

# Rethinking Philosophers' Responsibility



# Rethinking Philosophers' Responsibility

By

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To my parents, dead within five weeks,  
Hélène and Aryeh Amir  
Je ferai de vous des immortels



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A previous version of chapter 10 was published as “The Role of Impersonal Love in Everyday Life,” in *Philosophy in Society*, edited by Henning Herrestad, Anders Holt and Helge Svare. Oslo: Unipub, 217-42, 2002. Its sequel on indiscriminate loves has been published as “The Affective Aspect of Wisdom: Some Conceptions of Love of Humanity and their Use in Philosophical Practice,” *Practical Philosophy* 7 (1): 14-25, 2004.

A different version of chapter 11 was published as “Epistemology as a Practical Activity,” *Haser* 2: 41-65, 2011, and translated into Serbian in *Third Program*, August 2014.

A previous version of chapter 12 was published as “A New Skeptical Worldview for Contemporary World Cultures,” in *China and World: Culture Development Forum*, edited by Jian Chang. Beijing, China: Social Scientific Academic Press, 239-58, 2013.

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## INTRODUCTION

This book recommends rationality in everyday life. Its underlying argument is that since practice improves rationality, philosophy, as the custodian of rationality, is a practical discipline.

I suspect that this practical conception of philosophy is largely foreign to both philosophers and non-philosophers. This is regrettable, as people regularly turn to New Age practices and psychological counseling instead of philosophy to help them deal with problems in their lives. But New Age theories are typically intellectually sloppy and, in some cases, dangerous for their practitioners. And psychological counselors, who are nowadays being consulted for a wide range of ethical, existential, and spiritual problems, cannot do the epistemological and ethical work that philosophers have been trained to do.

The necessity of addressing epistemological problems on a day to day basis makes epistemology a practical discipline. Ethics is more clearly a practical discipline, not only in the narrow sense of distinguishing good from bad, but also in the wider sense of defining the good life. But these are not the only areas in which the philosophically-trained can help others. The unique association of love and wisdom that philosophy represents has led philosophers to advocate original forms of love, which can be seen as alternatives or supplements to the failing ideal of romantic love. And, philosophy's historical role, largely abandoned in the last century or so, was to provide realistic visions of the human condition combined with spiritual alternatives to established religions. It is time for philosophers to reclaim this traditional role, because people's yearning for worldviews, values, and examples to live by—what is commonly called “wisdom”—can be responsibly answered only by philosophers.

Responsibility lies where one is capable of doing something that is needed. Even more so, when no one else can do it. Thus, this book is a call for philosophers to reconsider their responsibility toward the communities in which they live and toward the rational enterprise that Western civilization represents. It further exemplifies various practical paths philosophy may take: it restructures epistemology and ethics as practical disciplines, indicates how philosophers' rational visions of the human condition and unique training in love can be implemented to ease contemporary predicaments, and advances a worldview to live by—*Homo*

*risibilis*.<sup>1</sup> This worldview can support an ethics of compassion that is needed for social action and provide guidance as we face daily problems in our lives. Its advantage is that it does not rely on the dubious metaphysical claims of traditional religious and philosophic worldviews.

The first chapter, “Rethinking Philosophers’ Responsibility,” presents the basic argument for reconsidering the role philosophy should fulfill in the contemporary world, and introduces many of the themes that are further developed in the remainder of the book. After analyzing the current state of philosophy—its attitude toward metaphysics and ethics, its recent skeptical and relativistic crisis—as well as philosophy’s relation to the New Age Movement, religion, and globalization, I suggest several ways in which philosophers can responsibly address contemporary problems.

The remaining fourteen chapters exemplify how this responsibility can be undertaken. They are grouped into six parts: Effective Ethics, Global Concerns, Conflict Irresolution, Philosophic Loves, Practical Epistemology, and Vital Tools.

The first part of the book, Effective Ethics, is concerned with the conditions for making ethics effective given the actual position of philosophy in contemporary society. It comprises two chapters, one examines the moral views implicit in psychological theories, the ethical guidance psychologists are requested to give, and their lack of training (Chapter 2); the other examines the dismissive attitude philosophers typically take toward emotions (Chapter 3). Unless this situation is amended, neither philosophers nor psychologists can effectively promote ethics.

In the contemporary world, effective ethics cannot be dissociated from global concerns, which is the title of the second part. It comprises three chapters, which deal, respectively, with “Business Ethics and Ecology” (Chapter 4), “Inequality and Justice” (Chapter 5), and the “Woman Condition” (Chapter 6).

First, the need to integrate ecological concerns with business ethics calls for a philosophy that can address both. In chapter 4, I argue that Spinoza’s ethics is a good candidate for this overarching vision.

