

The Aphorism: Fragments from the Breakdown of Reason

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I. Genre and Short Forms

1. APHORISM, DICTUM, MAXIM, slogan, witticism, hypothesis, thought, and many other terms for short expressions have no clear definition and are used in contradictory or overlapping ways. A book of aphorisms often contains expressions that in another classification would be called witticisms and maxims. Moreover, some of these terms are often used to refer to any short expression (broad definition) and to a particular type (narrow).

2. Vagueness serves the anthologizer. In *The Oxford Book of Aphorisms*, editor John Gross begins by reminding us that the earliest aphorisms to go by that name were a collection of medical sayings by Hippocrates; that when the term was revived in the Renaissance it first referred to such essentially mnemonic statements, but that by the eighteenth century it had come to denote “the formulation of a moral or philosophical principle,” a comment on some aspect of experienced life, and so had completely changed its meaning. So Dr. Johnson could define aphorism as “a maxim; a precept contracted in a short sentence; an unconnected position.” It must stand by itself (unconnected), be brief, and treat a moral topic—but so do most short expressions. Johnson is evidently formulating the broad definition, which would include witticisms and maxims.¹

Gross at first offers a narrower definition that might distinguish the aphorism from other short expressions. Yet his constant qualifications defeat the attempt, which is perhaps his point. The aphorism, he tells us, is often malicious, but sometimes consoling. Unlike the witticism, it can stand alone—although, Gross goes on, many are retorts and ripostes that cannot stand alone. At last Gross goes back to a broader approach, inasmuch as the broader the definition, the more interesting the short expressions that can be included. The introduction to the well-known anthology of W. H. Auden and Louis Kronenberger arrives at a similar point, acknowledging as well how much any such anthology owes to the

taste and moral inclinations of the anthologizer. The editors inform us about life with the selected words of others, which become partly their own: the volume is “a personal selection.”²

Anthologies that have lasted through many editors reflect a history of personalities and tastes; they do not exhibit any consistency with regard to the genre of expressions.

3. Anthologies of short expressions do something essentially different from anthologies of longer works (dramas, Renaissance lyrics, and so forth). We typically know most short expressions through Bartlett’s or similar volumes. The anthology is their natural home, especially with writers (and that is most of them) we have not read, let alone mastered to the point of knowing specific quotations. Sometimes the best-known formulation *is* the anthologized one, which may differ somewhat from the original source, as the popular anti-anthology edited by Paul F. Boller Jr. and John George, *They Never Said It*, reminds us. Nevertheless, Boller’s and George’s dudgeon is misplaced, because aphorisms live *as aphorisms* in their quoted—their “unconnected”—form, which achieves a special authority.³

4. How then are we to understand the different kinds of short expressions, and what is the advantage of doing so? The question, once asked, appears to be one of genre, and so we may reply: what is the advantage of classing long literary forms? The term “novel” may be used to refer to any long work of fiction, or to a particular type, as when we say that the novel began with Defoe or use the term “novel” to refer to “works like *Middlemarch*”—let us say, realistic fiction focusing on character development and specificity of circumstance. It is characteristic of genre studies that terms often have a broader or narrower sense.

5. Each classification system is to be judged by the insight it yields about the problems it sets. There is no single correct classification system. We do best when we cease trying to account for the multiple and incompatible uses of a term and focus on specific classes of works. Identify classes, rather than account for terms: this is a maxim of genre study.

6. Mikhail Bakhtin, perhaps the premier modern genre theorist, sought to identify genres by worldviews. The “novel,” the “romance,” “the adventure story”—these were for him forms that embodied a specific sense of experience, of the parameters of human action, of character, and of the nature of choice. His classification serves the purpose of creating dialogues among perspectives: we may ask about the difference between the novel and the utopia, explore how texts of each class have

commented on the other, and derive wisdom from observing their encounter. After many such encounters, we may “draw dotted lines” and extend the genre’s wisdom by imagining encounters that could have but did not actually happen. We learn to think in the genre’s terms.⁴

7. If we take this approach, each member of a genre becomes both a work in itself and a particular development of the genre’s resources. Once we know what a novel or an aphorism is all about, we can read a given work in relation to the class. By so doing, we may enrich ideas the genre characteristically treats.

8. We may also see the same work in multiple ways. Sometimes by an accident of literary history, or by the deliberate design of the author, a work may be decoded according to the conventions and perspectives of more than one genre.⁵

Genre is not unambiguously present in the work itself, all the more so with short expressions that necessarily offer relatively few generic cues.

The resulting interpretations may simply differ or be incompatible. Dostoevsky’s “Dream of a Ridiculous Man” and Thomas More’s *Utopia* have each been read as a utopia, an anti-utopia, and as a kind of dialogue between the two (what I have called meta-utopias).⁶ Each work has influenced others of each genre.

And so we are often moved to say: *if* we take the work as X, it means this, but as Y it means that.

Genre becomes essential to meaning, a quasi-part of the work itself.

