

June 13

Ok, I'm in business. Everything is up and running: The computer, the portable bubble-jet printer, an *Internet* link from a local number, and an *Email* hookup with my office. The place is even more beautiful than I remembered it. The people are friendly and helpful, the sun is shining, and the ducks are swimming in the narrow canal just outside my window. I checked into a lovely little room, Mtv is playing in the background, and I am evidently stalling now, until I think of something to say. Short break. Stop. Think. How to start? Above the line? Below the line? Ok, Ok. I got it back together now. The reader of this may know nothing about me. So now, a few introductory words. My friends may skip the next paragraph.

Two years ago I made a decision. Financially well off, with an extremely comfortable and undemanding executive position in a large company I founded many years ago, I decided to change my life; Or, rather, change the priorities in it. Close to the age of forty I declared a premeditated mid-life crisis, kissed everybody goodbye and enrolled in the Tel-Aviv University, to find out what has been said about the meaning of life. I had an ancient degree in computer science, and a very limited philosophical education, based mostly on S.H. Bergman's excellent *History of Philosophy*⁵. I studied like crazy: Five days a week, full days, and loved it. How refreshing was it, to constantly do stuff I really enjoy! How refreshing, to study something you love! I read, listened and wrote. First in Hebrew, than in English. And I really discovered things. I found out very important information.

As I said before, I promised to return and tell. I'm not really "returning", but I intend to tell - even as an interim report. Hopefully there will be more to follow. This first report is on the border zone between three philosophical domains: the philosophy of Language, Logic and Epistemology. Although my primary motivation in taking to philosophy was **ethical**, I decided to postpone the important stuff, the ethical, real-life implications of philosophy, to the end: To my Doctoral dissertation perhaps. For now, I thought, I need to find out what it is to **know**, to **understand**, to **mean**. These seemed like necessary foundations of every philosophical quest. Well, you can probably guess what I found: **Nobody knows**. Really! They say, that research of the Human brain is still in its first steps - scientists know very little about the working of the brain

⁵ Bergman's *History of Philosophy*⁴ describes 500 years of modern philosophy, from Nicholas of Cusa to Phenomenalism (app. 1440 to 1940). The two last volumes (out of a total of four) of this excellent book were published post-humously. The first volume was first published in 1970, when Bergman was 85 years old. In the introduction to the first volume, Bergman mentions only one philosopher out of the whole cannon: He mentions **Spinoza**. He does so because Spinoza is a unique crossroads between (general) philosophy and Jewish philosophy, which Bergman knew and cherished. Spinoza is a victim of gross misunderstanding, of poor translation. Spinoza's motivation, as are his conclusions, and as the title of his most important book⁵ indicates, is **Ethical**. Spinoza is an ethical man, an ethical philosopher, who took himself as dealing in nothing but morals. The severe criticism directed at Spinoza by his contemporaries, Jews and Christians alike, grasped the determinism he advocated as dangerously **immoral**. Spinoza was a mental giant, but a terrible writer. The "geometric method" in which *Ethics* is presented is, I suspect, not due to the mathematical precision with which his system is endowed, but to Spinoza's self-recognized limitations as an intelligible writer.

(although each has and uses one). Well, about **meaning, knowing** and **understanding** we know even less. We don't really know the meaning of the word **truth**, nor if there **is** an 'objective' meaning at all. Or if there **could** be such an objective meaning. Or **what** it could be, if there is one. We don't even know what we mean when we say these last words in the preceding sentence: *if there is one*. We don't really understand the meaning of the verb *to be*. Sure, we all use it: We know what it is to *be* in any **particular** context; But is there something in common for all the different particular instances of *being*? Are there two kinds of *being*: **real being** and **just being**? And if so, what is common to the variety of distinct kinds of **just being**? and if they all do have something in common,⁶ what separates the **real being** from all other kinds of being (aside from just saying that it is "real"). But even if I follow *Quine* and deny any "preferred" sense of *being*, still remains the question: What is it that is affirmed and denied in any particular context of **existence**? Consider the context of the game of chess: There **is** a rule that enables the pawn to make a first double step, and there **is no** rule that permits the pawn to step sideways. We all understand these two true existential propositions - the first being an affirmation of existence (of a rule in the game), the second a denial of existence of another rule. Note that there are here two distinct rules that are considered: The first exists, the other does not. But in some sense, they **both** exist, and even have a property in common: they are both rules! What we mean in the distinction between the existential status of these rule, has to do with their **validity**: The one is a real, valid rule, the other invalid. This distinction smells of **morals**: It is **good** to follow a **valid**, rule, and it is **bad** to follow an **invalid** rule of the game.