In the next chapter, I argue that the distant poor exemplifies issues of inequality and justice in our global world. The ineffectiveness of empathy as a foundation for action reveals the need for an effective ethics of compassion or a cosmopolitan view, and a critique of limitless wealth-

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<sup>1</sup> *Homo risibilis* has been introduced in chapter 3 in Amir, *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard* (2014) in relation to humor theories. Here, it is presented in relation to contemporary problems.

maximizing and power-seeking. These issues are further elaborated in the last part (chapters 14 and 15), where the worldview advanced in this book is shown to presuppose such a critique and support such an ethic.

The final chapter of the Global Concerns part addresses the woman condition. The situation of women is a source of much worry in the global world. Though feminists are right that laws and institutions must be changed, I argue that we must also work to transform our fundamental perspective of ourselves as vulnerable material beings, and I indicate how we can replace shame and disgust with compassion and acceptance.

Much has been written on conflict resolution. Yet the desirability and the feasibility of conflict irresolution is the topic of the next part (Conflict Irresolution). It comprises two chapters: "Moral Conflicts" (Chapter 7) and "The Value of Dissatisfaction" (Chapter 8). I argue that conflict irresolution is desirable and feasible when moral conflicts set irreducible values in opposition (Chapter 7), and when the conflict between desire and reason defines the human condition (Chapter 8).

The ideal of romantic love has ravaged the minds of many, yet philosophers may help cure contemporary distress by promoting other kinds of love. Philosophic Loves, the topic of the next part, comprise two chapters. Chapter 9, "Rationality as Passion," reveals valuable insights in Plato's theory of love that shed light on contemporary problems. Chapter 10, "Impersonal Loves," complements the previous chapter by presenting a variety of philosophical loves, which are not directed toward a particular human being and can be alternatives or supplements to romantic love.

The penultimate part, Practical Epistemology, comprises two chapters: "Intellectual Virtues" (Chapter 11) and "Skepticism, Reason, and Emotion" (Chapter 12). Because epistemology is also a practical discipline, Chapter 11 argues that a virtue epistemology of intellectual virtues should be taught and applied also outside of the academe. Chapter 12 looks for reasons why skepticism, in many ways the most reasonable epistemological view, is nevertheless rejected by many people. This chapter argues that the negative emotional attitudes skepticism elicits may be the cause of its disrepute, and follows with a proposal to effectively counter the negativity skepticism occasions.

Finally, the last part, Vital Tools, comprises "The Sense of Proportion" (Chapter 13), "Happiness as a Means" (Chapter 14), and "A Practical Philosophy of Vulnerability and Fallibility" (Chapter 15). This part offers as vital tools a systematic method for developing one's sense of proportion, an argument in favor of happiness, aimed at resolving doubts about its desirability and feasibility, and a philosophy of human

vulnerability and fallibility that prides itself on its practicability and its power to solve many of the problems broached in the course of this book.

Two underlying themes loom large throughout the book. One is the acknowledgement of the invaluable work undertaken by practical philosophers in picking up where academic philosophers have lost interest. Their pioneering attempts to take responsibility and answer contemporary needs are commendable. Their work should be promulgated, discussed, and sought out more than it currently is.<sup>2</sup>

The other theme is a novel philosophical theory of humor, which construes it as an epistemological tool that enables self-transformation through intra-personal dialogue. Humor's role in the solution to the various problems addressed in this book demonstrates its potency as a practical tool in the service of philosophical ideals. It further provides the foundation for a skeptical minimalism that contemporary philosophy should strive for even in its synoptic worldviews.

The chapters comprising this book are for the most part based on considerably revised essays and articles published separately over the last fifteen years. When brought together, they form a coherent and unified vision. However, the unavoidable repetitions also ensure that the following chapters are self-contained, and can be read in no particular order. I have written in an accessible style, hoping to engage not only academic and practical philosophers, but also students of philosophy, readers trained in other disciplines, and the general public.

## References

- Amir, Lydia B. 2014. *Humor and the Good Life: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- . Forthcoming. *Taking Philosophy Seriously*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

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<sup>2</sup> I address philosophical practice in a more explicit way in the forthcoming manuscript, *Taking Philosophy Seriously* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing).



# CHAPTER ONE

## RETHINKING PHILOSOPHERS' RESPONSIBILITY

Should philosophers address the needs of their societies? Today's needs for cosmology and spirituality are being answered mainly within the New Age Movement for lack of viable alternatives. Philosophers' minimal response requires construing logic and epistemology as practical fields to be taught outside the Academe. The maximal response requires reforming part of philosophy as social thinking in order to answer contemporary needs. This response is contingent on a diagnosis of people's desires for cosmology and spirituality, an assessment of the role the New Age Movement fulfills in relation to these needs, and an awareness of the Movement's imperviousness to criticism and potential dangers. The reform of part of philosophy also depends on the capacity of philosophers to answer the need for a synoptic vision, as well as their interest in doing so. It requires readiness to assume responsibility both for the state of philosophy and for its role in society. The future of philosophy and the character of Western culture may well be at stake.