9. I propose to examine short forms from the perspective of genres as carriers of worldviews. There exists an aphoristic consciousness that differs from that of a maxim, a dictum, a witticism, a hypothesis, a thought, and many other forms. In the following pages, I shall be primarily concerned to identify the basic worldview of the aphorism by contrasting it with an opposite form, the dictum. To read a short expression as an aphorism is to read it as incompatible with the perspective of a dictum.

There are some cases where an expression can be read in both (contradictory) ways.

To understand the aphorism better, one would need to go beyond the present article and juxtapose it with more short forms.

10. Because short forms express a view of experience, they may sometimes be expanded into longer forms. Philosophical parables (like Voltaire’s) are often expanded aphorisms. Plays, like those of Oscar Wilde, may be expanded witticisms, and often feature many examples of

the short form of the witticism. The aphoristic consciousness lends itself to still longer forms, such as *Rasselas*, which includes several classic examples of the aphorism proper.

11. Tolstoy, who in his late years produced his own anthology of short expressions, admired the great aphorists, and produced a translation of an aphorist he admired, Lao Tzu, sometimes seemed to structure his great works in part as dialogues on the wisdom of different short forms. Prince Andrei in *War and Peace* and Levin in *Anna Karenina* achieve wisdom when they reject witticisms as shallow and stop looking for dicta to provide the key to experience. The foolish generals in *War and Peace* speak in dicta, but the wise general, Kutuzov, and later Prince Andrei, reply with aphorisms, which represent the wisdom of the book. When Prince Andrei becomes disillusioned with Speransky, he dismisses him as a wit.

12. *War and Peace* is the longest aphorism in the world.

13. Of course, longer works that develop short forms may do more than that. *War and Peace*, though it has the aphorism at its heart, is not *only* an expanded aphorism.

14. There can be no final and no systematic classification of short forms from this perspective. Their number is as large, and as changeable, as views of human experience.

II. The Aphorism and the Riddle

1. A model aphorism:

The Lord whose shrine is at Delphi neither speaks nor conceals, but gives a sign.⁷

—Heraclitus

2. Apollo, the Lord at Delphi, answers a question with a mystery. He gives not a clear reply but a vague sign, and the sign he gives is, like Heraclitus's aphorism, anything but transparent. In its very brevity it is capable of multiple interpretations. Each interpretation may beckon further: the sign is a door to an endless maze. Truth is not revealed, because each interpretive step leads to another.

3. Anyone who thinks the oracle's meaning is clear, that one can by sheer intelligence simply guess the meaning the way one would solve a

puzzle, is proven wrong. Think of all the Greek stories (in Herodotus, in *Oedipus the King*) about a thinker whose hubris leads him to conclude that he can fully decode the mystery. For those who resemble Oedipus or Herodotus's Croesus, the god's sign turns out to be not a puzzle but a trap.

4. The god neither affirms nor denies (as other translations give the line). Rather, he points. But he does not point towards a goal, a perfect solution as in a mathematical problem, but to a horizon that continually recedes as we approach it.

5. The impossibility may lead to a feeling of despair (as sometimes in La Rochefoucauld or Dr. Johnson), as if we were in the position of Sisyphus; or it may lead to the luminous feeling of mysteries without end (as in Lao Tzu, Wittgenstein, or Tolstoy). Then we feel that even though we do not reach the goal, the quest is not futile because at each step we acquire greater wisdom.

6. The aphorism, like the god's sign, does not contain but points beyond itself, step by potentially endless step. It is a mystery.

7. For the aphorist, the world does not give itself away. Searching for wisdom is like consulting the oracle, and each mystery begets another.

Heraclitus: "Nature loves to hide" (*RA* 28).

Tolstoy's alleged last words: "To seek, always to seek."

8. The riddle differs from the aphorism because the riddle has an answer. The answer to a riddle solves it, but the interpretation of an aphorism deepens its mystery. The detective story is an expanded riddle, but its inversion, *Crime and Punishment*, develops the aphorism. The world of the riddler is a different world from that of the aphorist, for the riddler lives outside of mystery. For the riddler, there are only *unsolved* problems.

9. *Oedipus the King*. Oedipus, the greatest riddle-solver ever born, defeats the Sphinx by solving the riddle that perplexed all others and whose answer is man. He is a man of action guided by reason. "You are a man of experience, the kind whose plans result in effective action."⁸ He rules by virtue of puzzle-solving reason, and voices contempt for the sense of mystery, as does Jocasta. Jocasta explains that the prophecy that Laius's son would kill him proved false, and she concludes that "There is no human being born that is endowed with prophetic power" (*O* 370). The

vagueness of mysterious sayings counts against them: “If God seeks or needs anything, he will make it clear to us himself.” When the gods speak, they speak clearly, and the world is accessible to reason. Oedipus takes pride that mind and will, his great possessions, are adequate to the world: “I came, know-nothing Oedipus, I stopped the Sphinx, I answered the riddle with my own intelligence—the birds had nothing to teach me” (*O* 364).

It is not just what Tiresias says that disturbs him, but how he says it: obscurities and vague sayings do not help someone prepared to plan and act.

Tiresias: This present day will give you birth and death.

Oedipus: Everything you say is the same—riddles, obscurities.

