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Philosophy as Deep and Shallow Wisdom

David Gamez

Being is in a state of perfection from every viewpoint, like the volume of a spherical ball, and equally poised in every direction from its centre. For it must not be either at all greater or at all smaller in one regard than in another. For neither has Not-being any being which could halt the coming together of Being, nor is Being capable of being more than Being in one regard and less in another, since it is all inviolate. For it is equal with itself from every view and encounters determination all alike.

Parmenides, Fragment 8¹

The modern conference resembles the pilgrimage of medieval Christendom in that it allows the participants to indulge themselves in all the pleasures and diversions of travel while appearing to be austere bent on self-improvement. To be sure, there are certain penitential exercises to be performed – the presentation of a paper, perhaps, and certainly listening to the papers of others. But with this excuse you journey to new and interesting places, meet new and interesting people, and form new and interesting relationships with them; exchange gossip and confidences (for your well-worn stories are fresh to them, and vice versa); eat, drink and make merry in their company every evening; and yet, at the end of it all, return home with an enhanced reputation for seriousness of mind.

David Lodge, *Small World*²

Twenty people deprived of daylight and spaced evenly apart in a bare room. They listen to papers, take notes, get bored, fall asleep, shift on seats. Two hundred billion brain cells absorbing nine thousand words per hour on a variety of subjects. Some arguments slip by unapprehended. Others provoke feverish notes or kick lazy slides of ideas into a new turn. As the cadences of each paper drone on, these minds start to think about lunch, bouncing babies, next weekend, the nature of time and space or the trace of a bra strap on the back of the woman in the third row ...

Conferences are where the networking and business side of academia gets done, where strategic alliances are set up between participating individuals and institutions. They are hotbeds of political exchanges and gossip: who is hiring who; the sorcery of funding, propaganda, scandal; who is blind reviewing who.

Conferences are a chance to travel on the departmental budget; to meet fresh folk on foreign shores. Where would be the allure of conference going without a chance to skinny-dip on Blackpool beach at midnight or dirty flirt wearing coconuts and a grass skirt?

Conferences are a chance to publish and avoid perishing. Seduced by a place in the proceedings, delegates can pay hundreds of pounds to participate and add an extra entry to their list of world-wide dissemination work.

Conferences are acts of stratifying consumption where a product is presented to people who have been educated to enjoy it. According to Pierre Bourdieu :

The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile - in a word, natural - enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous,

distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences.³

We have been brought up to consume highly refined cultural goods - such as papers and books on philosophy - and by attending conferences we extend and refine this process of differentiating ourselves from the ale-swilling casuals watching the footy. Philosophy conferences perpetuate class differences.

Conferences are entertaining. Structuring the scholarly minutia are grand Hollywood-style myths about bad theories vanquished by superior ones and lonely facts brought together. Points of view are put forward and refuted whilst elusive truth skips skittishly away from the fumbling delegates. Supporting all this entertainment is the partisanship of the participants. The Hegelian in the corner sublates everything the Kierkegaardian says. The analytic philosopher disdainfully dismisses continental trash. Anti-realists fight with realists, naturalists with anti-naturalists, materialists with idealists; everyone defending their own corner with thrusts and parries of intellectual sophistry.

This backdrop to conferences is not bad, in fact a lot of it is essential to support the research that is done. However, none of it could support the conference system without the underlying idea that conferences are attended to gain truth, to exchange ideas which reciprocally enhance our wisdom. We are wiser women and men when we leave a conference and this gain in wisdom makes the tiring travel, adamant seats, boring chit chat and stifling stuffy air worthwhile.

To understand the relationship between the 'shallow' reasons for attending conferences that I have outlined and the 'deep' wisdom that we gain from them, I will examine some of the main components of wisdom in more detail. This will in no way be a comprehensive treatment of wisdom, since it is somewhat oversimplifying and ignores the whole question of practical wisdom. Rather, the aim of this description is to cover some of the more obvious features of wisdom to prepare the ground for the discussion of the justification of wisdom, which is the main theme of this paper.⁴

The main components of wisdom are facts, causal explanations and explanations of a thing in terms of something else – what I am calling the 'as' structure. I will now discuss each of these in more detail.

