

Divisions of Epistemic Labour: Some Remarks on the History of Fideism and Esotericism

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‘OF necessity’, Xenophon tells us, ‘he who pursues a very specialized task will do it best.’¹ In modern times, Adam Smith argued that such divisions of labour are central to the capitalist economy.² Most recently, philosophers have wanted to extend this notion in various ways. Hilary Putnam, for instance, has described a division of *linguistic* labour that he takes to be crucial to how natural-kind terms get their reference.³ Others have discussed the division of *cognitive* labour that one finds in the sciences, and have assessed the costs and benefits of this sort of academic specialization.⁴

Here I propose to extend the concept of specialization yet further, to cases where a division is introduced between those who are in a position to know a certain body of facts, and those who, for one or another reason, cannot or should not know. Such divisions of *epistemic* labour are in fact all around us, so common as hardly to warrant much attention. I know the grades of all my students, but my students are entitled to know only their own grades. You know where you have hidden a key to your house, but you have not told your mailman. No doubt there is much to say about such garden-variety secrets, and even more to say about the great secrets

¹ Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, trans. W. Miller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), VIII.2.5.

² *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. E. Cannan, 5th edn (London: Methuen, 1904) begins (I.1) by remarking that ‘the greatest improvement in the productive powers of labour, and the greater part of the skill, dexterity, and judgment with which it is any where directed, or applied, seem to have been the effects of the division of labour’.

³ ‘The Meaning of “Meaning”’, *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 7 (1975), pp. 215–71.

⁴ See, for example, P. Kitcher, ‘The Division of Cognitive Labor’, *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990), pp. 5–22.

of government and industry, but here my interest is in a less familiar but perhaps more philosophically interesting topic: the epistemic divisions that can arise even within a purely theoretical context, between those who know and those who cannot or should not.⁵ So far as I can find, this is not a topic that has occasioned much recent discussion. Historically, however, there is a great deal of material to draw upon.

In what follows I set to one side the familiar sorts of cases where information is held secret in some practical domain. Such practices can at times be interesting and controversial in their details, but as a general matter they do not seem particularly puzzling. There is no great advantage to telling the mailman where the house key is, and the potential disadvantages are obvious. We do not tell him. In a philosophical context, however, such a policy would be puzzling. If the mailman is interested in philosophy, then we would naturally assume that he is just as entitled as anyone else to know what we know. If he can afford the tuition, that would be most convenient, but if he cannot do that, and is nevertheless still keen, we would all gladly share with him as much information as we can, provided his claims on our time are modest enough. We do not keep philosophical secrets from the mailman.

Philosophy seems different in this way from more practical domains, in part because philosophy by its nature seems to have little by way of practical implications, and in part because the main point of philosophy is presumably to grasp the truth. Hence there seems on the one hand no harm in the mailman's learning some philosophy, while on the other hand the pay-off is immediate and obvious: the philosophical understanding the mailman would achieve is precisely what philosophy is all about. Eventually we will need to consider whether philosophy really is so detached from practical implications. But we can, I think, agree without reservation on the second point: that the goal of philosophy — or at any rate one of its principal goals — is to foster knowledge of its subject-matter. This feature of philosophy is what makes it a *theoretical* enterprise, in contrast to the

⁵ On secrets, see S. Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Pantheon, 1982). One occasionally sees the phrase 'division of epistemic labour', but typically it has been used to refer simply to the interdependence between one person's knowledge and another's (see, for example, S. Goldberg, 'The Division of Epistemic Labor', *Episteme* 8 (2011), pp. 112–25). Understood more properly, as a matter of knowledge's being confined to some restricted class, the phenomenon has been most studied among feminist philosophers (see note 10 below).

practical enterprises where secrecy is common. The puzzle I am concerned with, then, is how it can be defensible to postulate one or another division of epistemic labour in purely theoretical domains.

Fideism

Let us say that a theory is ‘elitist’ if it calls for some sort of division of epistemic labour, and ‘egalitarian’ if it does not. As we shall see, there are various versions of elitism, as well as various versions of egalitarianism. Since our reflexive tendencies are egalitarian, it will help to motivate the discussion if we begin with a version of elitism. Consider, then, this famous text from John Locke:

The greatest part of mankind want leisure or capacity for demonstration; nor can carry a train of proofs, which in that way they must always depend upon for conviction, and cannot be required to assent to, until they see the demonstration. Wherever they stick, the teachers are always put upon proof, and must clear the doubt by a thread of coherent deductions from the first principle, how long, or how intricate soever they be. And you may as soon hope to have all the day-labourers and tradesmen, the spinsters and dairy-maids, perfect mathematicians, as to have them perfect in ethics this way. Hearing plain commands is the sure and only course to bring them to obedience and practice. The greatest part cannot know, and therefore they must believe.⁶

This passage comes in the midst of a discussion of the Christian Bible’s contribution to our understanding of ethics. Before Christianity, according to Locke, philosophers had managed only an imperfect grasp of the moral truth. Inspired by the Gospel, however, philosophers and theologians have been able to articulate something very nearly approaching a true ethical theory. In doing so, they have not simply taken on faith the teachings of Jesus, but have come to *understand* those teachings and their ultimate foundation. Hence there are those, Locke thinks, who can ‘clear the doubt’ about ethics, as he puts it here, ‘by a thread of coherent deductions from the first principle’. Clearly Locke does not think we have everything in ethics worked out, down to first principles — he is not nearly that epistemically optimistic. But there is much we do understand, thanks to the guiding light of the

⁶ *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, in *The Works of John Locke*, 12th edn (London, 1824), VI.146.

Gospel.⁷ Even so, Locke tells us here, those truths are much too complicated for ‘the greatest part of mankind’. The sort of understanding achieved by the philosophers, which he here calls ‘demonstration’, is just not possible for ordinary folk. What the masses should do, instead, is simply to accept the conclusions of Christian ethics, in the form of ‘plain commands’, something that will bring them to ‘obedience and practice’ even if it leaves them short of understanding these commands. Hence Locke famously concludes that ‘the greatest part cannot know, and therefore they must believe’.

Let us use the term ‘fideism’ to describe this form of elitism. Its essential claims are that, within some particular domain, only a few are capable of knowledge, and that the majority must settle for mere belief. Such mere belief, lacking foundation in the supporting grounds available to the elite, does not count as knowledge, but is instead a kind of faith.⁸ Fideism does

⁷ It is tricky to characterize the extent of Locke’s optimism regarding ethical knowledge. On the one hand, he stresses that natural reason, unassisted by revelation, has been unable to make much progress: ‘It should seem, by the little that has hitherto been done in it, that it is too hard a task for unassisted reason to establish morality in all its parts, upon its true foundation, with a clear and convincing light’ (*Reasonableness*, in *Works* VI.139). On the other hand, he seems to think that those few who have put the Gospel’s revelation on a solid philosophical foundation can be counted as having knowledge in this domain — otherwise it is hard to understand the contrast he makes in the main text with ‘the greatest part [who] cannot know’. Also, *Essay* IV.xii.11 contrasts our inability to grasp the real essences of nature with the far less dismal situation in ethics: ‘morality is the proper science and business of mankind in general’ (see *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975)). Thus ‘morality is capable of demonstration as well as mathematics’ (III.xi.16), based on ‘self-evident propositions, by necessary consequences, as incontestable as those in mathematics’ (IV.iii.18). It was doubtless such remarks that encouraged William Molyneux to ask Locke for a treatise that would put morality on a demonstrative footing. Locke replied that others had already asked him for the same thing, and he wisely begged off, on the grounds that ‘the Gospel contains so perfect a body of ethics, that reason may be excused from that enquiry. . .’ (see *Correspondence of John Locke*, ed. E. S. de Beer, 9 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976–), V.595). For further discussion, see R. Ashcraft, ‘Faith and Knowledge in Locke’s Philosophy’, in J. W. Yolton (ed.), *John Locke: Problems and Perspectives: A Collection of New Essays* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 194–223.

⁸ Faith, as Locke understands it, does not imply the abdication of reason — on the contrary, it requires some measure of reason to determine who ought to be believed (*Essay* IV.xviii), and Locke insists that *everyone* has enough time ‘to think of his soul, and inform himself in matters of religion’ (*Essay* IV.xx.3). But it is simply wrong to characterize Locke as adhering to a strikingly modern egalitarianism regarding the responsibility to think for oneself. The *Essay*, just as much as the later *Reasonableness*, stresses that for ‘the greatest part of mankind . . . these men’s opportunity of knowledge and enquiry are commonly as narrow as their fortunes’ (IV.xx.2). Contrast such remarks with Richard Foley, *Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 122: ‘His [Locke’s] epistemology sought to address the crisis by defending the idea, daring at the time, that ordinary people, and not just intellectual and religious leaders, have the capacity to form their own opinion about matters of religion and morality. They need only to make proper use of the faculty of reason that God had given them for this purpose.’ Foley is drawing on Nicholas Wolterstorff, *John Locke and the Ethics*

not postulate a gap between the elites and the masses at the level of *what they believe*, but only in the depth of understanding that accompanies those beliefs. This depth of understanding may of course require further beliefs, and further knowledge, that the masses do not have. But with respect to the specific domain in question, there is no difference in what is believed, only in the epistemic status of those beliefs. Thus we have a division of epistemic labour, according to which the masses cannot achieve knowledge, while yet at the same time they benefit from the elites, whose deeper understanding provides a stable basis for the plain commands the masses obey.

