



Translated extract from

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Selbstdenken!
Zwanzig Praktiken der Philosophie
Mit Illustrationen von Nadia Budde
Peter Hammer Verlag
Wuppertal 2003
ISBN 3-87294-943-8

pp. 9-21 and 167-177

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Think for Yourself!
Twenty Philosophical Strategies

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Introduction

The ‘Methodists’ were a group of doctors in ancient Greece. They were highly systematized thinkers, as you can tell from the name. The Methodists aimed to bring order to the chaos of medicine. What was the point of having so many procedures, remedies and herbal cures? The Methodists believed every illness could be treated with a single cure. What genius: a multipurpose miracle method! But what did it consist of? Unfortunately we’ll never know. After a brief period of popularity, including a stint at the court of the Roman Emperor, the Methodists vanished from the scene.

The belief in the existence of a single method to solve all problems can also be found in philosophy. It dates back a long way, right back to ancient Greece. The medical Methodists may have died out long ago, but their philosophical counterparts are very much alive and kicking. Even today people still declare that they've found *the* philosophical method that will lead to progress on all fronts. In the past hundred years, we’ve been offered phenomenological reduction, hermeneutics and logical positivism: the more obscure the name, the better. And if the method doesn’t always fit, the topic – not the method – gets the blame.

But the truth of the matter is that philosophy and medicine both require a range of methods. If you observe what happens in philosophical debates, you’ll come across a variety of different strategies: parody is as much a part of things as is the technique of definition or categorization. These strategies are all related to one another, but they’re not so closely connected as to make one unworkable without the next. That’s why I’ve made sure that the chapters of this book can be read on their own as well as in sequence. Using a strategy is different to following a method; you don’t have to proceed from a particular viewpoint, which then governs your line of enquiry. For strategies, all you need is a starting-point, for example an opinion put forward by somebody else. Philosophical strategies can be used whenever ideas are being discussed -- whether that’s in serious debates about the meaning of life; in the political columns of a newspaper; or in family arguments about next year's holiday.

The first collection of philosophical strategies was put together by Aristotle (384 – 322 BC). *Topics* was one of his earliest works. He wrote it to help himself think through problems. At the time, he was a young man – probably nineteen or twenty years old – trying to find his way through the debates in Plato's Academy, of which he had just become a member. He collected types of strategies and arguments that were regularly deployed in the debates and that seemed to be useful irrespective of the subject under discussion. He called these strategies and arguments *topoi*. *Topos* means place or area. In figurative terms, it refers to an area of thought that would be worth considering at length.

In *Topics* you can find approximately three hundred different strategies. Later, when Aristotle was no longer a pupil but had founded his own school, he used the treatise in his teaching. *Topics* introduces students to philosophy, but also serves to educate them in a more general sense. If you wanted to be considered educated in ancient Athens, it wasn't enough to know a lot. Being educated also meant being able to think on your feet and to form an opinion on any topic. It meant coming up with new ideas and new arguments and being able to use ideas creatively, rather than just repeating them.

For today's readers, *Topics* is quite hard going – it's written in the dense, jerky style that is typical of Aristotle's treatises. In addition to this, Aristotle focuses on strategies that deal with the definition of concepts, since this was the main subject of debate at the Academy. To make matters worse, he illustrates each strategy with examples that are often difficult to decipher, as they are based on experiences and ideas that now seem alien to us.

It's for this reason that we're in need of a new collection – a lively new book of strategies that will demonstrate how thinking works. Thinking isn't just about knowing facts; it's also about being able to philosophize. And philosophizing means more than just producing arguments and formulating theses – it also draws on our dreams and imagination. It's like an absorbing *game* that invites us to join in.