Facts relate one thing to another and make connections within the world and between ideas. Some examples of facts are:

Humans have free will

Matter does not exist

Dasein is projected towards the future, thrown back upon the past and moves from there to the present⁵

Facts tell you something about something, but they are generally not concerned with the nature of objects or concepts. Some facts record relationships between objects – "Igor is married to a goat", for example - whereas others identify properties of an object – "Igor's hair is red". Whilst some facts are closely tied to an object's nature (Igor would not be human if he did not have free will), most have no bearing upon this. The redness of Igor's hair does not make him Russian; if he encouraged the growth of algae and small plants on his head, we would simply say "Igor's hair is green" instead. Although individual facts

generally do not affect the nature of a thing, this can be tied to a collection of facts about it. A could be an object that has to have properties P, Q, R and S if it is to be called A at all.⁶ For example, we might say that a table consists of a horizontal surface supported by three or more legs and refuse to classify an object as a table unless these facts are true about it.

A second part of wisdom is causal explanation, which explains one state of the world by reference to an earlier state. A causal explanation consists of a description of the earlier state and generally either a verb or physical law that identifies the cause of the move from the earlier to the later state. For example:

Abstract ideas are caused by generalisation from experience

Mental events are caused by physical events

Mr. P.'s claustrophobia was caused by complications during his birth

There is considerable overlap between causal explanations and the other components of wisdom. Causal explanations interrelate entities in time and space in a similar way to facts and they can also be 'as' structures, where the cause appears in the effect and we see the effect as its causal antecedent. Jack's mania may be caused by a chemical imbalance in his brain, but we also see his mania as a chemical imbalance in his brain.

A third component of wisdom is the explanation of one thing in terms of something else. For the purposes of this paper I have called this kind of explanation an 'as' structure. The 'as' structure sees something as something else. Whilst A is apparently there before us, in fact it is B, lurking in the background, that makes A what it is. We should see A in terms of B: A is *essentially* B.

I could have called this an 'is' structure, since we often use 'is' in this way as well. However, one difference between them is that 'as' is generally used when we are talking about an aspect of the thing being described, whereas we use 'is' to describe its real objective nature. I might say that I see the object in front of me as a rabbit or as a duck, but in fact the object really is a drawing. We also use 'is' to state facts about an object. To avoid ambiguities about different uses of 'is', and taking into account Mulhall's claim that 'a study of continuous aspect perception can legitimately be viewed as a philosophical investigation of human relationships with objects or phenomena *in general*',⁷ I will refer to both the subjective perception of X as Y and the objective claim that X *is* Y as 'as' structures in this paper. However many of the examples will be phrased in the form X is Y, rather than I see X as Y. Some examples of the 'as' structure now follow:

My big red car is a compensation for the small size of my penis. At first glance, I appear to be driving my big red car down the street, listening to big beats on the radio, on my way to do some shopping at Safeways. However, in reality, behind the scenes, I am *actually* doing something entirely different. As I push my foot to the floor and chuckle at the roar of the engine I am *compensating* for my biological deficiencies. If I had been more generously endowed genetically, I would probably be shopping online.

Matter is energy. Taken one way, this does not have to be an 'as' structure at all, since $e=mc^2$ could just be an equation governing the transformation of matter into energy, and not a claim about the identity of the two substances. In the same way as

a moving magnetic field can be converted into electricity and back, so matter could be transformed into energy without there being an identity between them. On the other hand, when matter is considered in more detail, the identity between them becomes more apparent. Matter is a cloud of wave-particles with different frequencies of vibration or energy states and these wave-particles are composed of further wave-particles also with different frequencies of vibration. The statement matter is energy, when explained in this way, opens up a new vision of matter, which is no longer solid through and through, but some kind of assembly of standing waves vibrating at energy levels too microscopic for us to see with the naked eye.

Truth is the correspondence between a statement and a fact. The essence of truth is this relationship between statements and facts. If this correspondence is not present, then no truth is present.

People are biological machines. When I meet my friend Pierre to chat about politics and bet on the races, I am in fact interacting with an extremely sophisticated biological machine. This is the nature of Pierre, the essence of Pierre, there is nothing more to Pierre than the clicking and whirring of his molecular engines.

