken captive in a just war (and their descendants). There really were people in Aristotle's world who had been enslaved on such grounds, and they reached that pass because they chose to surrender rather than to fight on to their deaths—that is, because they really lacked courage. There will always be wars and people deficient in the courage to fight them to the death, so "slave by law" is an eternal kind—very like a natural kind.

Solving the Paradox: Clarity as a Transitional Property of Discourse

It is important to see that the idea that all discourse should be clear is new with Aristotle. This is not always recognized. Martha Nussbaum, for example, has written that "ever since Socrates . . . [philosophy] has been a discourse of equals who trade arguments and counter-arguments without any obscurantist sleight-of-hand."[7] Although Nussbaum was originally trained as a Greek scholar, it is hard to detect in this observation any knowledge at all of Greek philosophy or its development. True, the Presocratic philosopher Parmenides is no Hume; and Heracleitus was famously nicknamed *ho skoteinos*, the obscure one. But things did not exactly get clearer with Socrates: has Nussbaum never heard of Socratic irony? The honest, even yeoman-like argumentation to which she reduces philosophy is, in Plato's dialogues, only the occasional basis of a much more complex series of moves and strategies, as is noted by the author of the "Seventh Letter" (that is, by Plato himself or an associate). It is as if Nussbaum watched a basketball game, saw only dribbling, and denied that the numbers on the scoreboard were rising.

True to his metaphysics of form, Aristotle himself claims that "language to be good must be clear." But he makes the claim in his *Rhetoric*, not in a treatise on philosophical method such as the *Analytics* (where clarity is required only of definitions).[8] And even Aristotle seems to have honored clarity very much in the breach. Anyone who has struggled through even a page of the central books of his *Metaphysics* knows that he dispenses with clarity when it comes to really basic thinking. As Herman Bonitz put it, "Is enim ut est diligentissimus in cognoscendis rebus singularibus . . . ut est acutus et ingeniosus in redigendas his singularis rebus ad summas, quas distinxit, omnium entium categorias; ita quum de iaciendis altissimis doctrinae fundamentis et de confirmandis interque se conciliandis principiis agitur, plurimum relinquit dubitationis."[9]

This discussion of ancient philosophy, although perhaps interesting, has not been a mere diversion. Seeing how clarity, both as the accurate conveyance of the thoughts of a speaker to a hearer and as the unambiguous distributability of truth values, is rooted in the law of the preservation of form enables us to solve rather than deny the paradox with which I began. For clarity is not, it seems, a property of my thoughts, or my words, for if it were, then you would not be its privileged judge. Nor does it reside merely in your understanding of my thoughts or words, because then if my words were unclear, you would have failed and I would not be required to reformulate my views. Clarity is, in sum, a property of the transition between my mind and yours: if my meaning has not changed when it reaches you, the words that conveyed it were clear.

Clarity in speech thus requires both a speaker and a hearer. (It may be worth reflecting on the social conditions that allow something that in its basic nature is cooperative to appear paradoxical. Those conditions may even overlap with those that make it seem plausible for logical positivists to legislate the paradox away altogether.)

What if Matter Speaks?

The instatement of clarity as a necessary condition for good thinking, speaking, and writing is thus grounded in metaphysics—in the law of the preservation of form. Certainly the facts of discourse, as we know them, do not justify it. For there misunderstanding—my meaning not entering someone else's head precisely as I intended it—is more the rule than the exception. Indeed, we would often prefer to have our words creatively applied rather than merely accurately repeated, even if such creativity always involves some degree of what Aristotle would call misunderstanding. Nor need we turn to ancient philosophers to see that unclarity is not only pervasive in learned discourse but even desirable. David Hull has argued both points in the case of contemporary science: "When new ideas are introduced they are

rarely expressed with sufficient clarity. Scientists do not know what they intended to say until they find out what other scientists think they have said. . . . But distortion is more than routine in science. It is a traditional mode of argumentation, and a mode that is not entirely counterproductive. It forces scientists to commit themselves."[10] Whether forcing scientists to commit themselves is the only productive role for "distortion" will be discussed shortly. For the moment it seems that the law of preservation of form cannot be grounded in empirical givens. Unclear discourse has had important roles to play in thought, from Greek metaphysics to postmodern science. Nor is it grounded, today, in metaphysics; for Aristotle's metaphysics of unchanging form has long been discredited. Why, then, is clarity still regarded by some people as an indispensable condition for good speech and writing? Why is the law of preservation of form still in force for discourse today? From what can it derive its legislative force?