This book started out in much the same way as Aristotle's *Topics* – from watching what philosophers do. So what do philosophers get up to when they're

philosophizing? You only need look at philosophical debates to see that philosophers seldom progress from thesis to thesis in the methodical way that people expect. On the contrary, their debates are a bit like rowdy celebrations. Philosophers don't just lecture and explain: they cheer, hiss, laugh, sing and swear. Thinking isn't as dull as it's sometimes made out to be. There are so many different ways of philosophizing -- it would be impossible to describe them all. The philosophical strategies presented within this book are just a small cross-section. Once you've seen how they work, you'll be able to come up with more for yourself. You'll also start spotting the interconnections: each strategy is described individually, but they're all closely related. I've taken a number of my examples from political speeches; some from literature; and lots from everyday life. That's why the dialogues I use to illustrate the strategies not only feature Socrates, but also Mr and Mrs Smith.

The *games* and sketches strewn among the chapters are intended to show that learning about philosophy doesn't have to be hard work. The *bibliographical references* have been kept to a minimum. At the end of each chapter, I list a small selection of texts that would be useful to read if you want to find out more.

The point of using philosophical strategies is to make us less dependant on the opinions of others. Philosophical strategies sharpen our judgement and open up new sources of ideas and inspiration. And that's why they're so liberating. They reinforce our ability to *think for ourselves*.

1. Being Provocative

Philosophy has been a form of provocation ever since its first beginnings. Even Socrates (470 – 399 BC) was thought to be a public nuisance. His humble dress was seen as a kind of effrontery by those around him. Unlike his pupils, who were often very wealthy, Socrates didn't wear jewellery and used to walk around barefoot, a habit which won him both admiration and derision. He would call into question established values such as social success or financial prosperity, and would openly poke fun at them. When he was accused and found guilty of impiety, he refused to beg for mercy. Instead he criticized the court for its injustice, insisting it should honour and not punish him – his work with the young people of Athens was a boon for the city. The court wasn't amused by his reasoning, and sentenced him to death by poison.

But the history of provocation doesn't end there. It reached new heights among the philosophers that came after Socrates. Among these was a small group of thinkers called the Cynics. A man named Antisthenes (455 – 360 BC), who had met Socrates and been impressed by his modest lifestyle, was their founding father. But it was one of his pupils, Diogenes of Sinope (400 – ca. 328 BC), who ensured that the group went down in history. Diogenes turned Socratic plain living into a real sensation.

Diogenes believed that people should satisfy their needs in the simplest possible way. This, he claimed, was the quickest route to achieving happiness. In practice, it led to Diogenes sitting in the marketplace and masturbating for all to see. He used to say it was a pity that hunger couldn't be relieved by the same easy method, just by rubbing the stomach.

Diogenes didn't have a home; he slept in different places, making the most of whatever shelter was available. He seems to have lived for a while in a man-sized terracotta tub. It later became known as the Tub of Diogenes. The only surviving portrait of Diogenes also shows him in a tub – it's a circular picture in the middle of a mosaic that's now on show in the Roman-Germanic Museum in Cologne. Diogenes ate a diet of herbs, olives and barley bread. He dressed in a coarse woollen cloak, with

nothing underneath. He used to stick his finger up at people – in that respect he was a forerunner of the Punks. He also liked farting in public, which earned him the nickname ‘the dog’. For the Athenians, the dog was the lowest of all animals, passing water wherever it pleased, chewing on scraps of food and satisfying its sexual needs in public. Diogenes accepted the insult as an honour. After his death, his pupils erected a monument in the form of a dog. The term ‘dog’ was later used to describe the whole group – ‘Cynic’ stems from the Greek word ‘Kynikos’, which means dog-like. Today’s cynics merely ridicule and mock. The Cynics of antiquity were philosophers who wanted their actions to be seen as part of a debate – as objections to the status quo.