I will now cover some features of this 'as' structure and the relationship between it and the other parts of wisdom. To begin with there is a feedback loop between the collection of facts attributed to an object and its 'as' structure. The collection of facts about an object affects its 'as' structure and its 'as' structure affects its collection of facts. If I change some of the facts about a drawing – for example, that it contains fur and big ears instead of a beak and wings – then this will change the way I see it – I no longer see it as a duck, but as a rabbit. On the other hand, a different 'as' structure may have a different set of facts associated with it. If I see the drawing as a duck, one of the facts about the drawing is that it contains a beak and wings. If I see the drawing as a record of a particle collision experiment, then one of the facts about it is that one quark is colliding with another and moving off to the left. A different 'as' structure realigns the existing facts and opens up new facts.

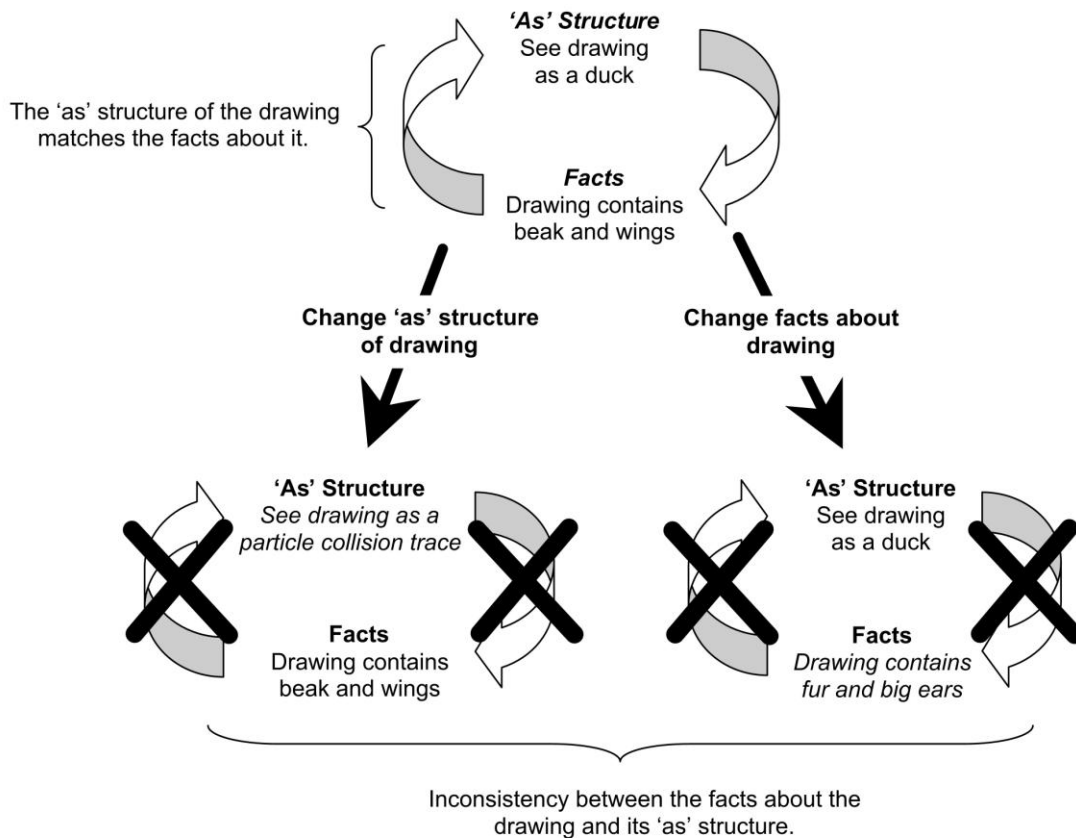


Figure 1. Changing the 'as' structure or the facts about a drawing alters the feedback loop between them.

A second feature of the 'as' structure is that 'as' type explanations or descriptions are generally not limited to one level and there is rarely a single 'as' which is at stake.⁸ A whole hierarchy of 'as's may need to be adjusted in response to a change in an 'as' at a high level. The more profound the high level alteration, the more detailed will be the other adjustments. The assertion that man is the outcome of an evolutionary process has had effects ranging from the abolition of religion to the religious way in which every facet of human behaviour is now reduced to some evolutionary advantage or other. This rippling down effect has consequences for the facts supporting each 'as' attribution in the way described in the previous paragraph.