Could it be that the word *unchanging* is the key? That the demand for clarity is *nothing more than* a demand for unchanging meaning (which in turn implies an unchanging domain of realities to which our words should remain "likenesses")? That this whole effort at universal clarity is nothing more than (yet another) expression of what Heidegger called the "metaphysical" effort to see anything and everything as "something which constantly stands at one's own disposal"?[11]

Aristotle himself seems to have thought so, for in the passages I have cited—as well as in his *Poetics*—he associates clarity with familiarity and ordinariness: a discourse will be clear if it uses standard words in their standard meanings or else works them up carefully by a process that moderns would call "induction" and that remains faithful to the particulars from which it begins.[12] If so, then the privilege of clarity in Western discourse is simply a demand that discourse avoid innovation.

So understood, this demand not only has metaphysical roots but grows from sociopolitical soil. The crystalline clarity of Aristotelian form, after all, is not the whole of his ontology. If it were, there would be no places for form to leave behind and transit to. Also ingredient in the Aristotelian world is matter. The metaphysics of form in terms of which the norm of clarity is historically grounded is one that maintains, and therefore abets, what can only be called the "domination" of matter by form.[13] In cognition this domination proceeds to the point of effacement: matter is unknowable, and all we can know of a thing are the various forms that we can receive in our souls. (Much of the unclarity of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* results from the fact that he is trying there to talk of the relation of form to matter and so—somehow—of matter itself.)

Two things, then, are forbidden by this metaphysics of form and clarity. One is newness: all form is eternal and preexists; the meanings of words, like the forms in the world of which they are likenesses, are eternal. All we can hope to do by way of improving our language is to capture them more adequately in our words (for example by defining *human* as "rational animal" rather than, say, as "animal with earlobes"). The other thing forbidden, and much more stringently, is the possibility that matter itself could ever speak, ever generate meanings. For meaning is form, and matter is—not.

What might we be entitled to expect, then, if matter were somehow to speak—to cease in any traditional sense to be "matter" at all, spontaneously to exceed this most basic of Western dichotomies? Certainly not the conceptually precise discourse of a preestablished set of forms or meanings. More like sighs and groans, at first—the emissions of a body in pain or ecstasy. Then, perhaps, an unrelenting and frustrated struggle to give pattern to the groans, to gain articulation for what is provoking them. Such a struggle may take any number of paths.

And it is taking them, because the speech of matter is the most important global event of the last half century. That period has seen large numbers of beings formerly relegated to the status of mere matter—people who had been thought to be mere bodies, mindless or almost so—stand up and start to talk: gay men, lesbians, people of color, women, groups formerly colonized in a variety of ways. This development is as important to thinking people in the twenty-first century as the triumph of science was to those in the first half of the twentieth and for the same reason: on the one hand, it has the capacity generally to enrich every human being (and not only spiritually). On the other, it has the potential utterly to destroy the world in which we think we live.

As a mere observer of this stupendous upheaval (although a sympathetic one), I can offer here only a few observations about where it may go with respect to the ancient norm of clarity, so suspect in its foundations and so tenacious in its grip.

Aristotle, Hegel, and Anonymous

Any attempt to articulate a life experience that has previously been relegated to the unheard opacity of mere matter can, it would seem, end in one of three ways: in an Aristotelian or Hegelian manner or in one that has no name.

The Aristotelian ending would be one in which the speaking matter, searching for an adequate vocabulary in which to articulate its pains and joys, would find one already familiar and—so to speak—well formed, which needs only to be taken over and used as it stands. The original unclarity was a mere contingent confusion, for the speaking matter could just as well have known from the start that the requisite words existed.