Diogenes was known for his quick-wittedness and intelligence. Alexander the Great (356 – 323 BC) once approached him and enquired what favour he, Diogenes, would ask of Alexander the great King. Diogenes blinked and responded: ‘Get out of my light.’ But Diogenes didn’t just content himself with witty retorts – he was also a dramatist and wrote tragedies. Needless to say, they had a cynical slant. In addition to this, Diogenes is said to be the author of a tract called *Politics*. He used it to turn countless traditions and customs on their heads, claiming, for example, that the institution of marriage was a custom that should be abolished. As an alternative, he suggested a system of free love, according to which anyone could have sex with anyone else – a man with the woman next door, a son with his mother or a son with his father. Of course, free love would not be without its problems, but Diogenes was too astute not to have foreseen this. Since in a community based on free love it would be impossible to decide which child belongs to whom, everyone would consider themselves as parents and the children would be held in common. Diogenes was also of the opinion that there was nothing wrong with eating the bodies of the dead. He even advocated a new law by which children would be allowed to kill their parents.

His tragedies went along similar lines. They haven’t been preserved, but we can reconstruct their general thrust by looking at what other writers from the same era wrote about them. That’s how we know that Diogenes wrote a play about Oedipus. In the classical version of the story, Oedipus discovers that he has slept with his mother, and gouges his eyes out. Diogenes, on the other hand, was of the opinion that there was nothing wrong with having intercourse with blood relatives, so he gave the story

a positive twist. For Diogenes, a mother sleeping with her son wasn't tragic; it was something to be encouraged. We can think of his version of *Oedipus* as an early example of the type of philosophy characterized by the question 'why not?'

Ancient writers also tell us of another drama, in which a man realizes he has eaten the cooked flesh of one of his sons. The playwright consoles the audience with the following philosophical remark: 'But elements of everything are contained within everything and flow through everything: meat is in bread and bread is in vegetables, and so it is that particles enter each and every body through certain invisible passages, before being lost again in perspiration.' From this Diogenes concludes that there is no fundamental difference between eating your own children and consuming other meals. If it's merely a question of degree, why get worked up about it?

So what was it that Diogenes was trying to achieve with his plays? He was 'defacing the currency', he explained. In Greek, this has a double meaning: *nomisma* means currency, but it also means custom. And it's certainly true that Diogenes turned society's customs on their head.

What was the next step in the history of provocation? After the Cynics had left the scene, seditious philosophy ground to a halt for a while. A few generations after the death of Diogenes, the Romans conquered Athens. Philosophy took centuries to recover. And then came the Middle Ages. Philosophy came back to life, but there was little space for cynicism the way the Greeks had practised it. So let's leave Diogenes in his tub and fast-forward straight to Commune 1, a group of young Maoists in 1960s Berlin. Most of Commune 1 belonged to an ultra-left splinter group of the German Socialist Student Union. The founders of the commune shared the same agenda as the ancient Cynics: protest, revolution and free love. When Hans-Dieter Kunzelmann was asked by a journalist why the Commune had been founded, he replied: 'I have trouble reaching orgasm, and I'd like the public to be informed of this.'

But Commune 1 wasn't just about Kunzelmann's sexual problems. Members of the group published a pamphlet in protest at the Vietnam War. The pamphlet, 'When will Berlin's Department-Stores Burn?', was interpreted as an attempt to incite arson, and it landed Fritz Teufel (who was twenty-three at the time) and Rainer

Langhans (twenty-seven) before the law. Little by little the two friends turned the trial into a performance. Their first appearance in court gave a taste of what was to come. Rainer Langhans and Fritz Teufel appeared before Berlin County Court in uniforms of admirable inventiveness. Under his mop of meticulously curled locks Rainer Langhans resembled a tribal medicine man. Over his light-blue jeans, he wore a lime-green jacket with orange buttons, blue cuffs and a blue Mao collar. From under his curls, his eyes peered out through circular lenses, making him look like a melancholy mouse. Fritz Teufel wore a knee-length orange-coloured cloak with shiny silver buttons. The violet cuffs and violet Mao collar provided an unusual finishing touch. His hair and beard were neatly trimmed to form a perfect all-round haircut, which looked entirely respectable in comparison to his clothes. His eyes gave the impression that he was quietly satisfied rather than stubbornly revolutionary. But in the gap between the hem of his cloak and the floor, he used his clothes to make an ironic statement about Western dress, combining dark pinstripe trousers, yellow socks and suede shoes. Dressed in their peculiar uniforms, the two students arrived at court, ready to turn an authoritarian ritual upside down.