Tiresias: Aren't you the best man alive at guessing riddles?

Oedipus: Insult me, go on—but that you will find is what makes me great. (*O* 365)

The irony is that in solving the riddle of who killed Laius he will reveal that the world is governed by unfathomable mysteries, which defy the human sense of purpose and justice. So the chorus concludes with a version of an ancient aphorism: “Therefore we must call no man happy while he waits to see his last day, not until he has passed the border of life and death without suffering pain” (*O* 386).

Two paradoxes govern the play: reason reasons its way to truths beyond the grasp of reason. And action for a purpose defeats the purpose. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, the hero says that he suffered his deeds more than he acted them.

The mystery repeats itself: in trying to avoid the prophecy, Jocasta and Laius have ensured its fulfillment. Oedipus, in escaping from Corinth to avoid murdering his father, meets him and kills him. The play's many other ironies follow from these, like Oedipus's curses of the man who turns out to be himself.

The chorus's final words point to a world of mystery we can never fully probe. The play reveals, but does not explain it; sheds light on it, but the light points to the darkness we can never illuminate. Beyond what we can govern and fathom lie the unfathomable and ungovernable, so that even Oedipus, the king (with power to act) and reasoner (with gift of deduction), is trapped by mysteries larger than any human plan. And if that is true for such a man, then we can call no person happy while he is still alive.

The play culminates in an aphorism because it is about the difference between aphorism and riddle. And the aphorism triumphs. The oracle may not be understood, but he cannot be gainsaid.

10. If life were a riddle, everything could be solved. But it is not. It is a mystery. This is the sense of the aphorism.

III. The Dictum

1. The aphorism is, in most respects, the opposite of the dictum. Representative dicta:⁹

a. Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off their subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire: but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while. The *principle of utility* recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and law. Systems which attempt to question it, deal in sounds instead of sense, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light.

—Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, opening paragraph

b. The greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation.

—Bentham

c. The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

—Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*

d. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary it is their social existence which determines their consciousness.

—Marx, *Critique of Political Economy*

e. Capitalist production begets, with an inexorability of a law of nature, its own negation.

—Marx, *Capital*

f. *Who Whom?*

—Lenin, title of work

g. Even though there may be a deceiver of some sort, very powerful and very tricky, who bends all his efforts to keep me perpetually deceived, there can be no slightest doubt that I exist, since he deceives me; and let him deceive me as much as he will, he can never make me nothing as long as I think that I am thinking. Thus, after having thought well on this matter, and after examining all things with care, I must finally conclude and maintain that this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true every time I pronounce it or conceive it in my mind.

—Descartes, *Meditations*

h. Finally, as the same precepts which we have when awake may come to us when asleep without their being true, I decided to suppose that nothing that had ever entered my mind was more real than the illusions of my dreams. But I soon noticed that while I thus wished to think everything false, it was necessarily true that I who thought so was something. Since this truth, I think, therefore I am, was so firm and assured that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were unable to shake it, I judged that I could safely accept it as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.

—Descartes, *Discourse on Method*

i. Nothing happens without a reason why it should be so rather than otherwise.

—Leibniz, second letter to Clarke

j. As the individual concept of each person includes once for all everything which can ever happen to him, in it can be seen, *a priori*, the evidences or the reasons for the reality of each event, and why one happened sooner than the other.

—Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, proposition XIII

k. God does nothing which is not orderly, and it is not even possible to conceive of events which are not regular.

—Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, proposition VI

l. The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for.

—Catechism of the Catholic Church

2. Unlike aphorisms, dicta see no mystery. They precisely resemble the solution to a riddle—and no ordinary riddle, but one of immense importance that has perplexed humanity but has now at last been solved. The dictum announces the discovery and specifies its essential nature. Its sense is: mystery is at last over.

People have always sought the principles of human behavior and have offered explanations of immense complexity and mind-numbing vagueness, but the answer is disarmingly simple (a).

In direct contrast to the aphorism, the dictum typically tells us that things are *not* so complex as people have thought. As the motion of the planets, which had seemed so bafflingly intricate, can be explained by a few general laws, so can the principles of human behavior.

We have looked since the time of the ancients for the way to organize society, and here it is (b).

The dictum comes with the feeling: a dark epoch is over.

The fundamental law of history has hitherto escaped all investigators, but it can now be succinctly stated, as can the origin of human ideas and the fate of the society we see around us. The fundamental principle for effective action is now also known (c to f).

People have striven to base human knowledge on an absolutely firm principle, which can withstand all critical assault, and now they can do so (g, h).

Endless confusion has beset investigations of the world and its events, of the nature of time and judgment, but the fundamental principles are now open for all to see (i to k). The purely rational order of the world is absolutely certain.

We know the way to truth and happiness (l).

3. The rhetoric of the dictum tends to *totality*. Bentham assures us in his opening paragraph that pleasure and pain “govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off their subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it.”