It is unlikely that such faith in the readily available conceptual frameworks is justified. First, it is a fact that the West by now contains a variety of what Richard Rorty calls "basic vocabularies."[14] These are sets of systematically interconnected, very basic, words or concepts to which people appeal for their understanding of themselves and others and in which they formulate their basic goals and plans of action. One generic name for these basic conceptual systems is "philosophy," and we could mention Platonism, Aristotelianism, Thomism, Kantianism, Hegelianism, and Marxism as a few examples of final vocabularies now available in the West. These vocabularies have now diverged from each other to such an extent, thinks Rorty, that communication among them is impossible.

This very plurality suggests that none of the available basic vocabularies by itself has been adequate to articulate everyone's experience up to now. Why, then, should it be assumed that any of them will be adequate to the newly speaking bodies of the third millennium? Moreover, most of the available final vocabularies have in fact been around for at least a couple of centuries, so if any of them were adequate for articulating the experiences of women and minorities, it would have done that job long ago.

None has, and this extraordinary fact suggests something else. To what do the available final vocabularies owe their common inability to articulate the experience of women and minorities? Is there some fault they all share, a core common to all that explains why all of them have, without exception, installed and legitimated the oppression of women and minorities?

In that case Rorty's claim of radical divergence among the final vocabularies available in the West today would be overblown. The various conceptual frameworks that we find around us today would, on a deeper level, be truly at one. Their arguments, however vicious, would be about secondary matters: about means, not ends. Their mutual incomprehension, however genuine, would be superficial: a matter of fashion, not essence. If such is the case, there is even less reason to think that the newly speaking bodies of the third millennium will ever come to rest comfortably and intelligibly within any of the currently prevailing final vocabularies.

And it *is* the case. What I earlier called the "domination" of matter by form is a leitmotif shared by all the philosophies I mentioned above and many others besides. It was first codified by Aristotle in a famous appeal to nature: "In all things which are composed out of several other things, and which come to be some single common thing, whether continuous or discrete, in all of them there turns out to be a distinction between that which rules, and that which is ruled; and this holds for all ensouled things by virtue of the whole of nature."[15] In other words, the domination of matter by form is universal and natural; in every association there must be a ruler (form) and a ruled (matter). The only question left is that of who will be which.

Aristotle's own account of the domination of form by matter was the first such account in Western philosophy, but as I have argued elsewhere it was not the most extreme or oppressive.[16] Modern versions of such domination, freed by empirical science from the constraints of nature, have been even more absolute. For all his jibes at Aristotle's natural philosophy, for example, Thomas Hobbes's subtitle for *Leviathan* is *The Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiastical and Civill.* Hobbes means the first two words in their traditional, that is Aristotelian, senses; but his deployment of them is a tyranny far beyond anything Aristotle ever envisioned.

Any attempt of matter to speak thus flies in the face of one of the most basic and dominant themes in Western thought: the domination of matter by form. Matter which speaks, then, can hardly expect to be familiar—or clear.

Aristotle's appeal to nature is basically an appeal to unchanging natural kinds, the general form of which is a form actively controlling some patch of matter. His view of natural kinds, however, does not survive the opening pages of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and its demise, in turn, allows a Hegelian vision of the speaking of matter that is very different from the Aristotelian one. In "Sense-Certainty," the *Phenomenology*'s opening section, experience is presented as a random flux so that a creative effort of the mind is required to gain any purchase on it at all. And as the rest of the book shows, our creative efforts always go astray eventually (that is what makes them *our* efforts), so no category can be eternally valid: all are in principle open to revision. (This is why, instead of transcending time at the end of the *Phenomenology*, consciousness's final, suicidal move is to embrace it).[17]

Since no category will be valid for all time, Hegel would be quite comfortable with my suggestion above that the categories basic to Western thought have reached their limits. Yet every time such a limit is reached in the *Phenomenology*, consciousness attempts to revise its categories in order to express what it has newly discovered. Applying this to the speech of matter suggests that such speech will eventually come to some sort of clarity but only in the terms of a new conceptual framework invented by the newly speaking bodies themselves—not one (or several) that are already available. This framework may be entirely new, or (more congenially to Hegel) it may be one that has been remodeled from previously available ones—but even in the latter case the remodeling may be so extensive as to obliterate any sense of derivation.