A third feature of 'as' type explanations is that they are generally a narrowing and delimiting of the object that is being explained. Whereas causal explanations often use something more complicated to account for something less complicated – for example, when we explain mankind by referring to the development of the Earth and the evolution of creatures on it – 'as' structures almost invariably move from a complicated structure to a simple essence which is said to explain and summarise it. Different slices are taken from the thing, which are said to be more primordial, more essential to its nature than its other 'secondary' qualities. The assertion that "matter is energy" ignores all the other associations that we have with matter, such as its bulk, its colour and its apparent solidity.

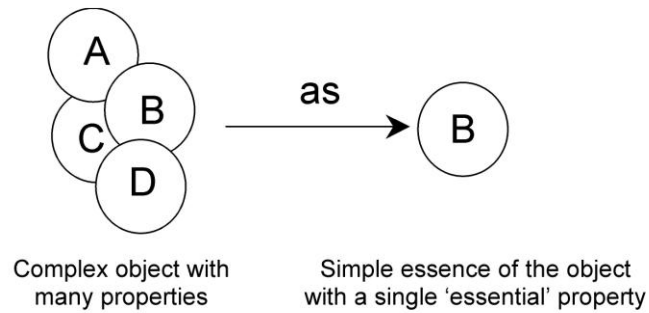


Figure 2. Reduction in complexity brought about through the 'as' structure.

This reduction in complexity offered by the 'as' structure has a number of pragmatic benefits. By reducing something to a simpler rule or essence, we can generalize and make predictions. If we understand the movement of the planets in terms of a force called gravity, we can predict the movement of future unknown bodies and calculate the trajectory of rockets and planes. By understanding the purchase of big red cars in terms of sexual inadequacy we can design big red car adverts which appeal more effectively to this market sector and target the promotion of other products - such as Viagra - to people who make this kind of purchase.

'As' structures also open us up to new things; they place us in different worlds. You are out on a duck hunt, spy a duck and blast it out of the sky. Suddenly the aspect shifts and a wounded rabbit appears before you. You are devastated, you like rabbits, you kneel down before the rabbit, hold its paw, beg it for forgiveness and so on: two different responses to the creature as a duck and as a rabbit. We also respond differently to other people when we see them as the Other and when we see them as biological machines. Some aspects are better than others and one of the benefits of philosophy and art is that they open us up to new aspects; show us new ways of seeing. The philosopher who sees material goods as worthless suffers less from their lack than a person who craves the latest style from Ikea.

Finally, the 'as' structure is entertaining; especially a transformation of the as. We love to be led into a fairytale world in which something or everything is different. Matter *seemed* to be just matter, but it is *actually energy*, a completely different substance. I thought that I was just telling a joke, but I am *actually* revealing the structure of my unconscious. The revelation offered by a new 'as' might be shocking, amazing, surprising; but it is always entertaining.

So far, I have traced out some of the reasons why we attend conferences and shown how they are grounded in the acquisition of wisdom. I then moved on to describe how this wisdom consists of facts, causal explanations and the explanation of one thing in terms of another, what I have called the 'as' structure. The final question that I want to address in this paper is why we might want to consciously and deliberately seek out the wisdom that I have just described.

A first observation that will help us to answer this question is that the descriptions which I have offered *about* wisdom are also pieces of wisdom themselves. When I say that the 'as' structure is entertaining, that it has pragmatic value, that it involves a reduction in complexity, I am saying that the 'as' structure is X, Y and Z; I am listing properties of the 'as' structure, facts about it. Whilst I might *appear* to be speaking at a 'meta' level, my statements about wisdom are actually part of the wisdom they are describing. This is shown diagrammatically in Figure 3.