In what follows, I assess philosophers' aptitude for adopting this response today. I examine the current state of cosmology (or descriptive metaphysics) and ethics, the opportunities and limitations that globalization affords for cross-cultural fertilization, and the interest philosophers may have in transcending philosophy's skeptical and relativistic crisis (Postmodernism), which has played a significant role in the spread of religion and fundamentalism. I reach the conclusion that the contemporary turn to religion is unnecessary. If philosophy is loyal to its historical role as an alternative to established religions, it can revitalize itself as well as provide a viable alternative to the intellectual laxity and potential dangers of the New Age Movement.

### **1. The New Age Movement**

Over the past few decades, the general public has become aware of a new popular religious movement. Despite its name and supposed genesis in the early 1970s, the New Age Movement has deep roots in Western culture. It emerged out of the longstanding occult tradition. It differs only by its

appropriation of several new scientific concepts from transpersonal psychology, and recently imported ideas and practices from Eastern religions, which began to permeate Western culture again in the 1960s.

While members share a repudiation of the orthodoxies they have left behind, the movement is held together, however loosely, by its very real transformative vision of a new world. A new people will transcend the limitations of narrowly chauvinistic and outmoded thought-forms of the previous age's theologies and beliefs. That transformative vision of a New Age both unifies the visible diversity and gives the movement its name.

Those who advocate the coming of the New Age start with the assumption that there is something wrong with the world as we know it. Recent advances in technology and growing ecological awareness have sharpened people's perception of contemporary global crises. Science and materialism, it is believed, have suffocated the human spirit and stifled human attempts to experience the holy. Organized religions appear to have overregulated and possibly distorted human desire for genuine spirituality or religiosity. Those who proclaim the New Age insist, therefore, that changes on both the individual and social levels are called for that stress holistic values rather than individual desires for wealth and power and that focus on one's inner experiences rather than on explicit statements of belief.

From this point of view, the New Age is a symbolic or metaphorical expression of the human quest for a transformative, creative, and free existence. Those involved in the New Age Movement envisage the human race as one family living and sharing the same planet in peace and harmony, since all people have the same origin and destiny. Compassion, love, and ministry to the needs of others are qualities that ideally identify those who want to join the New Age Movement. All people are invited to participate in its goals of social, material, and spiritual improvement or betterment.<sup>1</sup>

To realize this transformation, a variety of theories and techniques are proposed within the New Age Movement. Wouter Hanegraaff's *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (1996) represents the most ambitious attempt to find common doctrinal elements, ranging from ethics to cosmology, from occult anatomy to specific conceptions of human history.<sup>2</sup> He also introduces the distinction between the millenarian New

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<sup>1</sup> See Saliba (1999, 3). For a good description of the New Age vision see Melton (1992, 45-50).

<sup>2</sup> Lewis and Melton (1992) summarized the relatively few previous attempts at delimiting the New Age, but avoided committing themselves to any list of such traits. Mark York's work, more sociological in approach, attempts to circumscribe

Age *sensu stricto* (with an emphasis on an imminent apocalypse) and the broader New Age *sensu lato* (Hanegraaff 1996, 98-103). In his groundbreaking work on New Age epistemology, *Claiming Knowledge* (2003), Olav Hammer lists the following characteristics: The cosmos is a whole. Our inner states, attitudes and beliefs have a fundamental role in influencing our circumstances. The basic “stuff” of the cosmos is non-material “energy.” The self is a unity of body, mind and spirit; by treating this unity as a whole many of our problems in life can be solved. By combining the ecological with the spiritual, we can repair the ills that we have inflicted on the earth. Each of us has a unique role in this holistic cosmos, and this role can be discovered through various procedures, ranging from divination to meditation. Each of us evolves over a succession of lives. These basic ideas are not available to us primarily through rational thinking but through other means. One way to arrive at these “truths” is through personal experience; another is through embracing the spirituality of various non-Western peoples. The specific path that any of us will follow in order to gain these insights is an idiosyncratic path. Our experiences and feelings are the primary guides to our spiritual path, and since all individuals are different, many paths are valid (Hammer 2001, 76).

Despite the fragmented religiosity, there is a shared cosmology underlying numerous New Age books and many works of the esoteric tradition. It is a “hermetic idealism,” idealist in the sense that it sees spiritual impulses rather than material causes as the primary mechanism operative in the cosmos. It is hermetic in its implication that these spiritual impulses affect the material world by other means than mundane chains of cause and effect, such as Jungian synchronicities or correspondences. Synchronicity is an “acausal connecting principle” that links seeming coincidences through deeper meanings. Correspondence is based on the idea that “as above so below”; in analogy with a hologram, the human being and the cosmos mirror each other.<sup>3</sup> It is a cosmology with deep roots in Western esotericism.

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the New Age in terms of its organizational structures. A first attempt to formulate a doctrinal rather than a social definition has been made by Peter Heelas in *The New Age Movement* (1996a). He introduced the concept of the sacralization of the self, arguing that the veneration of an inner essence within the individual is common to most if not all New Age doctrines.

<sup>3</sup> The term “Hermetic idealism” has been coined by Olav Hammer (2001, 51, 307-10).

