

# Philosophical Insight: Falling Whilst Asleep

July 11, 2020

The philosophical enterprise is one of perennial revolution. After all, philosophical investigation necessitates the frequent revisions of one's commitments along the way. The moment of philosophical insight, I claim, is an awakening. It is a moment of destruction. It is an elimination of belief that irrevocably alters one's perception of reality, retroactively rewriting the memory of the previous worldview. To demonstrate this, I first describe the moment of philosophical insight, taking the *cogito* as a paradigmatic example, and then analyze this moment from a phenomenological perspective and explore its temporal asymmetry. I then show that insight is internal, and cannot, therefore, be objectively given to the student by the teacher.

To begin, I must first clarify what I mean by a moment of philosophical insight. Such a moment is one in which the philosopher comes to realize that their worldview can no longer be upheld. This may be due to a fundamental inadequacy or inconsistency of their worldview, or it may be due to its failure to reach the farthest corners of reality. In either case, the moment of insight occurs when this becomes apparent.

Before such an insight, the philosopher lives in a state of equilibrium: they operate with the belief that their perspective provides an adequate (if imperfect) depiction of reality. Insight perturbs this stasis. It is “something shocking, out of joint that appears to happen all of a sudden and interrupts the usual flow of things; something that emerges seemingly out of nowhere” (Zizek p. 4). Crucially, genuine insight is, therefore, *necessarily* unanticipated, and *necessarily* a destructive force. For it challenges the philosopher but offers in return no constructive resolution. This destruction initiates the silence from which philosophy begins which, for Cavell, is “the recognition of my lostness to myself” (Cavell p. 4). It is from this beginning that resolution may be sought. Such resolution, however, may only be obtained by exploring new alternatives to one’s worldview.

To better understand this, let us look to Descartes’ *cogito* for guidance. When the apprentice philosopher first encounters the *cogito*, it is a transformative experience. In understanding the basic formula of skepticism, they have a moment of insight, namely that any deep seated assumption may be challenged. However, this insight is internally driven; while it may be inspired by the words in the pages of *Meditations*, the process of realizing what those words mean comes from within. Moreover, if one honestly entertains the *cogito*, it will generically call for a dismantling of one’s worldview; indeed, to be totally skeptical is to dispense with *everything*. Thus, once the reader has come to grips with the basic tenets of this skepticism, they are left with a void to fill. Nonetheless, the *cogito* provides them with the first steps for reconstruction by justifying the existence of some minimal capacity to reason. However, the rest is left to them; so begins their

journey.

In the narrative of the philosopher's journey, the moment of insight serves as a call to action – one requiring a response, offering no resolution in itself. Yet, unlike usual literary narratives, the philosopher's journey is not one of forward motion; it is cyclic. After all, “the philosopher . . . is a perpetual beginner” and “[philosophy] is an ever-renewed experiment in making its own beginning” (Meleau-Ponty pp. 70–71). The philosopher is Sisyphus, constantly undertaking and re-undertaking the impossible task of *seeking to know*. Moments of insight provide the driving force that propels them up the mountain but also cause the slip of the foot that sends them tumbling back down. But every time they return to the bottom, it is not without lessons learned; such insights motivate a dialectic which serves to re-direct their goals. Each time they fall, they fall to a *different bottom*, and each time they redouble their efforts, it sends them up a *new mountain*.

Understood as a call to action, the moment of philosophical insight carries with it a moral obligation, a “responsibility for making sense of every particle or corpuscle of his or her experience” (Cavell p. 2). In the face of insight, one may either follow it or choose to ignore it. To knowingly suspend yourself, avoiding the fall, is to neglect your duty as a rational, though fallible, agent. Such a suspended realization is like a “book that you knew you needed to read but you didn't want to read. . . [because] you know it's going to mess you up” (Moten p. 14). It may seem strange to quote Moten here, whose concerns are focused on understanding the identity of blackness, and not on these abstract meta-philosophical issues. However, Moten spoke these words to describe his own feeling of coming

to terms with the implicit nothingness of the black experience – an uncomfortable reality to reconcile. His words serve as an apology for having put off a moral obligation to come to terms with such a jarring insight. Thus, it serves as a prime example wherein the moral obligation of insight is manifest.