A few well-aimed jokes coloured the courtroom like paint bombs; then the pair took over the trial. With the defendants acting as prosecutors, matters soon got out of hand. It all started harmlessly enough. The fifty-three-year-old presiding judge, Walter Schwerdtner, began the hearing by asking the accused to give their names and personal history:

JUDGE SCHWERDTNER: Mr Teufel, you now have the opportunity to describe your life and career in your own words.

MR TEUFEL: This is the fourth time that I've appeared in court in a political trial. The details of my life have been amply discussed, not least in the first hearing of this case, which failed due to the court's incompetence.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY TANKE: Please enter into the record that Mr Teufel claimed that the first hearing failed due to the court's incompetence. Mr Teufel is in contempt of court!

MR TEUFEL: ...and because the hearing failed due to the court's incompetence, I think it would be more fruitful vis-à-vis the difficult subject matter of this case if the Prosecution and the members of the court were to say something about their lives and

careers. I think the public has a right to know. I will comment on the proceedings as and when I see fit.

JUDGE SCHWERDTNER: There's no need for you to say anything.

MR TEUFEL: But that would make things easy for you.

Shortly after this episode, the court discussed whether the accused should be examined by a psychiatrist. A counter-attack swiftly followed:

MR TEUFEL: I am happy to be assessed -- on the condition that the members of the court and the Prosecution submit to psychiatric testing too.

Teufel's riposte was met with a storm of approval. The ensuing tumult forced Judge Schwerdtner to clear the court. Members of the audience had to promise in writing not to further disrupt proceedings if they wanted to stay. And then the trial continued:

JUDGE SCHWERDTNER: Ladies and Gentlemen, we have taken note of your assurances, but we urge you not to hinder us in our task. We trust that you will keep your word. Mr Teufel: you wanted to make a statement. Proceed, but refrain from comments of the kind we have just witnessed.

MR TEUFEL: Mr Langhans wants to say something.

MR LANGHANS: (in an ironic tone): I'm not sure to what extent this conforms to protocol, but I would like to support and extend the motion put forward by my friend, Fritz. In addition to the psychiatric examination, the members of the court, the Prosecution and the defendants should undergo an IQ test prepared in advance by the participants. The results should be published at length and in full detail!

The court retired in panic, reappearing a few moments later to fine Langhans for contempt of court. But the court's authority had been badly damaged, even though the defendants were eventually found guilty. For the student revolutionaries, the buffoonery in the Berlin County Court was an important event. It revealed just how easy it was to bring the bourgeois world into confusion.

So what has become of these heroes of yesteryear? Fritz Teufel now works as a cycle courier in Berlin, while Rainer Langhans has turned to esotericism. But

Langhans has remained a cynic. He still seems to get a kick out of being provocative and disrupting the status quo. That would explain why thirty years after the legendary trial he horrified his old friends by switching from the far left to the far right. In an interview with the Berlin newspaper, *taz*, he commented: ‘These days true spirituality is to be found in Hitler.’ At left-wing reunions designed to celebrate the events of 1968, he appalled other guests by making similar kinds of statements. He also founded a harem and described in interviews why this form of communal living is enriching for all those involved. Langhans has turned being a public nuisance into an art form: he certainly knows how to touch a nerve.

So how do people go about being provocative? In most cases, it’s a matter of turning established values upside down: of glorifying the things that are usually despised (like the dog on Diogenes’s monument) and denigrating the things that are normally glorified. To succeed in being provocative, you need to have a feeling for the taboos and conventions that are the fabric of our society. That’s not as easy as it sounds – the things we take for granted are particularly difficult to apprehend. If you want to be provocative, you’ll need to keep your wits about you, and you’ll have to be brave. People who attack the unspoken norms of society often end up being marginalized or persecuted.