Fideism, so understood, is very common in the Christian tradition. Thomas Aquinas, for example, distinguishes between two kinds of Church doctrines. One kind is not provable by natural reason. Included in this category are beliefs about how the world was created, Christ's divinity, the Eucharist, and the Trinity. Such doctrines cannot be known by any human being, at least in this life, and so must be held on faith. Here, there is no earthly division of epistemic labour. The other kind is provable by natural reason. Such tenets include the existence of God, various divine attributes, and the immortality of the human soul. Here there is a division of epistemic labour between those who grasp the arguments that prove these doctrines and those who do not. Aquinas insists, much as Locke later would, that most people not only *do not* know truths of this kind, but also *cannot* know them. Accordingly, he argues that items in this second category of Church teachings need to be treated as articles of faith, not simply as scientific facts about the world. The point is not that *everyone* should believe these doctrines on faith. It is of course better to know than merely to believe. But, for those who cannot know, it is important that they at least believe. If one held instead that these knowable Church teachings should be believed and asserted only when known, there would be three kinds of bad results. First, few human beings would be able to believe anything about God, be-

of Belief (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), whose excellent discussion of these issues reaches the more nuanced conclusion that 'for all of us there are some matters of such "concernment" as to make it obligatory for us to try to do our epistemic best' (p. 73). This is compatible with a very high degree of elitism regarding differences in epistemic capacities, leading in turn to a division of epistemic labour between those who can know and those who cannot, even with regard to the moral matters that are of the highest concernment to mankind. In one of his last published works, Locke writes that 'knowledge and science in general is the business only of those who are at ease and leisure' (*Conduct of the Understanding* §7, in *Works* II.342).

cause few are able to reach the stage of actually knowing such complex truths. Second, even those who could eventually reach some knowledge in these domains would do so only after a long time, meaning that much of their lives would similarly be spent in a state of disbelief. Finally, without faith as a guide even in these rationally accessible domains, many falsehoods would be mixed in with true religious beliefs, just because it is so desperately difficult to do philosophical theology. Of course, all of these arguments presuppose the legitimacy of faith in a religious context. Aquinas's point is simply that, if faith is to be allowed with regard to the true mysteries of the Church (the Trinity, etc.), then it should also be allowed even in some cases where philosophical proof is in principle possible.

The result is a division of epistemic labour, between those who can know and those who can only believe. Aquinas argues for the fundamental point — that many are incapable of such knowledge — in the following passage:

Most are barred from the payoff of serious study — that is, barred from the discovery of truth — for three reasons. (1) Some are barred because of their unsuitable [physical] makeup. Many, for this reason, are naturally unsuited for knowledge, and so cannot, by any amount of study, come to achieve the highest level of human cognition, the cognition of God. (2) Others are barred by the demands of domestic affairs. For there must be some among us who are preoccupied with managing temporal matters, and who cannot spend enough time in the repose of contemplative study so as to reach the highest peak of human inquiry, the cognition of God. (3) Still others are barred by laziness. For to cognize the things that reason can investigate of God one must first grasp much else, since a familiarity with almost all of philosophy is presupposed for the cognition of God. This is why metaphysics, which is concerned with divine matters, is left as the last to be learned among the parts of philosophy. Hence it is only with a great effort at study that one can arrive at the point of investigating the truth in question. Few are willing to undertake such effort for the love of knowledge, even if God has supplied the human mind with a natural appetite for such knowledge.⁹

Aquinas mainly has in mind theological rather than ethical doctrines, but the position he takes is in other respects very much like Locke's. He con-

⁹ *Summa contra gentiles* I.4. For a similar passage, see *Summa theologiae* 1a 1.1c and 2a2ae 2.4c, and *Quaestiones de veritate* 14.10. All translations of Aquinas are my own, based on Thomas Aquinas, *Opera omnia* (Rome: Commissio Leonina, 1882–). For a detailed investigation of the historical roots of Aquinas's position here, see H. A. Wolfson, 'The Double Faith Theory in Clement, Saadia, Averroes and St. Thomas, and Its Origin in Aristotle and the Stoics', *Jewish Quarterly Review* n.s. 33 (1942), pp. 213–64.

tends that there are, in this domain, a certain number of truths knowable through ‘serious study’, but which ‘most’ simply cannot understand. (The Latin word here, *plurimi*, might well be translated in Lockean fashion as ‘the greatest part’.) The failure of the masses to plumb these depths means that they lack knowledge in these domains — such folk are, among other things, ‘naturally unsuited for knowledge’ (*ad sciendum*), despite having been given a ‘natural appetite for such knowledge’. Here, then, is an unusual case where Aquinas admits that the provisionings of nature are out of line with our natural desires. Although we would all like to know, it is an evident fact that not all of us can know. In place of knowledge, however, Aquinas puts faith. Although the greatest part cannot *know* that God exists, they can nevertheless have faith that it is so.¹⁰

Evidentialism, Hard and Soft

To evaluate fideism as a general epistemic thesis, it is helpful to set aside the contentious religious context in which Locke and Aquinas situate themselves, and consider how fideism fares in other domains. In many cases, it might seem at first glance to fare quite well. In disciplines like physics and astronomy, only a very few are able to penetrate very far into the higher, technical regions of the field. The greater part, we might say, cannot know about such things, but yet are right to believe — to have faith in the consensus judgements of science. Here the sort of division of epistemic labour favoured by Locke and Aquinas can seem to be just obviously correct. Fideism, then, deserves to be taken seriously, as a general epistemic thesis.

¹⁰ For a detailed investigation of the sort of elitism at work in these passages — along class, gender, and religious lines — see S. Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-century England* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), the focus of which is seventeenth-century England. The most intensive investigation of such issues in a modern context can be found in work that has grown out of feminist epistemology: see, for example, L. Code, *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), esp. chs 5–6, and M. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). These works, however, focus largely on the question of who is sufficiently trustworthy to count as an epistemic authority: ‘who might be a reliable spokesman for reality’ (Shapin, *A Social History*, p. 42), versus those ‘who are not members of the select group of knowledge and epistemology makers’ (Code, *What Can She Know?*, p. xi). My focus here is on the related but distinct question of who gets allowed into the select group allowed to be taught by such experts.

It is, however, far from being unassailable, and I suggest that it goes wrong in one central respect.

The most obvious place to challenge fideism is in the role it gives to faith. Those who challenge this role are likely to put forward some version of *evidentialism*, according to which one should believe only if one possesses sufficient evidence. Famously outspoken in this regard was W. K. Clifford, who left no room for the sorts of excuses Locke and Aquinas invoke on behalf of the masses. With respect to lack of time, Clifford writes as follows:

‘But,’ says one, ‘I am a busy man; I have no time for the long course of study which would be necessary to make me in any degree a competent judge of certain questions, or even able to understand the nature of the arguments.’
Then he should have no time to believe.¹¹

With respect to abilities and training, Clifford writes:

It is not only the leader of men, statesman, philosopher, or poet, that owes this bounden duty to mankind. Every rustic who delivers in the village alehouse his slow, infrequent sentences, may help to kill or keep alive the fatal superstitions which clog his race . . . No simplicity of mind, no obscurity of station, can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe.¹²

No division of epistemic labour for Clifford. He takes us all to have the same obligation, the same duty to take up the labour of ‘questioning all that we believe’, even if it does require a ‘long course of study’.

This, then, is one alternative to fideism — we might call it *hard evidentialism*. The hard evidentialist agrees with the fideist that knowledge, in the domains in question, is extremely hard to come by, and that accordingly there will be many who are either unable or unwilling to acquire it. But whereas the fideist takes such considerations to point towards the need for faith, the hard evidentialist concludes that the masses should give up their beliefs in the relevant domains.

With this conclusion, we stand precariously on the verge of scepticism in its ancient form, according to which our insufficient evidence requires that we suspend belief. If the hard evidentialist accepts that such scepticism follows for the masses, then we have arrived at a new division of epistemic

¹¹ *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1999) p. 78.

¹² *The Ethics of Belief*, p. 74.

labour — roughly the view of Locke and Aquinas, but without the injunction to have faith. This form of elitism is not scepticism as usually understood, inasmuch as it does not apply globally, to all human beings. Still, it would seemingly apply to so many of us, across so many domains, as to be very nearly as bad. When Clifford tells those with no time for ‘long course of study’ to cease believing, he presumably has in mind only a few select domains rife with ‘fatal superstitions’. But there are many domains of inquiry where it takes a very long time indeed to become, as Clifford puts it above, ‘a competent judge’ or even ‘to understand the nature of the arguments’. Indeed, many of these domains are precisely the ones most highly prized by the foes of superstition.