The second clause illustrates a common rhetorical ploy of the dictum. It often takes totality one step further to arrive at irrefutability. Even the attempt to falsify the dictum confirms it. A sufficient reason must explain why you reject sufficient reason. You must enjoy rejecting the principle of utility. Or: to reject the dictum is incoherent (example k). At times, this claim leads to a new form of vulnerability: critics may reply that the dictum is unfalsifiable or tautological, therefore empty.

4. Dicta do not tolerate exceptions. For Leibniz, the principle of sufficient reason necessarily applies without exception. Against Newton, who could not prove the solar system to be stable and allowed that God might sometimes have to give it a push, Leibniz replied that God is not an inferior watchmaker: we can know in advance there can be no exception whatsoever to the laws that govern the world. Even miracles do not upset the regularity of nature, for miracles are simply natural laws that operate infrequently. With Leibniz, we are a world away from the rhetoric of Aristotle, with his characteristic phrase “on the whole and for the most part.”

There may still be some problems unexplained, but none that are inexplicable in principle.

5. The dictum is *certain*. As its explanatory force extends to all cases, so the confidence to be reposed in it is unlimited. Dicta survive not just doubts but the possibility of doubt: Descartes’s whole rhetorical thrust is that he has found a principle where one *cannot* doubt the point.

6. Dicta aspire to absolute *clarity*. They eschew metaphor, which is, if present, restricted to mere illustration and kept under rather strict control (Bentham’s image of the throne). One would entirely misread Marx and Engels to ask whether by “class struggle” they perhaps mean,

let us say, generational conflict or division within the self or something else. The dictum means what it says.

7. Dicta typically present their truths as *axiomatic*, that is, as the certain starting point for future investigation. Begin here, and all will follow. Bentham offers the “foundation” for morals and legislation, Leibniz a basic principle for understanding the universe (sufficient reason). One might almost say: the patron saint of dicta is Euclid.

8. Often, the dictum in its certainty provides the basis for the best possible action, to “rear the fabric of felicity.” The dictum is implicitly and often *utopian*, and utopian tracts and fiction incline to dicta. Dicta share with utopias the prime conviction that the world is not as complex as had been thought, for a simple solution is now at hand. No literary form proclaims more insistently: the darkness has been dispelled, the era of truth is upon us, if we will only act.

Dicta proclaim knowledge and demand power. They belong to rulers or those who would rule.

9. A dictum demands we attend to it. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. An aphorism, by contrast, seems to be found in hiding.

10. In contrast to the aphorism, which tends to curl back on itself, the dictum avoids self-reference of the sort that might generate paradox and doubt. One is clearly not expected to question whether the reason for asserting Bentham’s proposition or the inclination to believe it derive from the pleasure it brings rather than its fidelity to the evidence. Categorical assertions about the source of all belief would, to the aphorist, invite self-reference and paradox, but we are not expected to ask Marx the extent to which his own social existence shapes and perhaps limits his conscious conclusions. Whereas the aphorism invites this turn, the dictum either regards it as trivial carping or has not even dreamed of it.

The Cretan liar paradox is foreign to the dictum. When the gods speak to us, they do so with truth and clarity.

11. A special speech source lies behind the dictum. Though a specific person announces it, it does not speak his truth, but the Truth. As much as a proposition of Euclid, it is free from the taint of any merely personal source. No irony is cast upon it by its discovery at a particular moment of time: it is no mere expression of seventeenth-century or Victorian sensibility.

The dictum is insulated from history.

Its certainty reflects an authority that transcends history. Thus dicta often cultivate the language and forms of mathematical or logical proof (Descartes, Leibniz). Or they present themselves as a scientific truth: the sort of assertion Elie Halévy called “moral Newtonianism” (Bentham or Marx).¹⁰ Or they may claim Revelation from beyond: the word of God. In the frequent comparison of Marx to a Hebrew prophet we sense that his rhetoric, if not his argument, seems to claim a source beyond the merely human.

12. Nevertheless, great truths do not have to be enunciated in dicta, for they may be made by those who do not share the dictum’s worldview. No matter how sweeping a discovery, nor how far-reaching its implications, nor how overwhelming the evidence, the discoverer may avoid the language of dicta, as Darwin assiduously does. In *The Origin of Species*, the key ideas typically occur only when, after countless examples, qualifications, and possible objections, they are allowed to follow from the preponderance of available evidence but not from any absolute principle. There is not a single mathematical formula to be found in the *Origin*. The author never speaks like a prophet.

Darwin writes in what must be called reluctant utterances, which he can no longer avoid, but knows he will qualify. Nothing is final, and the process of changing conclusions is endless. Darwin presents his ideas as the result of a slow and unfinished *evolution*. Knowledge has been achieved the way species have evolved—by small and slow steps, leading to compromise solutions that are anything but perfect. Nature, and Darwin, take no leaps. From the book’s opening paragraph to its closing one, *the origin of conclusions imitates the origin of species*.

Unlike the truth of a dictum, neither the animals we know nor the conclusions we have just read are fixed. Everything is open to change once we recognize that forms and truths “have been, *and are being*, evolved” (closing paragraph).¹¹ The process is not over; there is no final truth; and knowledge, like the world it describes, must ever be tentative.