Some concepts once considered vital to the movement, such as the millenarian hope, have gradually diminished in significance.<sup>4</sup> Others, for instance, crystal healing and the veneration of dolphins, were barely known in the 1960s but have come to the fore during these last decades. Techniques once seen as linked by the common ideological core of a major planetary shift associated with the Age of Aquarius (the New Age *sensu stricto*) became part of an encompassing worldview that emphasized personal rather than global transformation (the New Age *sensu lato*). Then they once again became increasingly compartmentalized, giving rise to small islands of specialized interest linked by a tenuous and largely invisible set of common values.

The changes in the doctrinal or ritualistic focus of these islands of interest have not been that radical. Today they include astrology, Cayce, color and aura, dreams, gems and stones, graphology, healing, channeling, Indian philosophy, Chinese philosophy, Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah), Muslim mysticism (Sufism), Jungian psychology, mythology, numerology, parapsychology, reincarnation and karma, Tantra, tarot, UFOs, yoga, Zen Buddhism, neo-pagan religions, magic, witchcraft, woman spirituality's movement, American Indian spirituality, Shamanism, and more.

While few scholars would doubt the New Age's impact on modern society, many would question the depth and significance of its influence. Sociologist Steven Bruce points out that it is hard to assess the influence that New Age ideas and practices are having on society as a whole. New Age religion cannot aspire to promote radical and specific change because it does not have the cohesion and discipline of a sect. But, as has already happened with aspects of its environmentalism and its holistic approach to health, some of its ideas may find themselves stripped of their more esoteric parts and accepted into the cultural mainstream. More significant than its immediate impact on the lives of individuals is the part that it plays as symptom and as cause of the erosion of faith in orthodoxies and the authority of professional knowledge (Bruce 1996, 225).

Elliot Miller maintains that the movement "has become a third major force vying with traditional Judeo-Christian religion and secular humanism for cultural dominance" (Miller 1989, 183). It is becoming increasingly difficult to pick up a popular magazine and not to come across the New Age advertised or talked about in some form or another. The New Age has also come to mean big business. Peter Heelas examines

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<sup>4</sup> According to J. Gordon Melton (1992), it is almost impossible to find anyone in the USA who is still committed to this vision.

the increased prominence of prosperity thinking and the concomitant influence of New Age beliefs on mainstream society through, for example, management seminars.<sup>5</sup> There are probably few industrialized nations in the world that have not felt the impact of its ideology and practices.<sup>6</sup> Its influence is widespread, regardless of the fact that, at least in the States, the label New Age is being dropped from bookstores' shelves. It is being substituted by a more respectable designation, namely "Metaphysics," though this is certainly misleading and damaging to philosophy. Hammer maintains that the New Age Movement may be on the wane, but the wider New Age religiosity, i.e., a doctrinally and historically related group of doctrines and rituals codified in a set of texts, shows no signs of disappearing (Hammer 2001, 75).

The occult religion in the West is a persistent tradition that has been the constant companion of Christianity through the centuries and has blossomed heartily as a product of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.<sup>7</sup> Largely destroyed by Protestantism and the first major waves of religious skeptical thought represented in such movements as Deism, the occult needed a new vehicle to replace the outmoded supernaturalism of medieval magic and alchemy. It found that vehicle in the new science of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, one cannot understand the

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<sup>5</sup> Heelas (1996b, 49ff.). Metaphysical thought moved into business through the conversion of Orison S. Marden, who in the 1890s became the first successful merchant of techniques for success to entry-level corporate executives on their way to the top. He—with successors such as Napoleon Hill, Dale Carnegie, W. Clement Stone, Earl Nightengale, and Catherine Ponder—developed contemporary "prosperity consciousness" ideology. Discerning the frequent gap between such traditional values as hard work and native ability and any assurance of success, they attempted to discern rules for success, which they presented as universal metaphysical laws. They were the first to note that upward mobility demanded such things as self-confidence, enthusiasm, the use of mentors, goal-setting, self-discipline, intuition, and the ability to manipulate money without feelings of guilt. The presentation of these "rules" for success is now integral to the training for most salesmen and young executives, and many corporate training programs unabashedly retain the heavy metaphysical overload. See Melton (1992, 53).

<sup>6</sup> John Saliba notes that in Japan, for example, many of the so-called new religions have been influenced by the New Age (1999, vii, ix n4). One issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (Manabu and Kisala 1995) was dedicated to the presence of the New Age in Japan.

<sup>7</sup> A historical treatment of the metaphysical tradition is found in Judah (1967), with important supplementary material in Melton (1987a; 1987b). For several ancient and medieval traditions that were instrumental in the emergence of modern esotericism, see Faivre (1994).

New Age Movement without recognizing its initial approval of science and its subsequent use of it as a major vehicle for expressing its perspective.