The alternative for the hard evidentialist is to insist on egalitarianism — that is, to deny any division of epistemic labour. Clifford would thus be read not as describing an elitist division of labour between those who can know and those who should suspend belief, but instead as calling for a renewed spirit of conscientious inquiry among all human beings. This sounds appealing, on its face, but in practice seems wholly unrealistic. Knowledge is hard, says the hard evidentialist, and one should believe only when one satisfies those lofty requirements. It is pleasant to imagine a world in which everyone has sufficient time, enthusiasm, ability, and training to understand the world in all its scientific, philosophical, and ethical aspects. But in practice even our university students struggle with rudimentary problems in logic and calculus. And what about the billions who lack not just an education but even adequate food and medicine? What sort of epistemic labour can we reasonably expect from them? It is therefore hard to shake the suspicion that Clifford’s views fall ultimately into an elitism of their own.

All of this suggests that a better response to fideism might come from a *soft evidentialism* — that is, a view that insists on tying belief to the possession of knowledge, contra fideism, but allows knowledge to be acquired much more readily than either the fideist or hard evidentialist supposes. In recent years, this sort of view has been most prominently defended by the proponents of one or another sort of externalism in epistemology, according to which an agent does not require any sort of ability to articulate or even access the grounds that support one’s belief. Well-known views of this kind contend that justification turns on whether the belief be formed by

faculties that are reliable,¹³ or that are working in accord with their proper function¹⁴ — regardless of whether the agent is in a position to *show* or even be *aware* that this is so. Looking back at Locke and Aquinas, in contrast, one can see that their elitism turns in part on having very high standards for what counts as knowledge. Locke speaks of demonstration, deduction, and a train of proofs, and compares knowledge in ethics to knowledge in mathematics. Aquinas similarly speaks of ‘great effort’ and ‘serious study’, and stresses that knowledge of God will come only at the end of a long course of study. Both take for granted a conception of knowledge that goes back to Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*, according to which genuine knowledge is founded on precisely the sort of demonstration Locke has in mind, and where the various sciences are ordered to one another in such a way that mastery of a higher science depends, as Aquinas says, on grasping a lower one.

One need not look all the way ahead to our modern era to find softer conceptions of knowledge. Medieval scholastic authors, for instance, routinely distinguished between the very strict conception of knowledge described in the *Posterior Analytics* and various weaker conceptions. Thus, according to William Ockham:

In one way knowledge [*scientia*] is a certain apprehension of something true. And in this way some things are known through faith alone — as when we say we know that Rome is a large city, even though we haven’t seen it. Likewise I say I know that he is my father and she is my mother, and so on for other things that are not evidently apprehended. Nevertheless, because we adhere to them without any doubt and because they are true, we are said to know them.¹⁵

Startlingly, Ockham allows that faith can count as a form of knowledge. He apparently requires only that the belief be true and that it be adhered to

¹³ See, for example, A. I. Goldman, ‘What Is Justified Belief?’, in G. Pappas (ed.), *Justification and Knowledge* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979), pp. 1–23.

¹⁴ A. Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹⁵ *Expositio physicorum* prol. §2, in W. Ockham, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. P. Boehner, rev. S. Brown (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1990), pp. 4–5. For further references to scholastic softenings of the concept of knowledge, see R. Pasnau, ‘Medieval Social Epistemology: *Scientia* for Mere Mortals’, *Episteme* 7 (2010), pp. 25–41. There is room to wonder whether Aquinas or Locke might have some sympathy for this sort of approach. For although both hold explicitly that faith and knowledge are strictly speaking incompatible (see, respectively, *Summa theologiae* 2a2ae 1.5 (speaking of *scientia*) and *Essay* IV.ii.14), both are also prone to think of knowledge as admitting of degrees, and so one might attempt to find in them a sense in which faith is a *kind* of knowledge. Similarly, neither Aquinas nor Locke would entirely exclude evidence from their conceptions of faith.

‘without any doubt’. This is not a form of externalism, in the above sense, since the confidence that plays the role of justification here is fully accessible to the believer. Like externalism, however, this is an account that lends itself to egalitarianism, because its conception of knowledge is so soft as to allow almost anyone to be in possession of it. Knowledge not only requires nothing like demonstration, but also can be acquired without any sort of great effort. If, for instance, one adheres without any doubt to the experts about physics, and the experts turn out to be right, then this counts as knowledge, on Ockham’s weak standard (as it would for modern externalists too, provided the method be sufficiently reliable, etc.). There is no place here for Clifford’s moralizing insistence on ‘the universal duty of questioning all that we believe’, because one can know on these views without engaging in any such questioning.

One might say that the soft evidentialisms I am describing are so soft as not to count as evidentialist at all. Ockham in particular seems to require only firm belief, not evidence. And although the externalist will require some kind of appropriate method as the ground of the belief, the appropriateness of that method can itself seemingly be treated as a matter of faith. This is as it must be, one might think, in order to defend an egalitarian conception of knowledge. The epistemic reality for most human beings remains today much as it was in the Middle Ages — so bleak that, as soon as the requirements on knowledge rise beyond the most rudimentary, a division of epistemic labour immediately seems to threaten. There will be those who know, and the remainder who must merely believe.

It is not quite the case, however, that the only way to avoid elitism is to soften the standards for justification. Another way to proceed is exemplified by Plato in the *Meno*.¹⁶ This dialogue is one of our chief sources for Plato’s famous theory of recollection — that we are able to acquire the kind of knowledge that consists in grasping a Form because we somehow have that knowledge innately within us, just waiting to be shaken loose by sensory encounter with particulars. There is nothing at all soft about this conception of knowledge as the grasp of Forms, but even so Plato thinks that it is a path open to each and every one of us. He makes this explicit by having Socrates ask Meno to call over a random slave to submit to questioning. Call over ‘whomever you like’ — the only requirement is that he

¹⁶ Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. J. M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997).

speak Greek (82b). After a series of Socratic questions, the slave arrives at various geometric beliefs. Plato stresses that the slave does not yet know; instead, ‘these opinions [*doxai*] have now just been stirred up like a dream, but if he were repeatedly asked these same questions in various ways, you realize that in the end he would know [*epistēsetai*] these things as accurately as anyone’ (85c). This is, then, hard evidentialism, rationalist style. The slave still does not know, despite being led to the right answers. Because the theory is so demanding, there is no escaping one kind of elitism, the kind that arises from the simple fact that no one is going to take the time to teach the slave geometry. So it is an inevitable consequence of Plato’s high standards that there is a gap between those who know and those who do not. Still, quite unlike Locke and Aquinas, Plato makes it clear that this is merely a contingent feature of our impoverished, inegalitarian world. There is no in principle obstacle to the slave’s achieving just the same high standard of knowledge as the best of us. And to that extent, despite Plato’s high standards for knowledge, his view in the *Meno* is radically egalitarian.¹⁷

I have been describing views at the two ends of a spectrum, but clearly there is a great deal of room in the middle. Ockham, for instance, distinguishes four levels of *scientia*. On the strictest conception (which is more or less Aquinas’s and Locke’s in the passages above), very few can have much knowledge; on the weakest conception, everyone has lots of it. If one thinks of knowledge as requiring something in between (as modern epistemologists of all stripes are likely to suppose, and as both Aquinas and Locke elsewhere suggest), then one’s view may be more or less elitist, depending on how optimistic one is about the cognitive sophistication of ordinary folk. As to where the truth lies on this spectrum, it is natural to wonder whether anything very interesting can be said. Philosophers will have their various linguistic intuitions about how ‘knowledge’ works in English and how other, similar words work in other languages. But setting aside such matters of lexicology, it is natural to think we are simply dealing with different concepts here, ordered on a continuum from least to

¹⁷ The educational scheme of the *Republic* perhaps reveals a greater elitism. Also (to anticipate the following section’s discussion of esotericism), it is sometimes suggested that Plato’s works contain various concealed doctrines. For a recent English-language discussion, see W. R. Mann, ‘Plato in Tübingen’, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 31 (2006), pp. 349–400. The famous noble lie from *Republic* 414bc also comes to mind here, but would not seem to be an example of inegalitarianism, inasmuch as this is a lie — or, literally in Greek, a ‘falsehood’ — that everyone is supposed to believe.

most demanding. Once one selects from among these concepts, there is a great deal of interest to say about the conditions under which it is satisfied, the implications for the division of epistemic labour, and so on. But the question of which of these concepts corresponds to ‘knowledge’ may not admit of any right or even interesting answer.