These days it’s become more difficult to be provocative. Societies with rigid value systems are easier to disrupt than pluralistic ones. In a society where everyone is allowed to do as they please, it takes a lot to take the public by surprise. The act of being provocative loses its effectiveness, and is drowned out by applause. Troublemakers become the court jesters of a society that welcomes them into the fold. Yet from time to time you can still hear the age-old scream of outrage – which proves that even in a liberal society it’s still possible to go *too far*.

Game: Walking Barefoot

One hot summer’s day you take off your shoes and socks, and walk around barefoot. But you don’t just stick to the house: you go outside and walk down the road, through the pedestrian precinct, and around your school, university or office. Before too long you realize that few places are suitable for walking barefoot: thanks to the gravel,

even country footpaths are like beds of nails to naked soles. And then your ankles and calves start aching. It feels as if you're walking for the very first time. Your soles feel truly alive. Days later you can still feel the warmth from your feet.

Most people react to someone with bare feet as if they were totally nude. There's nothing indecent about naked feet, but, from the effect that they have on people, you'd think they were obscene. There's a German website (www.barfuss.org) where you can read lots of stories about the experiences of people who walk around barefoot. In fact, a surprisingly large number of Germans walk around barefoot all the time. According to the website, it's perfectly safe. After a while you instinctively know how to avoid sharp stones, broken glass or nails. And taking your shoes off in winter is fine too: you just have to be careful not to walk too fast in the cold; otherwise you might hurt your tendons. Elsewhere in the world, there are varying degrees of tolerance for people who walk barefoot. One barefooted walker, Julia Fiona, whose biography appears on the website, reports that she had no problems in France or Germany, but that things were different in the USA, where she was often asked to put her shoes back on. 'When I was in Florida in spring 2001, I was dragged into a nasty argument and ended up citing the US-constitution ('Land of the free...') I pointed out that if people were allowed to carry guns, then surely no one could have a problem with me not wearing shoes. I didn't get a satisfactory answer.'

Further Reading

You can read about Diogenes of Sinope in the writings of another Diogenes, Diogenes Laertius. His book *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* was written in ca. 3 AD. It is available in English in a translation by R.D. Hicks, published by Harvard University Press.

14. Using Inversions

Give me an idea, and I'll turn it into a new one that you won't have expected. Present me with one opinion, and I'll easily form a second. It's a bit like a surrealist collage -- scraps of material are used to surprising effect. In both cases, the key is to use what you've got in order to create something new – by reordering, re-evaluating or reorienting your material.

Here's an example for fans of the rock star Frank Zappa (1949 – 1993). Zappa was once invited by Joe Pine to appear on his talk show. Pine was renowned for his abrasive interview technique. He used to introduce his guests, and then lay into them, belittling their talent, their physical appearance or their beliefs. Some people said that Pine's aggressive attitude was due to the bitterness he felt about one of his legs being amputated. Other people weren't convinced, and said he had been nasty from birth. When Zappa appeared on the show, it was at the beginning of the sixties, when it was still unusual for a man to have long hair. Soon after Pine had introduced Zappa, the following exchange took place:

JOE PINE So, with your long hair, I guess that makes you a girl.

FRANK ZAPPA So, with your wooden leg, I guess that makes you a table.

Zappa's answer is a stroke of genius. Of course, he could have said: 'What makes you think it's OK to judge people on their appearance?', but that would have made him sound boring and vulnerable. Instead he picks up on Pine's argument and turns it against him. Zappa's reply has the same structure as the sentence used by the talk show host. He only changes two small words. But these words transform the meaning. And that's why Zappa's answer is so brilliant. Taken on its own – without Pine's initial attack – it wouldn't be so funny. It's only through the first sentence that the answer gains its power. That's typical of an inversion. They always need something to bounce off. This is also apparent in the second example. This time the joke is entirely harmless. It springs from the pen of Eugen Roth (1895 – 1976):

A man observes in anger that

No rose is without a thorn

But it makes him even angrier to see
Many thorns are without a rose.