In such a case the new conceptual framework may be intelligible only to those who have shared the inarticulate joy and anguish from which it came. Like musical notation or quantum physics—indeed, like any conceptual framework at all—it will not make sense to those who engage it without the requisite prior experience. Yet for all that, it will be clear, at least in that it enables those who *have* had those experiences to think and work together. So

this Hegelian outcome would not completely abjure clarity. As with Hull's scientists it would recognize unclarity not as a mere contingent confusion but as a necessary prelude to clarity.

But there is a third possibility, one that (I suggested) has no name. It involves abjuring, rather than seeking, clarity altogether. In such a case, many think, common action will also be abjured, leaving us with what so many on the cultural right see as postmodern: a group of people who perversely choose to express themselves in ineffectual whines.

But there are different ways to "abjure" something. The previous paragraph trades on an absolute sense in which we "abjure" something by rejecting it altogether. But when something has had absolute status, that is, has been canonized as the indispensable goal or necessary precondition of some practice, we can "abjure" it simply by beginning to look on it not as absolutely valid but as merely one among a number of alternatives, thus situating it in a wider spectrum of goals and practices. This would leave room for discourse that is not only not clear from the start (as Aristotelian views hold discourse should be) but that is also not trying to make itself clear (as discourse should on Hegelian views).

Utterances in such discourse would not be merely ambiguous, because ambiguity can be resolved through the available conceptual repertoires. They would have to be so genuinely strange as to mean not more than one thing but fewer than one: utterances whose component elements, for example, cannot be put together in the accustomed ways. An example, recently given fame by Judith Butler, is Adorno's "Man is the ideology of dehumanization."[18]

I have elsewhere developed an extended theory of such discourse[19] and will content myself here with merely pointing out that such a statement may well provoke a proliferation of meanings, when the hearer responds to the unclear statement by extrapolating a new meaning for it—a meaning of her own. In that case we have (at least) *two* meanings: the speaker's original one and the one the hearer comes up with (which may, of course, overlap with the other to some degree).

Thus, Adorno's "Man is the ideology of dehumanization" is transformed when Butler expounds it to mean "the way the word 'man' was used by some of his contemporaries was dehumanizing."[20] For that is not the only possibility. Adorno may have had not merely his contemporaries in mind but the entire philosophy of the Enlightenment, with its constant talk of "man" when it should say "argumentatively trained intellect." He may even have targeted, à la Heidegger, all modern philosophy. And by *man* Adorno might also have meant more than a word: he could have been talking about "man" as a socially functional illusion, such as that of American invincibility prior to the Vietnam War.

My aim here is not to point out deficiencies in Butler's admirably lucid

gloss, which elegantly makes her point that Adorno's seemingly unintelligible words can receive a perfectly clear interpretation. But part of the way those words work is to be susceptible of more than one possible meaning; alternatives cannot be ruled out.

Thus, the original meaning Adorno intended when he wrote his sentence and the meaning that Butler gives it overlap but are different. Different again is the meaning that I give it here, as a case of what I elsewhere call "abnormal poetic interaction." In each case the sentence transits into a new conceptual environment, where (as in Derridean iteration)[21] it does new work, and provokes new thoughts in the minds of its hearers. In the process its meaning is transformed—or, better, trans-formed—at every stage.

When things like this happen, we—the speech community—are provided with new meanings and categories, such as Butler's category of "[linguistic] challenge to common sense." Our dependence on the previously available repertoire of meanings and categories is lessened, and our verbal capacities are increased. This process, then, deserves to be called emancipatory. And it is an emancipation we often wish for and sometimes seek; for who does not hope that her words will be taken up by hearers and used in productive ways of which she has not dreamed?

If to engage in such discourse is to abjure clarity, it is also to commend oneself to a complementary set of values—playfulness, improvisation, and freedom itself.[22] It is to forswear the Aristotelian law of the preservation of form in favor of what his wiser teacher, Plato, called the "leaping spark" of philosophical insight: an unpredictable, and so joyful, passage from soul to soul.[23] And it is to forswear the vain project of immortalizing one's thoughts; for even if one's words survive, their meanings will not.