Still, lexicology aside, the division-of-epistemic-labour phenomenon casts an interesting light on how we might choose from among these various epistemic concepts. Consider Locke’s case of ethical knowledge. In the abstract, it is hard to see how we are to think about the question of how much one has to understand ethics in order to count as having knowledge of it. It is easy to see how the case would go for the sort of demanding standard that Locke has in mind, but also easy to see how the case would go for a much weaker standard. For someone inclined towards high standards in this domain, it is natural to wonder whether, perhaps, no one in fact has any genuine moral knowledge — on the grounds that, *pace* Locke, even we the teachers just do not understand the phenomenon of morality well enough to count as knowing anything. But what happens if we imagine a division of epistemic labour here between a few who have genuine, high-standards knowledge, and the greater part who do not? One might expect that, in this case, it would be all the more tempting to take a hard line about knowledge and insist either that the masses must rely on faith or that, on evidentialist grounds, they must abandon belief entirely. But this strikes me as the wrong conclusion. Once we stipulate that there is a group of experts with knowledge of a very demanding sort, it seems to me natural to think that their bare conclusions can be passed down to the masses, without the complex supporting meta-ethical framework, and yet still count as knowledge. Again *pace* Locke, it seems to me plausible to think that, if the experts have moral knowledge, then non-experts can piggyback on their expertise, and come to have knowledge too.

If this is right, then divisions of cognitive labour do not always give rise to a division in epistemic labour. In the domain of physics, to take another case, we are told that general relativity is incompatible with quantum mechanics. This is something I believe, and yet I understand it not at all. I understand a little about the character of the two theories, but I understand not the first thing about why these two theories are incompatible. Now, of course, if *everyone* was in my position then *no one* could be said to know

that the theories are incompatible. But let us assume that in fact the two theories are incompatible, and let us further assume that some people really understand why this is so. These people then meet very high standards for *knowing* that it is so. The present question, however, is whether *I* know that it is so. If we judge the situation along the lines suggested by Aquinas, Locke, and Clifford, then it would seem that I do not, and that I must either believe on faith (Aquinas and Locke) or suspend belief (Clifford). But this strikes me as wrong. I have it on good authority — indeed, multiple good authorities, as of yet uncontroverted by any other authority — that the two theories are incompatible. I do not myself understand it, but it seems to me nevertheless that I *know* it, and indeed that I know it just as fully as any theoretical physicist knows it. Of course, lying behind this one belief there is lots and lots that I do not know. But, with respect to this one belief, it seems to me that I know it just as much as the experts do.¹⁸

What I am relying on, of course, is authoritative testimony, and so to that extent I am simply taking the side of the weak evidentialists in arriving at this conclusion. But what I take to be interesting is that testimony in these cases exploits precisely the division-of-labour phenomenon that fideism invokes. Rather than concluding that the gap in *cognitive* expertise entails an *epistemic* gap, I am suggesting that a division of cognitive labour makes possible the sort of diffusion of knowledge defended by the egalitarian. On this picture, one can have a demanding conception of what knowledge requires at the outset, but then allow the work of a few to make knowledge possible for the masses. What epistemic responsibilities the masses have in such cases is a difficult question. Must they put some work into determining who the experts are? Is it enough if they simply get lucky in trusting the right people? I will not here try to sort these questions out, but will content myself with the bare, undeveloped idea of a division in labour. Russell famously distinguished between two kinds of epistemic labour, theft and honest toil, but we might rather — taking up Lockean language and using it

¹⁸ B. Williams, 'Knowledge and Reasons', in G. H. von Wright (ed.), *Problems in the Theory of Knowledge* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1972), pp. 1–11, contends that, in mathematics, one cannot know a theorem without knowing its proof. If this were true for maths, it would seem likely to be true in physics as well. I am inclined to think that the claim made here in the main text holds for mathematical knowledge as well. For a similar conclusion, see C. A. J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), ch. 14, who in fact invokes Putnam's division of linguistic labour as an analogue to the situation for mathematics (p. 257).

against him — think of the acquisition of knowledge as like the acquisition of property. One can acquire it the hard way, by mixing one's labour with it, or the easy way, by gift or inheritance. Either way, it counts equally as yours.

Esotericism

Epistemic elitism comes in different kinds. The focus so far has been on the sort of *de facto* division of epistemic labour that comes either from contingent socio-economic disparities or from allegedly inevitable cognitive disparities. Ultimately, for the reasons given at the end of the previous section, I think elitism on these grounds is wrong-headed. Knowledge is the kind of thing that, even if hard to acquire, is easy to share. There is, however, another kind of elitism, one that argues that there *should be* a division of epistemic labour in certain domains between those who know and those who do not. On its face, this looks like a surprising and dubious doctrine, at least in the sorts of theoretical contexts we are concerned with. But I will ultimately argue that we should take it more seriously than we presently do.

The idea of secret or esoteric philosophical doctrines goes back to the origins of philosophy. The word itself was coined in Greek to distinguish between Aristotle's popular teachings and his more technical works. Eventually, it was applied to the supposedly secret teachings of Pythagoras, and has been extended, at various times, to Plato, the ancient sceptics, Hobbes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and many others.¹⁹ Here my interest is not with those philosophers who have been thought to have secretly kept secret teachings, but with those who have openly advocated the keeping of philosophical secrets. Let us use the term 'esotericism' for views of this kind — views that contend there should be a gap, in one or another theoretical domain,

¹⁹ For the word's Greek origins, see 'esoteric' in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which finds the word first in English in Thomas Stanley's *History of Philosophy* (London, 1660), where it is applied to Pythagoras. The notion of the esoteric is of course widespread in religion as well, from the Druze of Lebanon and Syria to the Scientologists of California. According to E. R. Wolfson, 'Introduction', in idem (ed.), *Rending the Veil: Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 1999), p. 1, 'religions almost universally exemplify something of the phenomenon of secrecy even though the precise contours of the phenomenon will vary from one society to the other'. The various chapters of that volume display the range of phenomena.

between those who know and those who are kept in the dark. If this idea has not received much attention in recent philosophy, that is perhaps because it has only rarely been argued for in the Christian philosophical tradition that runs from Augustine through the seventeenth century and into modern Anglo-American philosophy. The medieval Latin philosophical tradition, for example, despite routinely embracing the sort of fideistic division of epistemic labour described earlier, does not — so far as I can find — contain any prominent figure who defends the esoteric concealment of one or another truth from the masses.²⁰ As soon as one looks further afield, however, it is easy to find a very different attitude towards such matters. Indeed, even among the not so far off philosophical traditions of Islam and Judaism, esotericism is the norm.²¹

Consider, first, Abū al-Walīd Muḥammad Ibn Rushd (Averroes), whose commitment to esotericism does not extend as far as other figures we shall

²⁰ There is a pronounced tradition of esotericism in the early Church, which seems largely to have died out from Augustine forward. For discussion and further references, see G. G. Stroumsa, 'From Esotericism to Mysticism in Early Christianity', in H. G. Kippenberg and G. G. Stroumsa (eds), *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), pp. 289–309. He quotes this remarkable passage from Cyril of Jerusalem (mid-fourth century): 'To hear the Gospel is not permitted to all; but the glory of the Gospel is reserved for Christ's true children only. Therefore the Lord spoke in parables to those who could not hear; but to the disciples he explained the parables in private. . . .' (p. 295). The main biblical licence for such claims is Mark 4:10–12: 'When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"'

John Marenbon, in personal correspondence, suggests two counter-examples to my remark about the absence of esotericism in later medieval Christian thought: William of Conches, in his commentary on Macrobius, in P. Dronke, *Fabula: Explorations into the Uses of Myth and Medieval Platonism* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), pp. 74–5; and Gilbert of Poitiers, in *Commentaries on Boethius by Gilbert of Poitiers*, ed. N. M. Häring (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1966), esp. pp. 53–4. It is notable, however, that both are writing in direct response to the explicit esotericism of the ancient text on which they are commenting.

²¹ Esotericism in Islam has been much discussed. For useful overviews, see E. Kohlberg, 'Taqiyya in Shī'ī Theology and Religion', in H. G. Kippenberg and G. G. Stroumsa (eds), *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), pp. 345–80, and M. A. Amir-Moezzi, 'Sirr', in P. Bearman et al. (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn, online (Leiden: Brill, 2011). See D. Gutas, 'The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: An Essay on the Historiography of Arabic Philosophy', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 29 (2002), pp. 5–25 for a scathing review of the tendency to suppose that Arabic philosophers hide their true meanings for fear of religious persecution. My interest, in contrast, is with their entirely open discussions of how it may be dangerous to spread philosophical–theological truths too widely — dangerous not to the author, as we shall see, but to listeners who are not prepared to grasp the truth properly.

consider, but who defends such views with characteristic rigour, and even while remaining steadfastly committed to the project of philosophy itself. His key text on the subject, the *Decisive Treatise* (*Faṣl al-maqāl*, 1179), distinguishes three classes of people (*ahl*): (i) those who are fit only to understand rhetoric, who are ‘the overwhelming multitude’; (ii) those who are fit to understand dialectical (that is, merely probable) arguments; and (iii) those few who are fit to understand demonstrative reasoning.²² Averroes has very high standards for membership in this last class: teaching such reasoning is ‘difficult and requires a long time’ (n. 39). For most ‘there is no path to demonstration, either because of their nature, or because of their habits, or because of their lacking opportunities for education’ (n. 27).²³ The central question of the treatise is how the various doctrines of Islam should be interpreted by people within these three different classes. Averroes stresses that Islam provides for those who are fit only for rhetoric: ‘the Law intends to teach everyone’ (n. 39) and indeed ‘the Law primarily intends to take care of the greater number without neglecting to alert the select few’ (n. 40). Accordingly, ‘God has been gracious to his servants for whom there is no path to demonstration’ (n. 27), and made sure that ‘the majority of the methods declared in the Law are the methods shared by the majority’ (n. 40). This is to say that the various sources of Islamic doctrine — in particular the Qurʾān, and prophetic sayings — are articulated precisely so as to be accessible to the common people, and for the most part require no complex philosophical or theological intervention.