This time the inversion doesn't consist of a malicious retort – instead Roth takes a traditional saying and uses it to produce a second one ('many thorns are without a rose') that mirrors the first in terms of form. He makes a tiny alteration to the existing elements of the sentence and gives it a new and unexpected meaning. Once again the power of the sentence – 'many thorns are without a rose' – is derived from the original statement, and would lose its impact without it. This twin structure is typical of inversions: they unite old and new; the known and the unknown – which is why they take us by surprise with their inventiveness.

There are many ways of inverting a thought: you can take the original statement and remove some of its original elements, add extra elements, change the meaning of the individual components, re-evaluate them or swap them around (the most common move is to make a direct swap so that A becomes B and B becomes A). I'll illustrate a few of these techniques in the following examples. Let's focus first of all on changing the order of the statement. Proverbs are particularly good for this. You can swap the elements around without too much trouble. Here is a selection of common sayings:

- Learn to suffer in silence
- The early bird catches the worm
- It's better to be healthy and poor than rich and ill

You can make a whole new set of sayings just by switching things around a bit:

- Learn to be silent without suffering
- The early worm catches the bird
- It's better to be healthy and rich than poor and ill

Of course, in order to find the new sayings funny, you need to be familiar with the original proverbs.

Displacement

One form of inversion is particularly popular – it challenges the balance between speaker and interlocutor, causing it to tip. This strategy can be used in almost any situation, especially when you want to challenge the demands that are made of you. That way you can transform yourself from somebody who is forced to take instructions from others into somebody who tells other people what to do. Take the following dialogue between a school-kid and his mother:

MRS SMITH Now it's time for you to drink your milk. Mmmm, yummy!

SMITH JUNIOR But I have milk every morning.

MRS SMITH Milk is sooo good for you.

SMITH JUNIOR I don't like it.

MRS SMITH And it's got lots of vitamins in it.

SMITH JUNIOR If it's got lots of vitamins in it, why don't you drink it?

The boy's question is entirely reasonable. It makes every sense to check whether the people giving us orders actually follow them themselves. In this example, the boy changes the roles rather than the word order. The person sending the message ends up on the receiving end; but the actual message stays the same. This form of inversion is particularly useful in deflecting unwelcome advice.

Screenplays

Whenever you invert things, the world appears in a new light. The Copernican Revolution is a well-known example of this. The Canon of Frauenburg, Nicolas Copernicus (1473 – 1543), swapped around the roles of the sun and earth: the sun no longer turned around the earth: instead the earth turned around the sun. Copernicus drew on elements that were present in the old view of the universe: the sun, the earth and the planets. But he gave the familiar actors completely new roles.

Screenplay writers take a similar approach. If we leap forwards in time, we can listen to Alfred Hitchcock (1899 – 1980) describing the same kind of process in an interview with François Truffaut (1932 – 1984). This time the sun, the earth and the planets are nowhere to be seen – Hitchcock is describing a murder scene: 'I found I was faced with the old cliché situation: the man who is put on the spot, probably to

be shot. Now, how is this usually done? A dark night at a narrow intersection of the city. The waiting victim standing in a pool of light under the street lamp. The cobblestones are washed with the recent rains. A close-up of a black cat slinking along the wall of a house. A shot of a window, with a furtive face pulling back the curtain to look out. The slow approach of a black limousine, et cetera, et cetera. Now, what was the antithesis of a scene like this? No darkness, no pool of light, no mysterious figures in windows, just nothing. Just bright sunshine and a blank, open countryside with barely a house or a tree in which any lurking menaces could hide.' The result was the famous crop duster scene in Hitchcock's thriller *North by Northwest* in which Cary Grant is attacked by an aeroplane in the middle of an open field.