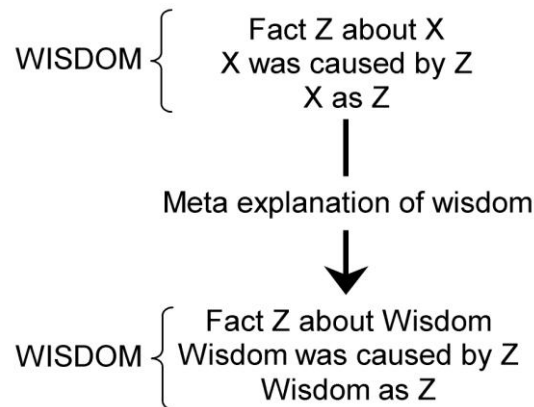


Figure 3. The meta description of wisdom is itself wisdom.

Since descriptions of wisdom are not ‘meta’ descriptions, but part of it, then everything which is said about wisdom must also apply to the statements that are used to describe wisdom. The claim that all ‘as’ structures are entertaining must itself be entertaining since this claim is an ‘as’ structure. A description of wisdom as deep and profound is describing itself as deep and profound. This leaves criticisms of wisdom in an interesting position. These criticisms are part of wisdom as well – they are facts, causal explanations or ‘as’ structures – which means that they must apply to themselves and thereby invalidate their own criticism. If I say that the ‘as’ structure is a load of rubbish, then I am also stating that my description of it as a load of rubbish is itself a load of rubbish and therefore should be discounted. Only self-affirming descriptions of wisdom can be applied to it. Critical descriptions collapse of their own volition. We can say good things about wisdom or fall silent.

We cannot criticize wisdom and it turns out that we cannot justify wisdom either. Justifications invoke and depend upon wisdom and so they must first accept wisdom before they can offer grounds for supporting it. If I say that “Wisdom is good because it increases our knowledge of reality”, I am asserting a fact (wisdom is good) and then justifying this fact using another fact (wisdom increases our knowledge of reality). Evidently the whole process of stating facts and linking them together cannot be justified by stating facts and linking them together.

This is also true of approaches which do not begin with the assertion of a fact, for example, “We should pursue wisdom because it is really great” or “We must pursue wisdom because ignorance is dangerous”. Here, the second part of these assertions, the “because...”, is still a statement of facts, a causal explanation or an ‘as’ structure. It seems that we need to be wise already if we are going to justify wisdom. We cannot say that we should pursue wisdom because it is good, because it is entertaining or because it has pragmatic value, without first saying that it is good, entertaining or has pragmatic value. Once we have accepted facts, causal explanations and ‘as’ structures, we can then use the wisdom that they offer us to justify wisdom. On the other hand, if we are sceptical about wisdom, then further examples of it will do little to convince us. We either accept wisdom blindly, irrationally, without reason, and then engage in some post-hoc rationalising to justify our acceptance of it, or reject it, and then no reason can be given which could lead us into its magic circle.

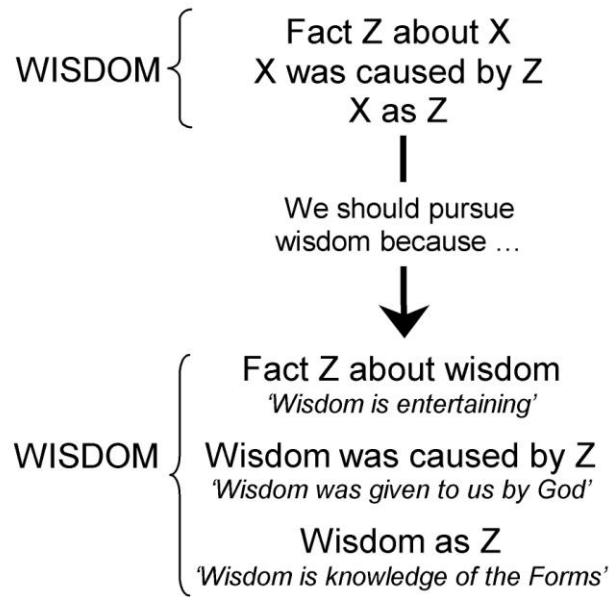


Figure 4. Justifications of wisdom depend on wisdom.