So far there is no sign of any division of epistemic labour. Averroes recognizes precisely the sorts of disparities in ability and opportunity that Aquinas and Locke stress, but thinks that Islam purposefully takes such disparities into account, and reveals its truths in a way that everyone can understand. The trouble comes when we consider those parts of the Law

²² The *Faṣl al-maqāl* is translated, with facing Arabic, in *The Book of the Decisive Treatise Determining the Connection Between the Law and Wisdom; and Epistle Dedicatory*, trans. C. E. Butterworth (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2001), n. 44. A similar discussion in the *Kashf ʿan manāhij*, see translation *Faith and Reason in Islam: Averroes' Exposition of Religious Arguments*, trans. I. Najjar (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), ch. 4, p. 66, makes clear that the people of dialectic are the worst of the three groups: these are the theologians whose reliance on dialectic sows confusion among the masses. Throughout, quotations from Arabic sources take as their starting point the translations cited, but make modifications on the basis of the original text.

²³ Compare Locke, as quoted above: ‘The greatest part of mankind want leisure or capacity for demonstration . . .’.

that are not accessible to everyone — those parts that cannot be taken at face value according to their literal meaning, but must be interpreted if they are to come out true. Like most Islamic scholars, Averroes does not think that there are many such doctrines, but he thinks there are some. Controversially, for instance, he is inclined to think that the Qurʾān's teachings about the next life — its famous descriptions of flowing streams, dark-eyed virgins, etc. — are not literally true, but should be interpreted nonliterally.²⁴ They *should* be interpreted, that is, by those who are fit to do so, those who are adept at the sort of demonstrative reasoning that will allow them to understand the deeper truths only hinted at by the literal text. At this point, however, rather than embrace fideism, Averroes describes a different kind of division of epistemic labour. Whereas Aquinas or Locke would think that the masses should believe such truths on faith, being unable to know them, Averroes contends that the lowest class of people, those adept only at rhetoric, should not be led even to *believe* such things. The truths about the next life need to be kept secret from such people.

The reason for such esotericism is that Averroes thinks there are certain truths about Islam that are very dangerous for ordinary people to become acquainted with. 'If the apparent sense is rejected by someone who is a follower [*ahl*] of the apparent sense, without there being established within him the [appropriate] interpretation, that will lead him to unbelief if it concerns the roots of the Law' (*Faṣl al-maqāl* n. 45). If, for instance, ordinary people were to be told that the Qurʾān's descriptions of the next life are not to be taken literally, this might undermine their broader confidence in Islam. They would not understand the reasons for not taking these passages at face value, nor would they understand the interpretation the theologian wants to give to such passages. Tell the ordinary Muslim that the next life is not what the Qurʾān describes, but more like an endless philosophy seminar, and the consequences might be very bad indeed. Thus Averroes goes on to say that 'anyone who declares these interpretations to those not adept in them is himself an unbeliever because of his calling people to unbelief'

²⁴ For a useful overview of this issue, see M. Hermansen, 'Eschatology', in T. Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 308–24: 'In the medieval period, a large majority of Muslim theologians stood by the view that the core eschatological doctrines and symbols must be held literally as tenets of faith' (p. 309).

(n. 47).²⁵ He offers an extended analogy of what it is like to spread such esoteric truths in places they should not be spread (nn. 48–51). Imagine a wise doctor who has established a thriving practice among the common people. The doctor does not attempt to educate the people in the fundamentals of medical science, rightly judging them incapable of grasping this, but harnesses their various folk beliefs about medicine in a way that produces effective results. Now imagine that a new doctor comes into the community, and begins undermining those folk beliefs and criticizing the previous doctor for fostering lies about medicine. The new doctor may well be able to undermine the trust of the folk in their humble beliefs, but he will not be able to establish within the people any deep understanding of the truths of medicine. The result will be confusion, sickness, death. Much better, Averroes thinks, is to let the people go on believing things that are not true.

In Moses Maimonides — Averroes's contemporary and fellow enthusiast for bringing philosophy to bear on religion — one finds a very similar form of esotericism at work, but one extending much more broadly. *The Guide of the Perplexed* (*Dalālat al-ḥāʾirīn*, 1185–90) lists a great many domains where it would be wrong to reveal the truth to the masses — including natural science, the creation of the world, the divine attributes, and God's providential relationship to creatures.²⁶ These are truths not plainly revealed by the Torah or by the sages of old. Instead, the Torah writes for the masses:

This is the reason why the Torah speaks the language of man, as we have explained. For it is the object of the Torah to serve as a starting point and teacher for the young,

²⁵ See also *Faṣl al-maqāl* n. 34: 'for anyone among the people whose duty it is to have faith in the apparent sense, interpretation is unbelief because it leads to unbelief. Anyone adept in interpretation who divulges that to him calls him to unbelief; and he who calls to unbelief is himself an unbeliever.' Similar remarks can be found on the concluding pages of the *Tahāfut al-tahāfut* (*The Incoherence of the Incoherence*), trans. S. Van den Bergh (London: Luzac, 1954), and throughout the *Kashf ʿan manāḥij*, esp. ch. 4.

²⁶ See, for example, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1963), I.35: 'But the question concerning the attributes of God, in what way they are disavowed of God, and the meaning of those attributes that are ascribed to him; the question concerning creation, of what God created, the way he directs the universe, and how he takes care of things other than himself; the meaning of his will, his understanding, his knowledge of everything he knows; the meaning of prophecy and in what way it comes in degrees; what the meaning is of his names that point toward unity, even though the names are more than one; all these things are very difficult problems, the true "secrets of the Torah".' For the secrets of natural philosophy, see *Guide* I.17.

for women, and for the common people; and as it is not within their power to understand the truth about things, they are confined to tradition with regard to all the sound opinions whose affirmation is preferable.²⁷

Here, as in Averroes, we might speak not just of a division of epistemic labour between ordinary people and the elites, but also between ordinary people and God. God might of course reveal more to us than he does. In particular, the various texts that we hold sacred might be considerably more illuminating with regard at least to theology, philosophy, and science (and, at least arguably, with regard to morality as well). But these are not scholarly texts; they are for the general reader, and are intended to be helpful to such an audience.²⁸

Maimonides is strikingly pessimistic about whether any of us can go very far in understanding God or the natural world. He thinks, for example, that we will never understand the nature of the heavens (*Guide* II.24), and perhaps are incapable of telling the difference between what is merely unimaginable and what is truly impossible (III.15). In general, ‘the pursuit of ideas in domains that are not accessible to one’s understanding, and where one lacks the tools for accessing them, this is nothing other than a defect of nature or the stirring of evil temptation. Let us extend ourselves only to what is within our power’ (II.24). Moreover, in those places where some of us can go further, we should be very cautious about sharing that knowledge with others. A first reason for caution is that such knowledge would be only poorly understood, and so lead more to confusion than to illumination:

Suppose you awaken any person, even the most simple, as if from sleep, and you say to him, Do you not yearn to know what the heavens are, what is their number and their form; what is contained in them; what the angels are; how the world as a whole was created; what is its purpose with respect to the order of its various parts to each other; what is the nature of the soul; how it is created in time in the body; whether the human soul is separable, and if so, how, by what means, and to what purpose; and similar problems? He would undoubtedly say ‘Yes,’ and would by nature yearn for the true knowledge of these things; but he will wish to satisfy that yearning and to achieve all that knowledge by listening to a word or two from you. Ask him to interrupt all of his activities for a period of time, until he learn all this, he would not do it, and would be contented with imaginary and false notions, and his soul would

²⁷ *Guide* I.33.