New Age science is typically concerned with developing unified worldviews. It shares this ambition with many popular expositions of modern science. It is characterized by a unified worldview that includes a religious element, and a resurgence of interest in religious techniques of the spiritual life, not only as found in Asian religions but also in monastic, Pentecostal, and cabalistic traditions of the West. With the weakening of the institutional, ritualistic, and theological components of religion, the spiritual exercises have become techniques of attaining spiritual ends. Enthusiasm for Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist teachers and writings, for “primitive” paths to salvation such as that of Don Juan in Carlos Castaneda’s sage, and for the occult “sciences” rejected by the West may appear to be a fad but they seem to be here to stay. The New Age Movement also promotes unscientific medical theories, diagnoses and treatments, which have infiltrated the medical establishment.<sup>8</sup> Ethical theories such as Karma and views pertaining to a specific philosophical anthropology, such as reincarnation, are representative of the movement. Some of the most problematic ideas of the New Age are that people are responsible both for creating their own illness and for healing themselves. If something is true for the individual, this is all that matters. We create the world we live in. We have forgotten our true nature. We are sparks of the divine, incarnated on this earthly plane but not of it. It seems that the New Age needs to be evaluated because it deals with both theoretical and practical matters that affect people’s lives.

## 2. Criticism of the New Age Movement

The criticism the movement attracts can be classified into epistemological, psychological, and spiritual arguments. Epistemological criticism targets the New Age Movement’s use of science and the spiritual techniques it promotes. The latter is best represented by the attitudes of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), epitomized by Henry Gordon’s unequivocal declaration that the field encompassed by the New Age is “nonsensical drivel” (Gordon 1988, 28; see also Saliba 1999, 25). The criticism of the New Age Movement’s use

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the fascinating account Hammer gives, as a case study that is representative of many other doctrines, of the way in which the *Chakra* system have infiltrated the West (Hammer 2001, 91-97, 181-97).

of science needs some elaboration. The guiding motivation of New Age scientists is the search for a new worldview. For this reason, the term “New Age science” is actually a misnomer. Its real domain is not natural science, but philosophy of nature or *Naturphilosophie*. New Age’s epistemology is therefore circular, according to Hammer:

Science is made to rhetorically support certain claims that are a priori doctrines within the esoteric tradition. A specific view of the world is clothed in scientific terminology and expressed by means of carefully selected bits and pieces of science in what is essentially a scientific [or pseudo-science] *bricolage*. Conversely, the underlying worldview is then said to be supported by the scientific edifice thus constructed. In an age where science carries an enormous rhetorical weight, but is devoid of fundamentally appealing qualities such as goal, meaning and purpose, it remains tempting to claim scientific status for what are essentially religious beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

Epistemological criticism targets also the dogmatism of the movement’s adherents. Joseph Chuman accuses New Agers of refusing to correct their assumptions, or being incapable of doing so, thus committing the “error of solipsism, or the belief that the outside world is exclusively an object of our consciousness” (Chuman 1992, 20). New Agers are berated for turning off their critical faculties and for proclaiming “a metaphysical dualism with an exuberance and gusto that would have caused St. Augustine to blush,” while the New Age is further charged with being “founded upon an utterly unsubstantiated metaphysics and a disreputable epistemology,” and for “irresponsibly confusing imagination with fact” (Faber 1996, 58; quoted in Saliba 1999, 25).

Psychological criticism of the New Age Movement originates in the anti-cult movement and in psychoanalytic assessments of its goals. The former emphasizes that the New Age Movement is not devoid of potential dangers. In *Religion without God*, Ray Billington reports G. K. Chesterton’s wry comment that if people don’t believe in God, they won’t believe in nothing—they’ll believe in anything. He argues that with the growing popularity of New Age concepts, and the less desirable proliferation of cults of various kinds, this stricture cannot be ignored: “Most of the cults are directed towards a charismatic person, usually male, who seems able to achieve a remarkable control of people’s minds, and who exploits this power unashamedly” (Billington 2002, 7).

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<sup>9</sup> Hammer (2001, 329-30). See the fifth chapter, “Scientism as a language of faith,” for a thorough explanation of the attitude of New Age’s theorists toward with modern science. See also Hanegraaff (1996, chap. 4).

Many of the goals of the New Age are said to be unrealistic, its psychology recalling the emotional irrationalism of the romantic period. Furthermore, the New Age has been criticized for endorsing a new form of personal responsibility deemed a “rationalized and often uncaring narcissism.” A good example is the doctrine that one is responsible for one’s illnesses, as well as for one’s situation in the world in general.<sup>10</sup> Psychoanalysts’ criticism has been the most damaging psychological assessment of the movement. In *New Age Thinking: A Psychoanalytic Critique*, Melvin D. Faber writes:

I regard New Age thinking as essentially regressive or infantile in nature. It is absorbed, I contend, in matters of symbiotic merger, omnipotence, narcissistic inflation, and in magical thinking and wishing generally. New Age thinking makes war on reality; it denigrates reason; it denies and distorts what I consider to be the existential facts of our human experience; it seeks to restore the past, specifically, the before-separation world, in an idealized, wish-fulfilling form that has little if any connection with the adult estate. . . . It bears no relevance whatsoever to any and all questions of veracity, authenticity, actuality, or validity, as it is a purely practical or pragmatic criterion; it exacts too high a price, namely loss of reason, autonomy, and maturity, for whatever adaptive reward it offers the practitioner. (Faber 1996, 14-15; quoted in Saliba 1999, 25)

The spirituality of the New Age Movement has been criticized both from the Christian perspective and the skeptical, non-religious community. John Saliba has evaluated the New Age Movement from evangelical and fundamentalist Christian points of view, as well as from Protestant, Eastern Orthodox and Catholic perspectives.<sup>11</sup> The superficiality of New Age’s spirituality has also been emphasized by philosophers of religion, such as Robert C. Neville.

Neville maintains that the shallowness of the faddish interest in non-Western spiritual traditions rests on three principal points. The first is that they seem to give the promise of rescuing Westerners from their problems without requiring them to face those problems. They seem to say that the problems are somehow either unreal or, in the case of occultism, in the control of forces other than human. This part of the fad is a desire to escape responsibility. But there is no genuine spiritual tradition which warrants the escape from responsibility. In fact, most increase the scope of things for which one is to be responsible.

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<sup>10</sup> Dubrow-Eichel and Dubrow-Eichel (1988, 178); quoted in Saliba (1999, 26).

<sup>11</sup> See Saliba (1999). For an assessment of New Age’s spirituality, see Ferguson (1993).



The second reason for the fad is a desire for an easy technology to attain psychic integrity. But no spiritual path is easy or quick. The paths of instant enlightenment may reach the omega quickly enough, but the problem is to stay there. One of the signs of faddishness in the cult of non-Western spirituality is the frequent switching from one path to another.

The third reason is that non-Western spiritual traditions simply are not present in the West in a congenial way. Westerners need to become something other than Western to employ those other spiritual resources. There are few models in the West for appropriating the non-Western traditions. As a consequence, it seems as if Westerners must adopt Indian or Chinese culture to learn from their spiritual traditions. And because few can switch cultures in any but the most superficial way, the whole effort hardly leaves the faddish stage (Neville 1978, 10-11).

Although important, criticism of the New Age Movement seems ineffective. To date, as noted by sociologist J. Gordon Melton, it has not had a measurable effect in deterring the movement's growth. Members of the movement tend not to read anti-New Age material, and many are quite unaware of its existence, having as its main circulation evangelical Christians and scientific skeptics rather than its intended target audience (Melton 1992).

Moreover, an ideological battle between opposing worldviews is being fought out in the arena of science, which is simply the wrong place. And when the fight occasionally takes place in the philosophic arena, it is usually within the context of a philosophy which insists on reason as the exclusive arbiter of truth: a rationalist epistemology which *Naturphilosophie* does not accept. The result is a discussion about, rather than with, the accused party, which is under no obligation to accept the results.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Philosophers' Possible Responses

Acknowledging that the New Age Movement is impervious to skeptical attacks, philosophers might ignore it. Diagnosed as continuing the occult tradition in Western history, it falls outside philosophy's scope and, perhaps, responsibility. Arguably, the whole discipline of philosophy is the adequate response to the New Age's endeavor. In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Karl Popper maintains that the rise of philosophy itself can be interpreted as a response to the breakdown of the closed society and

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<sup>12</sup> For the breach between New Agers and their critics, see Hanegraaff (1996, 66-67).

its magical beliefs (Popper 1966, 1: 188). Philosophy is an attempt to replace the lost magical faith by a rational faith. It modifies the tradition of passing on a theory or a myth by founding a new tradition—the tradition of challenging theories and myths and critically discussing them. A significant point is that the rise of philosophy coincides with the spread of the so-called Orphic sects whose members tried to replace the lost feeling of unity by a new mystical religion.

Why should the philosopher bother with the New Age Movement? One reason may be that this movement seems to attract persons who are not easily identifiable as mystics drawn by occult traditions and interested in spiritual shortcuts. Agnostics who won't adhere to established religions but who yearn for a unified worldview, or rational persons with a thirst for spiritual growth, may find themselves drawn to New Age theories and practices for lack of viable alternatives. If the philosopher has failed to provide new alternatives or has not done enough to share his knowledge of the alternatives that constitute the history of philosophy, he may be partly responsible for the gradual loss of rationality around him.

Sociological studies of the typical New Ager indicate that she is at least thirty-five years old, and may be well into retirement. She is twice as likely to be female as male. She is financially better off than most, and typically has a career in therapy, teaching, management or sales, nursing, or social work. It is more likely than not that he will have at least one degree or a professional qualification. Sympathetic accounts of the psychological profiles of most New Agers do not point to abnormal psychology.<sup>13</sup>

One becomes a New Ager either through a mystical experience or through an “interpretative shift,” that is, a “slow, often unacknowledged shift in someone’s manner of interpreting events as they become involved with a particular activity.”<sup>14</sup> The same shift appears in a witch’s testimony, who began as “a rationalist,” her experience being that “something happens” over the years.<sup>15</sup> Consider, for example, the following advice given by a New Age lecturer:

I can't prove—you can't prove—the things I have been saying. But what you can do is to take the idea, put it in your thinking—put it in your heart—and choose to live for a month as if you believed it. Look at the world in

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<sup>13</sup> For a sociological profile of the New Ager, see Kemp (2004, 121). For psychological profiles of New Agers, see Kemp (2004, 108-21).