Insofar as it is possible to extract quotable lines from Darwin’s reluctant utterances, they mark their provisionality. We may call these *hypotheses*, to emphasize their purely tentative and hesitant character.

Hypotheses, just because they are so reluctant, and so typically embedded in qualifying context, appear in anthologies much more rarely than dicta. They seem to *require* their context. Their brevity, when at last it has become necessary to formulate a concise principle, seems to run counter to their very nature.

Though neither dictum nor hypothesis cultivate the aphoristic sense of mystery, and both seek a knowable truth, their self-confidence, awareness of complexity, and claim on their listeners differ considerably.

IV. The Aphorism

1. Contrast the rhetoric of the dictum with that of these representative aphorisms:¹²

a. The way that can be spoken of
Is not the constant way.
The name that can be named
Is not the constant name. . . .
Mystery upon mystery
The gateway of the manifold secrets.

—Lao Tzu, I

b. What cannot be seen is called evanescent;
What cannot be heard is called rarefied;
What cannot be touched is called minute.
These three cannot be fathomed . . .
Dimly visible, it cannot be named
And returns to that which is without substance.
This is called the shape that has no shape.
The image that is without substance.
This is called indistinct and shadowy.

—Lao Tzu, XIV

c. Is it possible to perceive as a shape what has no shape?

—Ippolit Terentiev, in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*

d. *How* things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself *in* the world.

—Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.432

e. When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words.
The *riddle* does not exist.

If a question can be framed at all, it is also *possible* to answer it.

—Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.5

f. There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.

—Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.522

g. The heart has its reasons, which reason knows nothing of (*Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point*).

—Pascal, *Pensées*

h. To ridicule philosophy is to philosophize truly (*Se moquer de la philosophie, c'est vraiment philosopher*).

—Pascal, *Pensées*

i. We shall all die alone (*On mourra seul*).

—Pascal, *Pensées*

2. Despite their variety in tone, form, and language, these aphorisms all share a sense that what it is most valuable to grasp lies beyond our reach. God does not reveal himself *in* the world. The essence of the thing, the way to live, the true philosophy, self-knowledge and our deepest self—all lie occluded, beyond a barrier, beyond which we can see only dimly. The little we can see only invites us to peer farther. Mystery upon mystery, the gateway of the manifold secrets: language, reason, the mind, and introspection all fail, though not utterly. We sense that there is no single discovery to be made and no method for arriving at a definitive answer. There is no system, nothing generalizable and sure, and we must probe, guess, explore as best we can.

Each tool we use to explore also partly deforms. All tools are defective, though not useless, so we must try many and see what results. A sort of uncertainty principle reigns, in which the way of investigation introduces its own distortions. Language points beyond itself, but we are never quite free of its entanglements. The Way that can be spoken of is not the true Way. But we may learn something by speaking of it, as Lao Tzu does.

The aphorism senses the world as dim, though not absolutely opaque. The window to the truth is translucent.

We grope endlessly through obscurities.

3. One does not speak an aphorism, one voices it. It seems to come partly from outside oneself. The dark god of light speaks through us as he speaks through the Delphic oracle. In many cases, the speaker does not quite seem to grasp the significance of what he says, or grasps it as a mystery that he has identified—or that has identified him.

The wisdom appears to someone who senses it as exceeding his understanding and perhaps as doing him no good. This wisdom may be fire to singe or consume us. Oedipus assumes that wisdom can be used: this is why he is a man of action. But the deepest truths are too mysterious to act upon. Tiresias's aphorism: "Wisdom is a dreadful thing when it brings no profit to its possessor. I knew this well, but forgot" (*O* 362).

An aphorism is not so much proclaimed as posed. Oedipus learns: the wisdom was there, but it hid itself. It is now partly visible, but ultimately still obscure. It is still a voice from a mysterious other.

4. Sometimes we may make a statement into an aphorism by taking it as such, even though it was meant quite differently. And sometimes it is

unclear how the statement was meant—as an aphorism or as something else, so we try out an aphoristic reading to see what happens. Then we hear it as transcending its speech center, sense that it does not so much say something as *show itself* through its speaker, who cannot control it: the Pythoness, who does not understand her obscurities, or Tiresias, who knows where his understanding stops. Novels—by Jane Austen, George Eliot, Tolstoy—often include statements that, read one way, seem simply to characterize a particular situation or paraphrase a character’s thoughts, but, read another way, do something quite different. They seem to invite us to decontextualize them and read them as aphorisms, pointing to a higher mystery treated by the work as a whole.

5. Contrast the aphorism’s sense of obscurity with the dictum. There everything is *present* in the statement. It is complete and the author, who is in full control of significance, knows exactly what it means. We can develop it, apply it, take it as the key to many things: but we do not go *beyond* it.

The dictum is a conclusion, the aphorism a beginning.