How to Prove Einstein Wrong

Inversions are also common in discussions, debates and letter writing, where displacement is a particularly popular form. Here are three classic examples:

1. Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804): Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was designed to put an end to the rash claims of philosophy. Prior to Kant, philosophers saw no problem in making statements about God or the universe. Kant called this kind of thinking 'transcendent', and wrote of it contemptuously. He criticised the way that propositions were made without reference to experience, and outlawed this kind of thinking in his work: it was time to put a stop to 'transcendent' thought for once and for all. Goethe's friend Friedrich Jacobi (1743 – 1819) started out as a supporter of Kant's, but ended up as one of his most passionate opponents. Jacobi was the first to notice that Kant's own approach was very similar to that of the philosophers that he criticised. Indeed, Kant also writes of speculative objects, drawing conclusions without any empirical basis. He assumes, for example, that the 'thing-in-itself' is unknowable. But at the same time he claims that it has an effect on our imagination, since it 'causes' our sense-perceptions. But how does Kant know that? It would be difficult to tell how the 'thing-in-itself' affects our sensory organs, so Kant's claims must be purely speculative. He is guilty of the very thing that he criticizes others for doing. Jacobi writes: 'I must admit that I have been much distracted by Kantian philosophy ... for I have been puzzling continually over the fact that without the presupposition (of the 'thing-in-

itself' affecting our perception) I was unable to enter into (Kant's) system, but with it, I was unable to stay in it.' Jacobi's argument is one of the classic objections to Kantian philosophy, and is still used today.

2. Rudolf Carnap (1891 – 1970) was one of the central figures in the development of analytic philosophy, which for many years centred on the 'verification principle'. This principle states that a proposition can only have meaning if it can be proven empirically or if it is of a purely logical nature. Empirically-based propositions can be tested with reference to experience, while the coherence of purely logical propositions can be checked mathematically. So in both cases it is possible to verify the content of the proposition. That is how theories are tested in science; but in philosophy things are often very different. How can you test speculations about the world, God and the soul? That's why analytic philosophy launched an attack on metaphysics, which it considered to be meaningless. The attempt to overthrow a great philosophical tradition was impressive, but the question remained as to the exact status of the 'verification principle'. It couldn't be either empirical or purely logical – which leads us to conclude that it must be metaphysical, and therefore meaningless.
3. On the death of his friend Michele Besso, Albert Einstein (1879 – 1955) wrote: 'For those of us who believe in physics, this separation between past, present and future is only an illusion, however tenacious.' This statement is backed by the considerable weight of Einstein's theory of general relativity, which redefines the concept of the time. That said, we shouldn't feel intimidated: inversion can be used effectively even against Einstein, as the phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz has shown. Schmitz argues that since Einstein is a scientist, he must be prepared to learn. But being prepared to learn would mean believing in the possibility that you could discover something that you don't at present know. And that's only possible if you accept that the present, as we're experiencing it, is distinct from the future, that is yet to come, and that the difference between the two is not an illusion. So whenever Einstein speaks as a physicist, he should maintain the distinction between present and future and not just push it to one side.

As we've just seen, displacement has many uses in philosophy. There are some philosophers who insist that it's the most important philosophical strategy of them all, although that's stating the case a bit too strongly. Nonetheless it's true that displacement, like all the other forms of inversion, has the seductive advantage of requiring nothing more than the material provided by an interlocutor. And the more force the interlocutor invests in his words, the more powerful the impact when you hit back with an inversion.

Changing Contexts

Arguments are always presented within a particular context. The next type of inversion relies on this fact, as it works by changing the purpose of the argument. It still involves using the material given to us by our interlocutor, but this time it's simply placed in a different context. The effectiveness of the technique derives from the gulf between the original statement and the new one.

The following example is taken from the debates surrounding 'Pascal's Wager'. This was an attempt by the French philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623 – 1662) to convince his fellow humans of the usefulness of leading a Christian life. Pascal had spent a lot of time studying the mathematics of gambling, and had paved the way for the theory of probability. In his 'wager', he called on people to lead their lives as if they were sure that God existed. If you ended up by discovering that God didn't exist, you would have nothing to lose, as life, according to Pascal, would then be meaningless. But if God were to exist, just think of the gain! You could earn yourself eternal life. Given the nature of the reward, the sacrifices you might make in leading a Christian life would seem negligible. As Pascal said: 'If God does not exist, one will have lost nothing by believing in him, while if he does exist, one will have lost everything by not believing.'