In general, the distinction between rules that are "real", that "exist", from rules that do not, is clearly a moral distinction. It has to do with ethics, rather than ontology.⁷ The case is similar (although less obvious) in other tokens of *existence*: Say one cosmological theory claims that *black holes exist*, while another theory denies this existence. What the first theory is actually claiming, is: "The existence of black holes supports our theory", while the second maintains: "The existence of black holes refutes our theory". In any theory, scientific or other, existential

⁶ "To be is to be a value of a variable" may be *W.V.O Quine*'s best known quotation.⁶ Quine denies a "preferred" kind of existence, **real** existence (or "being"). He takes existence as always contextual. In his view, what we understand as **real** existence (say, **material** existence) is but another particular, scientific, or physical, context. There is no sense to "objective", or "transcendental" existence. This position is as metaphysical as any position could possibly be, and yet it is said about Quine that he has no metaphysical bone in his body.⁷ How could that be? (**be!**) Is Quine's radical holist position **metaphysical** or is it not? If there is any objective sense to the term "metaphysics", Quine himself must be able to answer this questions. If posed to him, his answer would no doubt be, that it depends on the meaning of the word "metaphysics". He himself knows of no such objective meaning, so he cannot give an objective answer. Quine holds a holistic notion of meaning - a view with which I sympathize. In *Holism, A Shopper's Guide*,⁸ Jerry Fodor and Ernst Lepore devote the first chapter after the introduction to Quine's *meaning holism*. More to come.

⁷ The interplay between Ethics and Ontology is a major theme of this thesis. It will be claimed, although in a somewhat disorderly manner, that ontology is reducible to ethics. For Plato, this distinction did not **exist**. For him, Ontology and Ethics are one and the same. So is the case for Spinoza. Both made this point extremely clear in their writings. I propose to repeat and enforce this claim, so badly distorted by Aristotle.⁹ It is he who is mostly responsible for the western notion of 'the' (one and only) **real, objective existence**.

claims carry a moral, normative load: They support the theory (to which they belong). When a theory affirms the existence of a term it employs, it simply iterates the validity of the whole theory; it means “The theory is good”.⁸ A last quick example of the moral significance of existential claims is the age-old dispute regarding the truth-value of the (mega-existential) proposition *God exists*. Is this not clearly a moral statement?

⁸ Much has been said about “existence” in the context of scientific theory. Einstein’s revolutionary theory of relativity significantly contributed to the swift development of the *philosophy of science*. **Carl Popper**¹⁰ and **Thomas Kuhn**¹¹ are but two examples. For my purposes, it suffices to say that “existence” in the context of scientific theories is completely theory-dependent, and no theory asserts existence that prevails **outside** of its realm. Existence (in scientific contexts) may be reduced to a **predicate**: *The property of being a member*. When we say that something exists, we mean it **belongs** to a certain (well known) **domain**. Existential claims may thus be reduced to simple **predication**: *Pegasus’s do not exist* is simply the denial of predicating “material existence” to “Pegasus”, and *Quarks exist* is the predication of “participating in physical theory” to “quarks”. As Quine said in footnote 6, “To be is to be a value of a variable” - to belong to a group - to participate. This sounds familiar: Being is participating- taking part. Sounds awfully **Platonic**, does it not? The worldly objects **take part** in the (Platonic) **Ideas**.¹² To me, Quine is a deep Platonist; Plato understands **Ideas** as **predicates**, as “pure” **properties**. Plato understands the proposition “*This tree exists*” as “*This is a tree*”, or “*This takes part in the Idea of tree*”. Quine is different only in his professional jargon: He understands “*This tree exists*” simply as “*This belongs in the domain, the category, the class, of trees*”. Quine understands an existential proposition of a particular object as nothing but its **classification**, its membership in a certain class. Plato distinguished two distinct **modes** of existence: **Real** existence, of the **eternal** kind, the kind only **Ideas** enjoy, and a worldly state of “quasi-existence”, attributed to objects in the phenomenal world. Quine, although not explicitly, shares this view: He also distinguishes two distinct ontological statuses: That of **domains**, or classes, or categories, the **range** of the variable, and a second, inferior ontological status of **membership** in the class. In this distinction, Quine follows **Gottlob Frege**¹³ in what is termed *the existential import*: Of laying an ontological premise as the basis of logic and epistemology. More to come.