²⁸ As these remarks suggest, the general theoretical notion of a division of epistemic labour contains within it, as a special case, what is known as ‘the hiddenness of God’ problem — in effect, why God does not share with us more of what he knows, particularly about himself.

be satisfied with this; he would feel disgusted by your saying to him that there is something here that requires much preparation and long investigation.²⁹

This passage comes from a long discussion of the dangers of indiscriminately teaching deep truths in metaphysics and other domains. Aquinas cites this discussion in many places, as the arguments of ‘Rabbi Moses’ in support of the necessity of faith where knowledge is not possible.³⁰ But, whereas Aquinas treats these considerations as arguments for fideism, Maimonides’s purpose is quite different: he is contending that such people should not be allowed to arrive at such beliefs at all. In addition to the sort of consideration just described — that ordinary folk would not understand such teachings — Maimonides makes the further claim that such knowledge, if possessed, would actually be harmful to the wrong sort of people:

You must know that it is very injurious to begin with the science of metaphysics . . . On the contrary, it is necessary to educate the young and to give firmness to those less capable, in accord with their powers of understanding. Those who appear to be talented and to have the capacity for this high level — the level of reflection based on proof and on true intellectual argument — should be gradually advanced toward achieving perfection, aroused either through others or through themselves. One who begins with metaphysics will not only become confused in matters of religion, but will cease believing entirely. I compare such a person to an infant fed with wheat bread, meat and wine; it will undoubtedly die, not because such food is naturally unfit for the human body, but because of the weakness of the child, who is unable to digest the food, and cannot derive benefit from it.³¹

One must follow the proper order of education, but must also limit the deeper subjects of study to those capable of handling them. As Maimonides continues, it becomes clear that the view is deeply elitist. He concludes the whole discussion with the remark that ‘for all these reasons it was proper that the study of metaphysics should have been exclusively entrusted to a special few, and not to the common people’ (I.34). Restricting the elites still further, he asks: ‘How is it possible, given this, to plunge into these studies with common people, with children, and with women?’ (I.34). Esotericism here combines with the usual premodern sexism and classism to yield a division of epistemic labour between privileged men and everyone else,

²⁹ *Guide* I.34.

³⁰ See Thomas Aquinas. *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, ed. P. Mandonnet and M. F. Moos (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1929–56), III.24.3.1c; *Quaest. de veritate* 14.10c (*Opera omnia* XXII); *In Boet. de trin.* 3.1c (*Opera omnia* XXII).

³¹ *Guide* I.33.

whom it would be too dangerous to educate about these matters. For their own sake, we should keep certain kinds of truths out of the hands of these folk. ‘He who investigates without preparation is like a person who goes on foot to reach a certain place, and on the road falls into a deep well, which he has no way of escaping before he dies. It would have been better for him if he had not gone out, but had stayed at home’ (I.34).³²

Even more thoroughgoing as a proponent of esotericism is Abū Ḥamid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, who lived a century before Maimonides and Averroes. In ways that are now familiar, Ghazālī distinguishes between the intellectual abilities of the masses and the elites:

Not every nature is capable of the sciences, or even of the arts and crafts.³³

A clumsy and stupid person is kept away from the seashore, not the proficient swimmer; and a child must be prevented from handling a snake, not the skilled snake charmer.³⁴

Averroes’s distinction between three classes of people — those adept at rhetoric, at dialectic, and at demonstration — appears in almost precisely that same form in Ghazālī,³⁵ who likewise warns against offering the wrong kind of ‘food’ to the wrong kind of people. Ghazālī is, however, refreshingly resistant to distinctions based purely on class. His essay on the art of teaching warns that the first depth of hell is occupied by those teachers who do not share their knowledge, and the second depth by those who cannot abide contradiction. Those in the third depth ‘confine their knowledge and

³² There is a large literature on Maimonides’s esotericism, dating back to the medieval commentary tradition on his work, and centring in the modern era around the work of Leo Strauss. Particularly controversial is the question of what Maimonides’s esoteric doctrines are supposed to be. For a useful recent overview, see A. Ravitzky, ‘Maimonides: Esotericism and Educational Philosophy’, in K. Seeskin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 300–23. He offers a more democratic reading of Maimonides, stressing the possibilities of education and societal progress — for example, ‘the person for whom the secret was concealed yesterday may yet merit its unveiling tomorrow’ (p. 306). To my inexpert eyes, the texts do not bear out this optimistic reading. For a sustained recent attempt to work through Maimonides’s various esoteric views, see T. M. Rudavsky, *Maimonides* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

³³ *Faḍā’ih al-bāṭiniyya*, trans. in al-Ghazālī, *Freedom and Fulfillment: An Annotated Translation of al-Ghazali’s al-Munqidh min al-Dalal and Other Relevant Works of al-Ghazali*, trans. R. J. McCarthy (Boston, MA: Twayne, 1980), p. 254.

³⁴ *Munqidh min al-dalāl*, trans. in *Freedom and Fulfillment*, p. 79.

³⁵ See *Al-Qiṣṭas al-mustaqīm*, ch. 1 (trans. in *Freedom and Fulfillment*, p. 288) and ch. 9 (ibid., pp. 318–19).

wonderful accounts to the noble and wealthy classes [*ahl*] and deem the poor classes unfit [*lā ahl*] for it'.³⁶

The most striking feature of Ghazālī's views is just how far he extends his esotericism. Whereas both Averroes and Maimonides allude to specific doctrines or domains that they think should be off limits for ordinary people, Ghazālī contends that almost all of philosophy and theology should be restricted. Remarkably, this applies even to mathematics and logic:

One should restrain anyone who would immerse himself in these mathematical sciences. For even though they do not pertain to the domain of religion, yet, since they are among the foundations of the philosophers' sciences, the student will be infected with the evil and corruption of the philosophers. There are few, therefore, who immerse themselves in mathematics without being stripped of their religion and having the bridle of godly fear removed from their heads.³⁷

Ghazālī is not suggesting, absurdly, that Muslims be barred from all mathematical knowledge — only that they should be discouraged from going too deeply into such matters. ('Immerse' translates *yakhūdu* — literally, to plunge.) Although Ghazālī does not think that the truths of mathematics are intrinsically harmful, he thinks such study is liable to lead ordinary folk astray, because they suppose that the philosophers have established other, harmful conclusions with the same sort of rigour that they find in mathematics. Hence, extending his argument to the case to logic, Ghazālī remarks that 'frequently, the student who admires logic and sees its clarity believes that the infidel doctrines attributed to the philosophers are supported by similar demonstrations, and hastens into unbelief before reaching the divine sciences [*al-ʿulūm al-ilhīya*]'.³⁸ Even theology (*kalām*) should be kept from the masses, and not just from those who are incapable of appreciating it. Indeed, only two sorts of people should be allowed to study

³⁶ *Ihyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* Bk 1, in *The Book of Knowledge, Being a Translation with Notes of the Kitāb al-ʿIlm of al-Ghazzālī's Ihyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Din*, trans. N. A. Faris, rev. edn (Lahore: Shaykh Muhammad Ashraf, 1966), p. 164.

³⁷ *Munqidh min al-dalāl*, trans. in *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazālī*, trans. W. M. Watt (London: Allen & Unwin, 1953), p. 34.

³⁸ *Munqidh min al-dalāl*, in *Faith and Practice*, p. 36. Elsewhere, in *Ihyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* Bk 1, in *The Book of Knowledge*, p. 53, speaking of geometry and arithmetic, he remarks that these are 'permissible and no one is barred from them except the person for whom it is feared that their study would lead him on to blameworthy sciences, for most of those who practise them have stepped over to innovations. Thus the weakling is barred from the study of geometry and arithmetic just as the boy is barred from the bank of the river for fear he should fall into the water, and as the newly converted Moslem is kept away from the company of unbelievers for fear his ability to handle their company is not to be trusted.'

theology: those who are unable otherwise to resist the religious doubts that gnaw at their heart, and those who wish to use theology to help people of that first kind.³⁹

Such strictures evidently do not leave a great deal that Ghazālī thinks ordinary believers should learn. This is something he is frank about:

If you seek all the sciences, how intense is your curiosity, how great your business, and how large your expectation! So busy yourself with those sciences that concern you. If one says [in response] I want what concerns me, then we say: The only thing of concern is knowledge of God and of his apostle. This is the meaning of his saying: ‘There is no god save God, and Muḥammad is God’s apostle.’⁴⁰

This does not mean that Ghazālī puts no value on knowledge. The ‘Book of Knowledge’ that is the first part of his famous *Revivification of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*) begins with a lengthy discussion of the importance of knowledge, invoking Muḥammad’s saying that ‘the learned believer holds a rank seventy degrees higher than that of the ordinary believer’.⁴¹ But Ghazālī thinks that most knowledge, if not positively harmful, is of no real value to what matters in life. He invokes various prophetic traditions on this score, such as this one: ‘the most severe punishment on the day of the Resurrection is that of the scholar to whom God gave no benefit from his knowledge’.⁴² What counts as such benefit? ‘Beneficial knowledge is that which makes you grow in the fear of God, in awareness of your own faults, and in knowledge of the service of your Lord . . .’.⁴³

Ghazālī himself famously acted on these principles when, at the height of his career, he abandoned his distinguished position as professor of theology in Baghdad, and devoted the next decade to a life of ascetic meditation in the Sufi tradition. Accordingly, he often stresses that the path to knowledge lies not in the usual academic study, but in moral purity. ‘To know God, his attributes, and his works . . . does not result from theology — in fact, theology is almost a veil and a barrier against it. Those are not attained except through self-mortification which God has made the prerequisite for

³⁹ *Fayṣal al-tafriqa*, in *Freedom and Fulfillment*, p. 168.