At the moment in which philosophical realization presents itself to the philosopher, the philosopher undergoes an awakening. They suddenly realize that the image of reality which they had in mind was, in fact, not *real* reality, but more of a dream-like unreality – a vague depiction whose corners merely *resemble* those of reality. Hence, the fall from knowledge which, by insight, they are compelled to undergo is much like a fall in a dream which jars one from their slumber. Proust describes the moment of awakening thusly:

I had only the most rudimentary sense of existence, such as may lurk and flicker in the depths of an animal's consciousness; I was more destitute than the cave-dweller; but then the memory – not yet of the place in which I was, but of various other places where I had lived and might now very possibly be – would come like a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of not-being, from which I could never have escaped by myself (Proust p. 6).

Just as the dreamer, upon awakening, must undergo a moment of reorientation, the philosopher must confront the challenge of rebuilding their worldview in light of the new reality they have been thrust into. Yet, unlike the world one faces upon awakening from a state of unconsciousness, which, while disorienting,

is self-assembling, the world into which the philosopher awakens, ending their unknowing slumber, is empty and devoid of hints for reorientation. They awaken into a state of not being, contrary to the ready-made world they anticipate (analogous to the racial nothingness discussed by Moten). The philosopher's reason and memory alone must play the role of the guide. It is the fallibility and malleability of these faculties which ensure the philosopher will remain forever out of tune.

It is important to note that the experience of philosophical insight bears two critical temporal asymmetries. First, before the fall, the philosopher rests content with their existing worldview; their understanding of the world around them appears to be adequate (barring their intellectual modesty, pronouncing their own fallibility whilst unaware of where their beliefs fail). Yet, after the fall, when retrospectively recalling their perspective *as it had once been* prior to their moment of insight, the philosopher will inevitably see as obvious the flaws of their former beliefs. Thus, while they may have experienced their former worldview as astute *while they believed it*, their memory of it becomes dulled by the essential anxiety associated with its inadequacy *after* the fall. In this way, philosophical insight has the propensity to retroactively alter one's understanding of their own reality. It is easy to be clever after the fact, but impossible to return to a state of ignorance.

The second temporal asymmetry is that insights often bring about a feeling of putting into words primitive ideas that the philosopher held *before* the fall. That is, if an insight is sufficiently clear, it may feel as though it is merely the articulation of a notion the philosopher had implicitly known all along. Yet, it is often the case that, before the insight, the philosopher was in fact *unaware* of this purported

knowledge. Once again, Proust offers clarity for understanding this retroactive experience. In speaking about his as of yet unarticulated memories of Combray, he writes:

To tell the truth, I could have answered anyone who asked that Combray did include other scenes and did exist at other hours than these. But since what I would then have remembered about it would have been furnished me by voluntary memory, the memory of intelligence, and since the pictures which that kind of memory shows us of the past preserve nothing of the past itself, I would never have had any wish to ponder over this residue of Combray. To me it was in reality all dead (pp. 49–50).

In the same way, one's *post hoc* memory of such 'anticipated' articulations of primitive insights are generally not factual memories, but rather these 'voluntary' memories, memories derived from the informed intellect, not from the experience of the agent possessing this intellect. And just as Proust's voluntary memories of Combray have died, so too, do one's primitive, pre-linguistic anticipations die in the moment of their articulation. While the realization of such an insight may strike the philosopher as natural and long-awaited, it is only in the process of the insight being put into words and fully revealed that it may come to be understood. Afterward, nothing else remains of the seeds of preconception. The two states – one of primitive anticipation, and one of articulate realization – though connected, are unequal and incommensurable.

Allow me to press harder on this incommensurability between insight and factual memory.

While speaking about phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty remarks that it is “expressing in concrete form this *phenomenology for ourselves* which has given a number of present-day readers the impression . . . not so much of encountering a new philosophy as of recognizing what they had been waiting for” (Merleau-Ponty p. 64). The same holds true with the *cogito*; upon one’s first explicit encounter with it, jarring though it may be, the reader will generally feel as though something which they had always known had finally been put into words. And this template of the experience of reading the work of other philosophers goes beyond the *cogito* and phenomenology. It extends to *all* moments of deep philosophical insight.