6. The aphoristic source itself sometimes seems to partake of mystery. We know almost nothing of Lao Tzu (Old Master, a name that is not his true name), who is shrouded in mystery. He may be identified with Lao Tan, a recluse of whom it is said that Confucius himself visited him for instruction. Pascal’s thoughts are traditionally the product of his “night of fire” in which he was seized by a truth beyond himself. Wittgenstein intimates that his basic ideas have come to him outside of rational discourse, so that they cannot be communicated except to someone who has experienced the same truths. The *Tractatus* begins: “Perhaps this book will be understood only by someone who has himself had the thoughts that are expressed in it.”

7. We sense it to be fitting that aphorisms often come as fragments. The full intelligence is not there, only hinted at. Part of the whole is missing, as is always the case with truth itself. This fragment—it is a fragment of what?: that question is always implicit.

Pascal left us only fragments, which have been assembled in several different ways by others. It is hard to find two editions of the *Pensées* that adopt the same ordering, and so the different pieces seem to shed different light on each other. Lao Tzu’s “poems” are not wholes: their division into eighty-one parts (a mystical Chinese number) seems a later editorial decision,¹³ and even the succession of lines in a poem sometimes reflects a stringing together of assertions on a given theme, not a progression within a single thought. (That is why it can be a mistake to read them as “poems.”) If Heraclitus wrote a complete work, which has

survived only in fragments, the fragmentary quality of what survived is what most strikes us and seems an essential part of it.

For this reason as well, the authoritative version of an aphorism is often the one most cited *out* of context: not only because an aphorism is an “unconnected position,” but also because citation in anthologies or in diverse contexts lends the quotation the quality of the numinous fragment. The line lives *as* an aphorism precisely in its cited form, which may differ slightly from the original. It achieves a life of its own as anthologized, as beyond its source, as contextless.

As we read such fragments, their incompleteness seems a part of them, because they speak of the necessary incompleteness of our knowledge of what is most important. They gesture beyond themselves, and the white space that follows seems a part of them. They are momentary probes, or flashes that die out before we have quite made out what they reveal.

8. We also sense it to be fitting that collections of aphorisms are often made by others: that Pascal did not assemble the *Pensées*, nor Heraclitus his fragments, nor Lao Tzu the *Tao Te Ching*. It is as if the author were constantly engaged in interminable probing, got lost in the mystery, and so could not return for a complete statement, which therefore had to be assembled, with no great authority, by others. And so there are different versions (Lao Tzu also exists in different versions), and no one knows which, if any, is right: more mystery.

9. The dictum is spoken by a clear God in the language of science, mathematics, or Revelation.

The aphorism is spoken by a dark God in the incomplete language of mystery.

The hypothesis is spoken by a fallible human in the tentative language of intelligent guesswork.

10. Pascal’s aphorisms frequently focus on the deep mystery of self: there is a world in which the self lives, enters into, but the self differs fundamentally from the world. The world is unconscious, it is governed by laws, it can be accounted for by generalities, and one can prove things about it, as one does in mathematics. There are those who see all these qualities as applying to us and view us as just another part of Creation. But each of us dies a death entirely apart from the world and from all other people, and unavoidable fact points to our ultimate separation from all else. There is no better development of Pascal’s thought that we all die alone than Tolstoy’s “Death of Ivan Ilych” (Tolstoy greatly admired Pascal).

Humanity differs from nature because people are conscious (the famous aphorism about “the thinking reed”) and the individual differs as much from all others (we die alone). The road to meaning cannot be a system. Reason is best understood when one knows its limits, philosophy when one can mock its pretensions to explicate the ultimate mysteries.

Pascal the mathematician and Wittgenstein the logician: both are sensitive to what can be proved and therefore to what cannot be proved—where proposition ends and aphorism begins.

11. In Lao Tzu, the ultimate principle which guides the way to live is beyond words, beyond mind, beyond the world. It even precedes the division into Something and Nothing, and so neither language nor silence is adequate to express it. Because it precedes the world, and the myriad creatures of which we are one, all attempts to name it must fail because all our tools of naming belong to this world.

Nevertheless, the *Tao Te Ching* demonstrates a constant attempt to name what cannot be named. The Way that can be spoken of is not the true Way, and any name we give it is not the true name; but we try because knowledge of it is infinitely valuable. The entire book therefore offers myriad inadequate names: the Way is the uncarved block, the valley, the shapeless; it is the evanescent and the rarefied, the minute and the broad, the female and the baby; it acts out of emptiness, like a bellows, but produces all things. It does all by doing nothing. Each name reveals something though none is correct. The Tao is not even empty or nothing because Nothing comes from it.

A. C. Graham reads the first chapter (or poem) as a process. After the first lines expressing the futility of naming, the poem continues:

What has no name is the beginning of heaven and earth,
 What has a name is the mother of the myriad things.
 Therefore by constantly having no desire observe the sublimest in it,
 By constantly having desire observe where it tends. (DT 219)

Graham comments: “The trouble with words is not that they do not fit at all but that they always fit imperfectly; they can help us towards the Way, but only if each formulation in its inadequacy is balanced by the opposite which diverges in it in the other direction. ‘Correct saying is as though the wrong way round’” (DT 220). And so the author tries out opposites, and this chapter, and later ones, proceed by trying out antithetical formulations. “The approach of *Lao Tzu* is to lay out couplets which, juxtaposed as parallel, imply both that there is and that there is not a constant Way with a constant name, and then try out the two alternatives in turn. Call the Way nameless, and it is put back to the

time before there were things distinguished by names; name it, and it becomes itself a thing out of which all others have grown" (*DT* 220).