If we try to do without the *reasons* that we use to justify wisdom, the *justification* falls apart. We are left with the bare “We should pursue wisdom”, the idea of wisdom for wisdom’s sake or perhaps just the command “Pursue wisdom”. Perhaps this is why we started to pursue wisdom to begin with, when these injunctions and imperatives were repeated and reiterated throughout the early years of our lives. We are left with a vision of wisdom as a perfect sphere that is everywhere identical, the being imagined by Parmenides. Of course this vision of wisdom is itself just another self-affirming, complexity reducing, hierarchically structured 'as'.

Wisdom is self affirming or it collapses of its own accord. It cannot be justified without presupposing it. But if we choose to enter the sphere of wisdom and look at the reasons which it offers for extending and augmenting its reign, we find that they are pretty similar to the more superficial reasons for attending conferences which I alluded to at the beginning of this paper. According to wisdom, we might want to pursue wisdom for its pragmatic benefits, because it is entertaining and because it opens up new worlds for us.

Wisdom initially appeared to be the anchor point around which each conference turns but it seems that this anchor point leads back to the conference motivations that were initially thought to depend on it. We attend conferences because we want wisdom, but we want wisdom so that we can entertain ourselves, enhance our salaries, skinny-dip on Blackpool beach at midnight and do some dirty flirting wearing coconuts and a grass skirt.

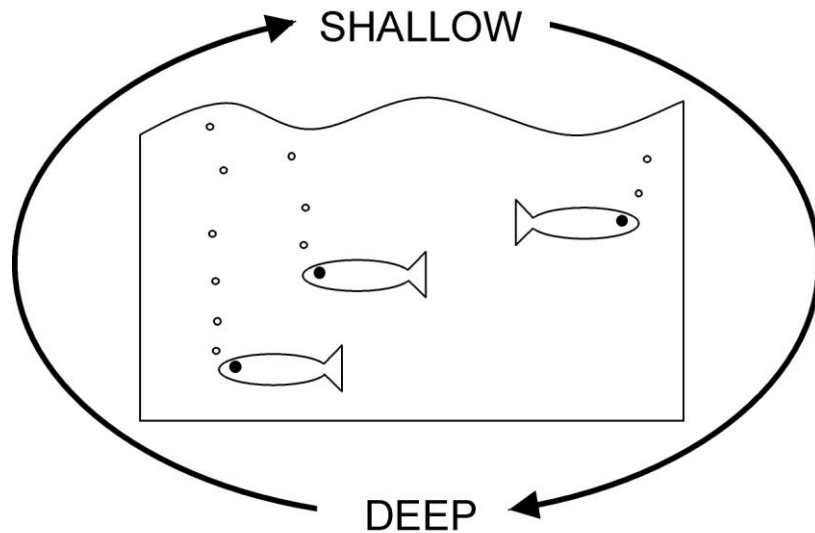


Figure 5: The relationship between our shallow and deep activities.

Ascetic philosophers can only enjoy the shallow things in life – holidays, entertainment, money etc. – by situating them relative to the pursuit of deep activities such as wisdom; but wisdom can only justify itself (to the extent that it can justify itself at all) by referring to shallow activities, such as holidays, entertainment and money. Since we never reach the bottom of wisdom we rarely question where it leads, but the only place it can lead is back to the shallows of life. Wisdom is not a bad thing – it is entertaining, has pragmatic gains and so on – but aside from these benefits it has nothing to say for itself at all.

Before enlightenment, we chop wood and carry water.
After enlightenment, we chop wood and carry water as well.

Further Reading

Jacques Derrida, 'Ousia and Grammē', in *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982).

David Lodge, *Small World* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984).

Stephen Mulhall, *On Being in the World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

¹ Parmenides, Fragment 8, 42-49, translated by A. H. Coxon in *The Fragments of Parmenides* (Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1986), p. 74.

² David Lodge, *Small World* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984), Prologue.

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction, A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) p.7.

⁴ Those who are so inclined may substitute a different or improved account of wisdom in its place, since the exact nature of wisdom is not critical for the argument that I am putting forward.

⁵ These facts are not necessarily all true.

⁶ I am using properties and collections in a very loose way here. In a longer paper this could be nuanced with notions of family resemblance, Wittgenstein's metaphor of the rope with many strands and so on.

⁷ Stephen Mulhall, *On Being in the World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 137.

⁸ This is especially true of philosophy.