<sup>14</sup> Luhrmann (1989, 12); see also (1989, 312, 322).

<sup>15</sup> Starhawk (1996); quoted in Kemp (2004, 122).

the light of it. If it's true, it draws an inner certainty to itself. And if it's not true, it fades away.<sup>16</sup>

Frederick Lynch describes four stages of conversion to the occult. Intellectual curiosity leads to lone occultism (phase one), which creates tension and stress within the individual (phase two). This tension in turn generates spiritual experiences and emotional conviction, as in the traditional theory of conversion. In phase three, the lone occultist meets like-minded individuals or a charismatic leader. This allows for social support in an occult community, collective rituals and the sense of growth, development and achievement that comes with it (phase four) (Lynch 1977).

I take the testimonies on which Lynch draws as supporting the view that rationality can intervene at various stages in the gradual process of becoming a New Ager. Even if someone has a mystical experience, rational explanations of these experiences may prevent him from becoming a believer.<sup>17</sup> The sociological and psychological profiles of New Agers as well as the gradual shift in interpretation that leads a person into New Age beliefs may support the view that philosophers could help in stopping the rapid influence that the movement gains.

Admittedly, there are worse things than being a New Ager and more urgent matters in the contemporary world than the New Age Movement. Still, we are noticing a change in Western civilization to which the silence of philosophers is contributing. This silence has had an impact on psychological therapists, who search in esoteric reconstructions of Eastern religions and practices for a broader ethical worldview. This, in turn, enables them to guide their clients, for example, by assessing the adequacy of the client's feelings in light of the values this broader worldview recommends. The silence of philosophers has had an impact on the popular perception of science as well, which is being now confused with pseudo-science. Thus, the philosopher of science's role is significant, especially in assessing attractive media, the recent "Blip" and "The Secret" narratives being good examples of repeated yet almost imperceptible shifts from facts to rhetoric. The silence of philosophers has had an impact on popular anthropological philosophy and ethics as well. Several polls carried out in North America and Europe show that the professed belief in reincarnation is widespread. The majority of texts pertaining to the esoteric tradition associate the concepts of reincarnation

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<sup>16</sup> See Trevelyan (1983), quoted in Kemp (2004, 122).

<sup>17</sup> For the rationality and irrationality of magic, see Agassi and Jarvie (1987, 361-94).

and karma.<sup>18</sup> Last, but not least, the silence of philosophers has had an impact on their own discipline: on the status of metaphysics, which is identified now almost solely with the New Age Movement, and on the cultural offspring of philosophy's own skeptical and relativistic crisis, known as postmodernism. Postmodernism, in turn, seems to have played a significant role in the spread of religion and fundamentalism.

Philosophers who believe they should be involved in their societies may opt for a minimal or maximal response to the New Age Movement. The minimal response involves construing logic and epistemology as practical fields. Teaching practical logic and critical thinking outside the academe exemplifies the kind of preventive action philosophers may undertake. Philosophers' maximal response to the inadequately answered contemporary needs that lead to the popularity of New Age ideas may involve developing synoptic visions with relevant wisdom for laymen. In the remainder of this chapter, I briefly introduce the minimal response (section 4)<sup>19</sup> and then elaborate on the maximal response (section 5).

#### 4. Philosophers' Minimal Response

Philosophers' minimal response to the New Age Movement involves teaching practical logic and critical thinking outside the academe. This requires construing logic and epistemology as practical fields. Socratic dialectics, as understood by Popper and his followers, can be a good starting-point for the former.<sup>20</sup> However, Popper's follower, Joseph Agassi, rightly remarks that although "dialectics remains the only useful practical logic...we have scarcely developed its application to education" (Agassi 1993, 245). This remains to be done, then.

A practical version of epistemology may be better approached through virtue epistemology. Epistemology has been traditionally concerned with questions about the nature and scope of knowledge, which quickly led to

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<sup>18</sup> For the history and the current state of belief in reincarnation in the West, see Hammer (2001, 455-94). For a philosophical review of the concept of karma, see Edwards (1996).

<sup>19</sup> For more detailed argumentation on the minimal response, see Amir, "Philosophical Practice: A Method and Some Cases" (2003) and "Taking Philosophy Seriously: Perfectionism versus Meliorism" (2006). Versions of both articles can be also found in the forthcoming *Taking Philosophy Seriously*.