The way to the Way is a constant trying out, and the eighty-one chapters are a repeated trying. The sage is "Tentative, as if fording a river in winter / Hesitant as if in fear of his neighbors" (*TC* XV). The entire book is, remarkably enough, composed of assertions following assertions, each one in a definitive tone succeeded by another, no less definitive in tone but tentative in sense, as each trial leads infinitely on. The Way becomes clearer in its infinite indistinctness, but each characterization is used up as soon as offered.

This language could not be further from that of the dictum, with its confident assertion that its words precisely describe what is most important, and where metaphors are minimal or transparent.

12. A trope that recurs in aphorisms: the methods we use to find what we most want prevents us from seeing it. Let us call this *the paradox of method*. In La Rochefoucauld, we cannot know ourselves because we are blinded by what is most essential to the self, self-love. For all the strategy we may use to outwit the deceiver, the deceiver is one step ahead: "Self-love is cleverer than the cleverest man in the world."¹⁴

In Lao Tzu, in Dostoevsky, in many other aphorists there is something about the very fact that we are in the world that makes it impossible to understand it. We are trapped at a moment of time so we cannot see the world from the perspective of eternity. We are entangled by language, by the very categories of thought, by the fact that we come after the divisions that have made the world.

Or: our picturing mechanism cannot work in describing the most important things, which are pictureless, since they are what makes the picturable possible. The Way precedes all picturable things.

We ascribe an essence to what is essentially fluid or we paint a picture to fit what has no image. Can anything that is specified be adequate to pure potential, can there be an image of imagelessness?

Dimly visible, it cannot be named
And returns to that which is without substance.
This is called the shape that has no shape,
The image that is without substance. (*TC* XIV)

"Is it possible to perceive as a shape what has no shape?" (aphorism example c).

13. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* concludes with a famous sequence of aphorisms that precisely exhibit the aphoristic consciousness. In one letter to a prospective publisher, he writes, rather oddly: "My work consists of two

parts, the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written. *And it is precisely this second part that is the important one.*"¹⁵

The *Tractatus's* second part may not have been written, but it is nevertheless introduced in the puzzling final aphorisms. As has often been pointed out, what the main portion of the work and its ending share is the idea that some things, the most important ones, cannot be said in propositions but can only be shown. In the first part of the work, we learn just how propositions can describe reality, but they cannot describe how they describe it: they *show* their connection. The relation cannot be said but must be seen.

In the book's concluding sections, its propositions turn into aphorisms about what cannot be said but what can be glimpsed. Wittgenstein turns to problems of value and "the meaning of life"—all that is most important—and contends that these lie beyond the reach of any propositions. For propositions describe what is *in* the world, a factual state of affairs, but value lies outside the world:

6.41 The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: *in* it no value exists—and if it did, it would have no value.

If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental.

What makes it non-accidental cannot lie *within* the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental.

It must lie outside the world.

Both the good and the beautiful therefore lie outside what can be said:

6.42 So too it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics. Propositions can express nothing that is higher.

6.421 It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words.
Ethics is transcendental.
(Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same).

We sense immediately why Wittgenstein chooses the aphorism to gesture to the "transcendental." The *Tractatus's* opening "motto" reads: "and whatever a man knows, whatever is not mere rumbling and roaring that he has heard, can be said in three words." We are used to essays on aesthetics and ethics, but aesthetics and ethics cannot be described and the treatises that attempt to do so rest on an error confusing the world with what is outside it, the facts with the transcendental. But the aphorism neither affirms nor denies, it gives a sign.

14. Karl Kraus, whose aphorisms Wittgenstein admired, observed: “An aphorism never coincides with the truth: it is either a half-truth or one-and-a-half truths.”¹⁶ We can imagine Wittgenstein considering his concluding aphorisms as half-truths because they seem to say what cannot be said and one-and-a-half truths in the sense that they gesture to things that cannot be made into statements (truths). They point to what he calls “the mystical.”

6.5 When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words.

The *riddle* does not exist.

If a question can be framed at all, it is also *possible* to answer it.

Riddles are questions with an answer. But the ethical and aesthetic, the realm of value, are not riddles. They are not even questions. The aphoristic truth is that, though they exist, they cannot be arrived at by a chain of reasons. But they may be glimpsed, or rather they may show themselves.

15. No dicta will ever lead to value. When all scientific questions have been answered, when all statements about things in the world have been provided, “the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are then no questions left, and this is itself the answer.” But what is an answer to no questions? It is a changed sense of the world *as a whole*.

6.521 The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem.

(Is not this the reason why those who have found after a long period of doubt that the sense of life became clear to them have been unable to say what constituted that sense)?