When basic issues are settled and newness is not on, the habitual suffices and our speech can observe the law of the preservation of form in its linguistic sense: we can expect and demand clarity from those who address us. But history—even, as we saw, the history of science—teaches that those conditions do not always obtain. Simple common sense—of all things—shows us that they certainly do not obtain right now. Many people today find that the current conceptualities do not do justice to their experience, and new ones are needed. Breaking free from the old words—always, as Rorty teaches, a delight[24]—is now a necessity for those people, in ways that, if they are allowed to stand as what they are, will enrich everyone.

So we see, finally, the terrible price paid by those who, siding with form against matter, would make clarity an indispensable condition of serious thought. Trapped in a misguided effort to obtain immortality for their own current world, they would force us all to remain in ancient and oppressive habits of thought. They set themselves against time itself—and against the creativity and joy that are our privilege, as the mortal creatures that we are.

Notes

1. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 9.9.1051b2f; also *De Interpretatione* 1.16a11.

2. Aristotle, *De Anima* 2.7.418a33seq and, more generally, *De Anima* 3.2.425b225–426a1, 416a6–11; also cf. Aristotle, *On Dreams* 459a27–60a32. On the origins of this view in Aristotle's account of form in matter see also Edwin Hartman, *Substance, Body, and Soul* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 175–80.

3. Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium* 4.3.767b7f.

4. See Aristotle, *Physics* 3.3.202a31–32, 202b6–8, 8.5.257a1–3, 257b3–4; also *Metaphysics* 2.9.1065b19.

5. On this general characteristic of modernity see my *Metaphysics and Oppression* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 105–8.

6. See Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 2.13.97b33–39.

7. Martha Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody," *New Republic*, Feb. 22, 1999, p. 38; available at http://www.tnr.com/archive/0299/022299/nussbaum022299.html.

8. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3.2.1404b1–5; *Posterior Analytics* 2.13.97b30–37.

9. Roughly: "However diligent [Aristotle] is with regard to the knowledge of individual things, and however acute and ingenious he is in bringing these individuals to the highest categories of all beings, which he distinguishes; yet, when it is a matter of laying the foundations of the highest doctrines and of confirming them and reconciling them with one another, he leaves a great many doubts" (Hermann Bonitz, *Aristotelis Metaphysica*, 2 vols. [Bonn, 1848] 2:29; quoted in Irwin, *Aristotle's First Principles* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988], 640 n. 4). Nussbaum says the same thing about Butler: "one is bewildered to find her arguments buttressed by appeal to so many contradictory concepts and doctrines, usually without any account of how the apparent contradictions will be resolved" (Nussbaum, "Professor of Parody," 41). This is high praise from so famous an admirer of Aristotle as Nussbaum. Perhaps it is unintentional.

10. David Hull, *Science as a Process* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 288–89.

11. Martin Heidegger, "Über Nietzsches Wort: Gott Ist Tod," in *Holzwege*, by Martin Heidegger, 4th ed. (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1963), 221.

12. Aristotle, *Poetics* 22.148a18–20.

13. See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 27–55; and the first two chapters of my *Metaphysics and Oppression*.

14. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 9.

15. Aristotle, *Politics* 1.4.1254a28–32.

16. See my *Metaphysics and Oppression*, 105–93.

17. G. F. W. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 563.

18. Judith Butler, "A 'Bad Writer' Bites Back," *New York Times*, March 20, 2000, op-ed.

19. John McCumber, *Poetic Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

20. Butler, "A 'Bad Writer' Bites Back."

21. Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Glyph* 1 (1977): 172–97.

22. It is thus no wonder that Martha Nussbaum attacks Butler for "unclarity," as well as for lacking immediate political relevance (of the single kind Nussbaum desires), and that she does so in an angrily dictatorial tone: the absolute installation of clarity brings absolute hatred for creativity and freedom. See Nussbaum, "Professor of Parody."

23. Plato, *Seventh Letter* 341d1. I am assuming here that Plato was the author of the letter; but even if he was not, it clearly expresses an ancient and respectable view of philosophy.

24. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.