Pascal's argument convinced one person at the very least, for Pascal himself led a Christian life. In his old age, he even gave up scientific research and retired to a monastery. His wager also had an effect on many of his contemporaries. It seemed to provide a modern substitute for the old ontological proofs that now seemed problematic: Pascal's wager was mathematical, elegant and seemingly conclusive. It

is still used by many missionaries today, and the mathematician John von Neumann (1903 – 1957) claimed that it played an important role in his decision to convert to Christianity. As a mathematician, von Neumann was careful to create the best possible ratio of earthly pleasure to eternal life: he waited until he was on his deathbed to convert. What Pascal would have thought of this we'll never know. But even during Pascal's lifetime, his contemporaries had come up with a solution to his ingenious wager: by changing the context, they realized that the argument could be put to many different uses. As the Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot (1713 – 1784) points out, Pascal's wager could also be used in the service of Allah: 'An Imam (the prayer leader of a Mosque) could argue in just the same way.'

This is the big problem with Pascal's argument – it could just as easily be used by a Muslim to win converts to Islam or by an Aztec priest to popularize human sacrifice. Anyone who wants to win people over to a particular religion can use the wager. As a result, the argument isn't much good at convincing people to lead their lives according to the precepts of one specific religion. The sudden change of context divests the argument of some of its original power.

There's a general message to be learnt from this particular example: every time we hear an argument for or against something, we should be asking ourselves what other uses the argument could be put to. The key is to detach the argument from its original purpose.

We would do well to take a leaf out of Mother Nature's book, for nature's creativity doesn't lie in creating from scratch, but in permanently remodelling what already exists. Mother Nature tinkers with living objects, happily changing a jawbone into an ear bone and an intestine into a lung. Fish use their backbones to move their tails – humans need the spine to keep their heads held high.

H2O: Invention by Inversion

Let's finish off by taking a sideways glance at the natural sciences, where inversions have also come in handy in promoting innovation. In fact, the discovery of the chemical formula for water occurred as a result of an inversion. In 1800, the British chemist, Humphry Davy (1778 – 1829) learnt of a curious stack that had been built by

a fellow scientist, Alessandro Volta (1745 – 1827). It consisted of disks of different metals, piled one on top of the other and separated by cardboard soaked in brine. The full setup was the size of a room. Prior to Volta's discovery, it hadn't been possible to create a reliable source of electricity. Davy immediately guessed that Volta's electricity had been generated by means of chemical reactions. Chemistry makes electricity! Davy reasoned that the opposite must also be possible: an electric current must be able to make chemistry. This insight proved to be enormously useful. Davy succeeded in using electricity to separate water into its individual elements, and he was able to prove that oxygen and carbon dioxide combine in a set ratio. That meant that he had cleared the way for the most important chemical formula to be discovered: H₂O. Davy also used his method to isolate potassium, sodium and various other elements, thereby laying the foundations for the periodic table. The public lectures Davy gave about his discovery proved to be extremely popular. The young author Mary Shelley (1797 – 1851) was so excited by one of his lectures that she cited entire passages from it in the speech made by Professor Waldmann (the wise and benevolent teacher of the ambitious Dr. Frankstein who is murdered by his pupil's monster) in her novel *Frankstein*.

Game: Upside Down

1. The first time you try standing on your head, you wobble about, sway backwards and forwards and feel like a child who is learning to walk. If you don't have anything to prop yourself up against, you soon topple over and fall to the floor. That's why you should always start out by doing headstands against a wall. It works as follows:
2. Crouch down and place your head on the floor. Wedge your hands next to your head, and use your palms and your lower arms for support.
3. Lift your bottom into the air. Keep your knees straight, and move your feet slowly along the floor toward your head.
4. Raise your legs off the ground, and remain upside down for ten to fifteen seconds. With practice, you'll be able to stay up for as long as three minutes.
5. Lower your feet back down to the ground.

6. Yoga gurus claim that standing on your head releases new energies. Medical doctors agree: organs that normally receive relatively little blood are provided with large amounts of oxygen when you stand on your head.