6.522 There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.

What happens when we sense the meaning of things is not that a riddle is answered, it is that what is mystical—what lies beyond—shows itself to us. What alters then is “only the limits of the world, not the facts—not what can be expressed by means of language. In short the effect must be that it becomes an altogether different world. It must, so to speak, wax and wane as a whole. The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man” (6.43). Wittgenstein writes in aphorisms because he is writing about the mystical, and the mystical is what cannot be *said*. But aphorisms do not say, they show and gesture.

They are never *finished*.

16. The best-known lines of the *Tractatus* are its last two aphorisms, which reflect on the book's own method. What these lines say may be taken to apply to the aphorism as a genre.

6.54 My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

He must transcend these propositions and then he will see the world aright.

7 What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.

If one thinks of Lao Tzu, one will understand that the aphorism is suffused with the sense that it is at bottom nonsense because it is trying to go further than we can go. Part of the aphoristic sense of the world is a feeling that one's firmest beliefs might be utter nonsense.

The aphorism senses its senselessness. The aphorism cannot be *read* like a dictum: what it wants to find isn't in it, but beyond it. It neither says nor conceals, but gives a sign.

The sign, when contemplated, leads not to a final statement—then it would be a riddle—but to another sign. Each step takes us a bit further. But we see that it is not in the sign itself that meaning lies, though we need the sign to intimate meanings. Signs are used up, transcended, climbed up like a ladder we must then throw away.

When we reach an understanding, it is one that cannot be put into words even if words have been part of the process by which we reach it. We sense it as a different kind of silence.

17. Section 7 of the *Tractatus* is only one sentence long. But though it appears to be the shortest section, it also intimates that it is, in another sense, the longest, because we understand that not it, but the silence following it, is the ending; and that silence does not cease.

18. The dictum must be complete or it is nothing. But we sense the white space around an aphorism as part of it. An aphorism does not coincide with itself. The formula of identity, $A \equiv A$, does not apply to it. It is perpetually unfinished, always reaching beyond itself. When we enter it, we intimate a wholly different world.

19. The dictum says Something. The aphorism shows Something Else.

NOTES

- 1 John Gross, ed., *The Oxford Book of Aphorisms* (Oxford, 1983), pp. vii–x.
- 2 W. H. Auden and Louis Kronenberger, ed., *The Viking Book of Aphorisms: A Personal Selection* (Dorset, 1981), pp. vii–viii.
- 3 Paul F. Boller Jr. and John George, ed., *They Never Said It: A Book of Fake Quotes, Misquotes, and Misleading Attributions* (New York, 1989), pp. vii–xi.
- 4 For an account of Bakhtin’s theories of genre, see Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, 1990), pp. 271–305.
- 5 On works that belong by accident or design to more than one genre, see Gary Saul Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky’s “Diary of a Writer” and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Austin, 1981).
- 6 I coined the term “meta-utopia” to indicate works that create a dialogue between utopia and anti-utopia in Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre*.
- 7 S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd, and C. D. C. Reeve, ed., *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy from Thales to Aristotle* (Indianapolis, 1995), p. 28; hereafter cited in text as *RA*.
- 8 Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, tr. Bernard Knox, in *Man and His Fictions: An Introduction to Fiction-Making, Its Forms, and Uses*, ed. Alvin B. Kernan, Peter Brooks, and Michael Holquist (New York, 1973), p. 357; hereafter cited in text as *O*.
- 9 These dicta come from the following sources. Dictum a is from Jeremy Bentham, *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* (New York, 1948), p. 1. G is from René Descartes, “Meditations,” in “*Discourse on Method*” and “*Meditations*,” tr. Laurence J. Lafleur (Indianapolis, 1960), p. 82. H is from Descartes, “*Discourse on Method*,” tr. Lafleur, p. 24. J and K are from Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “*Discourse on Method*,” “*Correspondence with Arnauld*,” *Monadology*, tr. George Montgomery (La Salle, Ill., 1989), pp. 19, 10. L is from *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Mahwah, N.J., 1994), p. 13. The remaining dicta are from John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations: A Collection of Passages, Phrases, and Proverbs Traced to their Sources in Ancient and Modern Literature*, ed. Emily Morison Beck, 15th ed. (Boston, 1980).
- 10 Elie Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*, tr. Mary Morris (Boston, 1955), p. 6.
- 11 Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species: A Facsimile of the First Edition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), p. 490.
- 12 These aphorisms come from the following sources. A and B are from Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, tr. D. C. Lau (Harmondsworth, 1985), hereafter cited in text as *TC*. C is from Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, tr. Constance Garnett (New York, 1962), p. 389 (amended by author for accuracy). D, E, and F are from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, tr. D. W. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London, 1961). The remainder of the aphorisms are from Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations*.
- 13 For information about the *Tao Te Ching*, I rely on A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, Ill., 1989), pp. 215–34; hereafter cited in text as *DT*.
- 14 *The Maxims of La Rochefoucauld*, tr. Louis Kronenberger (New York, 1959), p. 33.
- 15 As cited in Alan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein’s Vienna* (New York, 1973), p. 192.
- 16 Karl Kraus, *Half-Truths and One-and-a-Half Truths*, ed. Harry Zohn (Chicago, 1990), p. 67.