In coming to terms with the *cogito*, Merleau-Ponty notes that the apprentice philosopher encounters two different *cogitos*: the tacit and the spoken. The spoken *cogito* refers to the idea which is “put into words and understood in words, and for this very reason not attaining its objective, since that part of our existence which is engaged in fixing our life in conceptual forms, and thinking of it as indubitable, is escaping focus and thought” (p. 201). The textual articulation of the insight (provided by the teacher for the student, for instance) is not enough to instill deep change; it rather perturbs their thinking only on a surface level. Yet, Merleau-Ponty goes on to note that “I should be unable even to read Descartes’s book, were I not, before any speech can begin, in contact with my own life and thought, and if the spoken *cogito* did not encounter within me a tacit *cogito*” (p. 201). No

genuine insight can be scraped from linguistic analysis alone; it must always find in the reader some tacit, pre-existing primitive form to latch onto.

This internal origin of insight, however, seems to be at odds with my claim that the memory of the insight's anticipation is illusory. While it is true that one generally does *not* anticipate insight prior to its revelation to them, the general claim that insight is *strictly* spontaneous is likewise indefensible. For, while I maintain that insight cannot be anticipated insofar as it can be consciously predicted, nor does it lie within the philosopher in full form simply unarticulated, the internality of insight nevertheless requires that there is some ever-present shadow of insight lurking in the corner. Such a vague, pre-linguistic form is necessarily distinct from the end product, but it serves as the putty which the philosopher may then mould in a moment of insight into a fully-fledged philosophical thought.

In light of this internality, I pose one final question: Can insight be given, perhaps by a teacher? That is, can any *particular* insight, selected by the teacher, be imposed upon the apprentice philosopher? Any lesson the teacher may offer the apprentice must be formulated objectively in some language; in Merleau-Ponty's terms, the teacher may only offer a *spoken* insight. Once the philosopher is caught up in the meaning of these words, "the significance carried into the reader's mind exceeds language and thought as already constituted and is magically thrown into relief during the linguistic incantation" (p. 201). Thus, it is impossible to reduce a moment of insight to external factors, such as a teacher's articulation of the insight in some language. At most, the teacher may hope to nudge the student toward the same psychological state they were in when they experienced some insight in the

hope that, under these conditions, the student may have a similar realization.

Indeed, insight is internally manufactured and must likewise be reconciled from within. Instruction is, in this capacity, a content without content; it necessarily takes the form of linguistic expression, yet, such an expression only goes so far. The content of any philosophical insight is found not in the words of the teacher, but in the thinking faculties of the student. In this way, philosophy *for the philosopher* begins with wonder. While the student may seek guidance from the teacher, the teacher's words inevitably become divorced from the lesson learned by the student, even if they initiate the chain of reasoning which leads the student to a moment of insight. There is thus an essential freedom and individuality implicit in the experience of insight.

Viewing the moment of insight as an awakening, the teacher may only push the sleeping student to induce a fall. If powerful enough, this fall can thus force them to awaken. However, the teacher cannot choose the world into which the student will awaken.

Philosophy is driven by the insights of philosophers. Such insights, I have shown, are experienced as an awakening. More precisely, they are experienced much in the same way one experiences a fall whilst asleep which suddenly jolts them into a new reality. But insight is experienced as a fall in another sense as well; it destroys the existing paradigm of reason with which the philosopher is familiar, obliging them to restart: it is a fall of Sisyphus, one with a capacity for dialectical reorientation. This fall retroactively affects one's memory of reality, irrevocably altering the memory of their former worldview. It may also make it

feel as though the insight could have been anticipated, even though this is impossible. Yet, detached though insight may be from the explicit paradigm of thought, its origins are internal. Necessarily, philosophical realization comes from within.

## Works Cited

Cavell, Stanley. "Silence Noises Voices". *Future Pasts: The Analytic Tradition in Twentieth Century Philosophy*. Edited by Juliet Floyd and Sanford Shieh. Oxford University Press, 2001. Print.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Basic Writings*. Edited by Thomas Baldwin. London: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Moten, Fred. *A Poetics of the Undercommons*. Sputnik & Fizzle, 2016. Print.

Proust, Marcel. *In Search of Lost Time: Swann's Way*. Vol. 1. Penguin, 1996. Print.

Zizek, Slavoj. *Event: A philosophical journey through a concept*. Penguin Random House, 2014. Print.