⁴⁰ *Faḍāʾ ih al-bāṭiniyya*, in *Freedom and Fulfillment*, p. 253.

⁴¹ *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* Bk I, in *Book of Knowledge*, p. 13.

⁴² *Bidāyat al-hidāyah*, in *Faith and Practice*, pp. 87–8.

⁴³ *Bidāyat al-hidāyah*, in *Faith and Practice*, p. 107. The passage continues in this vein for some lines further, describing the features of beneficial knowledge (*al-ʿilm al-nāfiʿ*).

guidance when he said, “And those who strive hard for us, in our way will we guide them: for God is assuredly with those who do righteous deeds.”⁴⁴

Averroes’s view, in comparison, is much more thoroughly intellectual. The failings of the masses to grasp the higher truths of philosophy and theology are strictly intellectual faults. And he resolutely defends the importance of philosophical and theological study for those capable of effectively pursuing it. Thus he remarks:

Those who prevents someone from reflecting on the books of philosophy [*hikma*] when he is adept [*ahl*] at so doing, on the grounds that some very disreputable people are supposed to have erred due to reflecting upon them, are like those who prevent thirsty people from drinking cool, fresh water until they die of thirst, because some people choked on this water and died.⁴⁵

The need to treat certain philosophical truths esoterically does not show that philosophy should be prohibited for everyone. On the contrary, Averroes argues that Islamic Law itself calls for philosophical study. If certain people are liable to misuse such studies, that is not philosophy’s fault. It is like the story of the man who complained after a dose of honey — recommended by the Qurʾān — made his brother’s diarrhoea worse. The Prophet’s rejoinder to this complaint: ‘God spoke the truth, whereas your brother’s stomach lied.’⁴⁶

Applications for Esotericism

Although esotericism is rampant in religion, and pervades the early history of philosophy, it is not something that modern philosophers have spent

⁴⁴ *Ihyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* Bk I, in *Book of Knowledge*, p. 55, quoting Qurʾān 29.69. See also *ibid.*, pp. 48–9, and *Fayṣal al-tafrīqa*, in *Freedom and Fulfillment*, pp. 146–7. Maimonides likewise puts weight on the moral character of the would-be student. In addition to intellectual ability, those suited to pursue advanced philosophical truths must consider their own morality: ‘For whenever a man finds himself . . . inclining towards lust and pleasures, or preferring sin and irascibility, giving the upper hand to his irascible faculty and letting go its reins, he shall constantly be at fault and stumble wherever he goes. For he shall seek opinions that will help him in that toward which his nature inclines’ (*Guide* II.23). There is, however, an important difference here. Whereas Maimonides’s account is naturalistic, in the sense that he thinks one’s moral failings will create a psychological obstacle to intellectual achievement, Ghazālī seems to invoke divine illumination, suggesting that God himself will give cognitive rewards to those who are morally good.

⁴⁵ *Fayṣal al-maqāl* n. 10.

⁴⁶ *Fayṣal al-maqāl* n. 10.

much time thinking about. But perhaps we should, or perhaps in fact we do take esotericism more seriously than is immediately obvious. Consider, most obviously, the domain of ethics, and the various dangerous teachings to be found therein. There is reason to fear that too persuasive a statement of one or another unorthodox view will lead students down the wrong path — well past the possible truths that lie in such a view, all the way to a destructive nihilism. The consequences of such half-absorbed lessons were famously depicted in the play (and later Hitchcock movie) *Rope*. This was based on the true story of Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, who in 1924 were inspired by their studies of Nietzsche at the University of Chicago to attempt the perfect murder. Clarence Darrow asked in Loeb's defence:

Who is to blame? The university would be more to blame than he is. The scholars of the world would be more to blame than he is. The publishers of the world . . . are more to blame than he is. Your honor, it is hardly fair to hang a 19-year-old boy for the philosophy that was taught him at the university.⁴⁷

Who was the last philosopher to make the front page of the *New York Times*? So far as I have seen, it was again Nietzsche, who was invoked in its lead story of 12 January 2011, as an influence on Jared Loughner's attempted assassination of US Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords. It is of course absurd to ask whether Nietzsche's books should be banned, but perhaps it is worth considering whether professors — even those who find Nietzsche's work illuminating — should avoid teachings this material. Or, minimally, that they should be very careful in how they go about teaching it.

Nietzsche does not make the best case for esotericism, because few philosophers find very much true in his work — or, if they do, they are likely to think that what is true can be distinguished from what is pernicious (and is perhaps the result of misreading). Hence this is not likely to be viewed as a case where the *truth* must be hidden. Consider instead, then, the view that ethics has no foundation beyond the contingent facts about what human beings care about. Many professional philosophers endorse this sort of Humean anti-realism, understanding that it does not immediately entail that 'everything is permitted' (as, to mention a strictly fictional example,

⁴⁷ As quoted in R. A. Harris, *Landmark Essays on Rhetoric of Science: Case Studies* (Mahwah, NJ: Hermagoras Press, 1997), p. 114. Interestingly, the passage is cited most often not from its original context, but from its reappearance in the Scopes evolution trial, when Williams Jennings Bryan read the passage to the court in an effort to undermine Darrow's arguments in favour of teaching evolution.

Ivan disastrously put it to Smerdyakov in the *Brothers Karamazov*). Even so, there is room to worry that some students might draw such a conclusion. Here, then, we have a more promising case for esotericism: we are considering certain putative truths about the world, and assessing how much of those truths to reveal to the uninitiated. The worry is not that ordinary folk will be unable to grasp the truths, but that they may grasp them imperfectly, misunderstanding their implications, with results that are worse than the accompanying gain in knowledge could justify. Presumably there is no objection to discussing such views in graduate seminars, and in scholarly journals. But should one self-censor when teaching PHIL 101?

The dangers here are, so far as I know, unproven. For a domain where empirical research has actually been done, we might switch to a different kind of case, the free will debate. Here there is a body of empirical research that suggests exposure to hard determinism (the world is determined, and so we lack free will) increases immoral behaviour. According to a recent study by Kathleen Vohs and Jonathan Schooler, subjects exposed to a brief passage arguing for hard determinism were significantly more likely to cheat on subsequent tasks than was the control group.⁴⁸ It is unclear how long this effect endures, and whether it would extend to seriously immoral behaviour. But there is surely room at least to *wonder* what impact a sustained and persuasive classroom discussion of hard determinism might have, if simply reading a brief passage can produce measurable results.

Consider, too, any of the various politically contentious topics in science, such as evolutionary theory or climate change. Suppose a scientist came to have doubts about some aspect of the standard model for climate change. One might well think it reasonable for that scientist to be very careful about expressing those doubts, for fear that wide publicity would lead the general public to be even more sceptical about the legitimacy of the whole field, thus leading them away from the truth overall and encouraging disastrous environmental policies. The scientist might judge that revealing the truth in this one domain would overall do more harm than good. Although such esoteric calculations are rarely made explicit — or at any rate, naturally enough, they are not made explicit to a wide audience —

⁴⁸ K. D. Vohs and J. W. Schooler, 'The Value of Believing in Free Will: Encouraging a Belief in Determinism Increases Cheating', *Psychological Science* 19 (2008), pp. 49–54.

one might wonder whether they lie behind the unusually harsh treatment accorded to those few scholarly works that do challenge the scientific consensus in domains such as this. Obviously there is considerable room to take issue with the details of any scientific theory as complex as those at issue in the debates over evolution and climate change. But these topics may seem so dangerous as to make the usual open critical scrutiny inappropriate, even flatly immoral — in much the way that Averroes and others thought that certain sorts of teaching, to certain audiences, is immoral.⁴⁹

The case for esotericism is most straightforward on utilitarian grounds. For if transparency in communication and the spread of knowledge have no independent value, beyond the overall pleasure they bring and the suffering they relieve, then it is a simple matter to construct cases — even in the most theoretical of domains — where secrets should be kept, and knowledge should be curtailed. Indeed, the prospect of esotericism has sometimes been wielded as an objection to utilitarianism. Given the utilitarian's set of values, it seems that it will often be justified, perhaps even obligatory, for the utilitarian to suppress the truth even about certain implications of utilitarianism itself. The convinced utilitarian argues her case, presumably, not because she is motivated by the desire for truth, but because she is motivated by the desire for utility. If this is the goal then there can be no objection, in principle, to fudging the details here and there, and perhaps not being entirely open about the radical implications of the theory in various domains. To speak too freely about such implications might be, indeed, quite wrong, from the utilitarian perspective. In just the way that Maimonides and others described, the utilitarian seems required by her own principles to reflect carefully on whether her audience is ready to hear one or another of the more esoteric implications of the theory. (Euthanasia? Infanticide?) Furthermore, as Bernard Williams has pointed out, the utilitarian may even need to keep certain secrets from herself. For it may be that achieving the ends of utilitarianism requires not believing the theory, or at least not believing it everywhere and always, as in cases where utility is