<sup>20</sup> See Karl Popper's works in the philosophy of science: *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1959) and *Conjectures and Refutations* (1963).

other questions.<sup>21</sup> One of the most representative fields of professional philosophy, epistemology is also a practical discipline as we have to address epistemological questions on a day to day basis. In the last twenty years, parallel to a revival of interest in virtue ethics there has been an interest in virtue epistemology.<sup>22</sup>

Virtue theories in epistemology mirror the structure of virtue theories in ethics. Different kinds of moral theory make various kinds of evaluation most fundamental.<sup>23</sup> Virtue theories make the properties of persons most fundamental, and then understand other normative properties in terms of these: What makes a person good (virtuous, admirable)? What makes a life worthwhile (desirable, enviable)? What sort of life constitutes human flourishing? Similarly, virtue theories in epistemology make the epistemically normative properties of persons fundamental, and understand other sorts of epistemically normative properties in terms of these. For example, a virtue theory attempts to understand key normative notions such as justified belief, knowledge, and evidence in terms of the intellectual virtues. According to David Solomon, virtue epistemology “would not be belief-based; it would be agent- or end-based in that virtue would be more basic than belief. It would focus on the cognitive set-up of the agent rather than on episodes of cognitive activity in isolation” (Solomon 2003, 80). John Greco explains that instead of focusing on static states such as belief and the evaluation of these as justified or as knowledge, we might instead focus on the role of virtue in evaluating and regulating the activities of inquiry and deliberation (Greco 2007, 182). Furthermore:

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<sup>21</sup> In the essay “Epistemology” in *Columbia Companion to Twentieth-Century Philosophies* (2007), John Greco explains: “Assuming that knowledge is superior to mere opinion, what is it that distinguishes the two? What makes knowledge ‘justified’ or ‘warranted’? A related question concerns the structure of knowledge: Is knowledge like a pyramid, with a sure foundation supporting the remaining edifice? Or is knowledge more like a raft, with all parts of the structure tied together in relations of mutual support? More generally: What is the nature of the mind-world relation that constitutes knowing rather than merely believing? Given that knowledge involves a mind representing the world, how must mind and world be related for knowledge of the world to be possible?” (Greco 2007, 172).

<sup>22</sup> For virtue ethics, see, for example, Statman (1997).

<sup>23</sup> Consequentialist theories make the following valuations most fundamental: What things are good (valuable)? For example, Hedonistic utilitarianism claims that only pleasure is essentially good. The normative properties of actions, persons and lives are then understood in relation to this fundamental value. Deontological theories in ethics change this direction of analysis, making the following evaluations fundamental: Which actions are right (appropriate, required, or permitted)?

Different versions of virtue theory emerge depending on how the intellectual virtues are understood. At the end of the twentieth century, two understandings of the virtues competed to address a broad range of epistemological problems and issues. The first way of understanding the intellectual virtues follows Aristotle in making a strong distinction between intellectual virtues and moral virtues. Whereas the moral virtues are acquired traits of character, such as courage and temperance, the intellectual virtues are broad cognitive abilities or powers. For example, Aristotle defined “intuitive reason” as the ability to grasp first principles, and he defined “science” as the ability to demonstrate further truths from these. Epistemologists in the twentieth century added to Aristotle’s list of cognitive powers, by including accurate perception, reliable memory, and various kinds of good reasoning.<sup>24</sup> The second way of understanding the intellectual virtues rejects Aristotle’s way of distinguishing between intellectual virtues and moral virtues. On this second view, the intellectual virtues are also acquired character traits such as intellectual courage and intellectual carefulness.<sup>25</sup> (Greco 2007, 182)

Virtue epistemology is suitable to epistemology as a practical activity. Our intellectual lives are not devoted exclusively to acquiring beliefs; we also are concerned with maintaining, communicating and applying our beliefs to practical affairs. Intellectual virtues pertain to the entire range of our intellectual endeavors. Jay Wood rightly maintains that an epistemology rooted in the virtues is an epistemology in the service of life (Wood 2006). In everyday life we have to address epistemological issues and display epistemological virtues such as wisdom, understanding and foresight. Intellectual vices, on the contrary, include traits such as gullibility, superstitiousness, closed-mindedness and being prone to self-serving beliefs.<sup>26</sup> David Solomon comments on the practicality of epistemological issues:

Just as moral philosophers find themselves asking epistemological questions, epistemologists are centrally concerned with questions about our practical life. After all, the central problems of normative epistemology are problems about what to do. To believe or not to believe, that is the question—or at least one of them. (Solomon 2003, 60)

Thus, epistemological virtues are required on a day to day basis. Linda Zagzebski lists intellectual carefulness, perseverance, humility, vigor, flexibility, courage, and thoroughness, and the virtues opposed to wishful

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<sup>24</sup> For example, Sosa (1991), Goldman (1992), Plantinga (1993), and Greco (2000).

<sup>25</sup> For example, Code (1987), Montmarquet (1993), and Zagzebski (1996).

<sup>26</sup> This is Jay Wood’s list (2006, 63).