⁴⁹ For recent examples within the field of philosophy, see the reception accorded to J. Fodor and M. Piattelli-Palmarini, *What Darwin Got Wrong* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2010), and also to B. Monton, *Seeking Science in God: An Atheist Defends Intelligent Design* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2009). It seems clear that many reviews of these works are motivated by more than the usual sorts of scholarly disagreements. It is as if some reviewers regard these authors as guilty not just of the usual sorts of scholarly errors, but also of *moral* errors.

best promoted by the unalloyed commitment to a loved one's well-being. For Williams and others, this counts as a decisive objection. But it may simply be another case of esotericism at work.⁵⁰

My aim here is only to raise questions, not to attempt answers. But I do want to insist that these questions are reasonable ones to ask, and that in pursuing them it *might* become clear that philosophers ought to practise esotericism in one or another domain. Even to say this much is perhaps controversial, because one might instead take the view that esotericism is never permissible in purely theoretical domains, and that the programme of theoretical inquiry and education requires the completely open willingness to follow the truth wherever it may lead. Let us call such a view *universal theoretical exotericism* or, for short, simply *exotericism*. The proponent of exotericism will of course agree that not everyone can be taught everything, and that subjects need to be taught in the proper order, with the most difficult material saved for last. But this is simply a matter of pedagogical strategy. The exotericist categorically rejects the idea that the danger of certain truths can ever outweigh the good that comes from teaching them, to anyone capable of grasping them. *Vincit omnia veritas*.

Exotericism, framed in such absolute terms, is perhaps a straw man. (Given how little these issues have been discussed in modern times, it is hard to say what the range of opinion might be.) Nevertheless, it is a view worth considering, both because of its *prima facie* plausibility and because it has powerful arguments behind it. I will conclude by sketching five of them, and indicating briefly how the proponent of esotericism might respond.

The first, most obvious argument for exotericism arises from the intrinsic value of knowledge. One way to put the argument would be to say that acquiring knowledge, and transmitting that knowledge to others, has a value in purely theoretical contexts that cannot be outweighed by other considerations. In such contexts, then, there can never be any justification for hiding knowledge.

⁵⁰ See B. Williams, 'Knowledge and Reasons', in G. H. von Wright (ed.), *Problems in the Theory of Knowledge* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973), pp. 1–11, who remarks that 'it is reasonable to suppose that maximal total utility actually requires that few, if any, accept utilitarianism' (p. 135). This has become known as the esotericism objection to utilitarianism. For an example of the sanguine utilitarian response that occasionally esotericism is perhaps justified, see A. Norcross, 'Consequentialism and Commitment', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 78 (1997), pp. 380–403.

Such an argument is not going to be effective against all the cases where esotericism looks tempting. For in some of the cases we have considered, revealing certain truths is said to yield a net loss in knowledge, because the believer wrongly takes his new information to have further implications that lead him away from the truth downstream. This is what al-Ghazālī thought often happens to those who immerse themselves in mathematics: that they trade knowledge in one domain for greater amounts of ignorance elsewhere. The climatologist imagined earlier might likewise think that enlightening the public about one small point would lead to an overall increase in ignorance about the larger picture. In such cases no objection to esotericism can be grounded in the intrinsic value of knowledge.

In other cases, however, it may look as if the proponent of esotericism is consciously embracing a strategy of keeping certain people ignorant about various truths, without any compensating epistemic pay-off downstream. This does not seem to be the structure of the various Islamic and Jewish texts considered — those authors all stress that teaching the wrong things leads to greater ignorance in the long run. But someone who withheld various information in meta-ethics, say, or on the free will debate, might do so not in the interests of downstream epistemic pay-offs, but for strictly moral reasons — that such knowledge (if so it be) would make people worse morally. This is no doubt a harder form of esotericism to defend. But here one might make another kind of response to this first argument, by questioning the notion of a ‘purely theoretical context’. Although I have been assuming that keeping secrets raises special problems in philosophy and other theoretical domains, one might wonder whether any domain is ever purely theoretical. As we have seen, there are reasons to think that even highly abstract philosophical questions can have a measurable impact on behaviour. The defender of exotericism in the theoretical domain may be thinking of such discussions as entirely cut off from practical effects. What the esotericist insists on, in contrast, is that even the most theoretical knowledge can have dramatic practical effects.

A second, related argument for exotericism holds that in theoretical contexts it is always wrong to conceal the truth. Esotericism would always be wrong, at least in these domains, because it amounts to a kind of lying, or at least deception. Setting aside worries about the scope of the purely theoretical, one might take issue with the notion that keeping secrets is

tantamount to lying.⁵¹ Surely if I decide simply not to discuss meta-ethics in PHIL 101, I have not lied to my students, no more than I have lied to them by not mentioning, say, Francisco Suárez. One can imagine a teacher very keen to avoid certain dangerous subjects, but who will not lie about them, and so will answer truthfully if the subject is directly raised. Perhaps such distinctions can be effectively maintained, at least in some contexts, but this terrain looks slippery. If your only reason for avoiding a topic is that you think it is too dangerous — if you would otherwise regard it as falling squarely within the appropriate topics to cover in a class — then are you not, in some sense, lying by omission? And if you really believe that the material is too dangerous to teach, then will you not be prepared to engage in further subterfuges, in the course of class discussion, to avoid the topic? It seems better, then, to admit frankly that esotericism entails a policy of lying in theoretical matters. This is something that al-Ghazālī forthrightly concedes. He considers the objection that grasping the truth of things can never be bad: ‘You may say that knowledge is the grasp of a thing as it is, which is one of the attributes of God. But then how is a thing knowledge and at the same time blameworthy?’ In response he makes the striking move of immediately assimilating the case of withholding knowledge to the case of lying, and arguing that the one should be defended on the same grounds as the other. Invoking the now familiar murderer-at-the-door scenario, Ghazālī responds:

If someone should pursue one of the saints of God in order to kill him, but the saint should hide from him in a safe place and, then, the murderer inquires about the saint’s whereabouts, it would not be permissible to point out the hiding place, but rather, lying to him would be mandatory. For while pointing out the whereabouts of the saint provides guidance and useful knowledge of a thing as it is, nevertheless it is blameworthy because it breeds injury.⁵²

Ghazālī offers this defence of lying because he thinks that esotericism requires precisely this,⁵³ and thinks that the circumstances warranting eso-

⁵¹ In this spirit, Bok, *Secrets*, p. xv, remarks that ‘lying and secrecy differ, however, in one important respect. Whereas I take lying to be *prima facie* wrong, with a negative presumption against it from the outset, secrecy need not be.’

⁵² *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* Bk I, in *Book of Knowledge*, pp. 73–4.

⁵³ Note 28 above remarks that the problem of divine hiddenness looks in effect to be a special case of esotericism. Because Ghazālī concedes that esotericism requires lying, he cannot suppose that God or Muḥammad treats us esoterically. This would be, in effect, to accuse God or the Prophet of lying, which

tericism are every bit as dire as if there were a murderer at the door. Knowledge of the wrong kind can be a killer.

By now it will be obvious that the sorts of esotericism in question here are highly paternalistic, and this might be the basis for a third argument for exotericism. The esotericist will presumably plead guilty as charged on this score, and insist that it is precisely the job of those who know to look after the well-being of those who do not. The argument from paternalism, then, is not likely to make much headway against the determined esotericist. A more effective basis for argument would be to show that esotericism, even if conceivably in the interests of the masses, is in fact harmful to those who keep the secrets. One path towards this conclusion would be to show that restricting theoretical knowledge to a tight circle impedes the progress of inquiry itself. This seems plausible enough, since it is natural to think that the more widely information is shared and discussed, the more likely it is that the truth will be discovered, and falsehood ferreted out.⁵⁴ Such an objection would certainly apply to cases of esotericism where the circle of the initiated is extremely tight. We might, for example, imagine our earlier climatologist sharing his discovery with no one at all, or with just a few others. This would surely be very harmful to the course of inquiry, and would seem justifiable only in very extreme circumstances. Esotericism can be defended against this argument, however, provided it allows for the sharing of the esoteric material with a sufficiently wide circle of initiates. Averroes, for example, thinks that the full truth about various religious doctrines should be shared with all those who are capable of appreciating it — everyone who is among the adept at demonstration. Ghazālī's much more extreme position, in contrast, is widely thought to have been a prominent reason for the decline of Islamic philosophy and science in the post-medieval era.⁵⁵

Ghazālī regards as the essence of unbelief. This becomes explicit when he considers, as an objection to that definition of unbelief, the response that the Prophet *does* lie, for the good of the common people, in his accounts of various matters that the people could not understand if taught literally (for example, the nature of the next life, or the attributes of God). In *Faysal al-Tafriqa*, in *Freedom and Fulfillment*, pp. 160–1, Ghazālī brusquely denies that the Qurʾān does any such thing.

⁵⁴ See Bok, *Secrets*, p. 25: 'Secrecy can harm those who make use of it in several ways. It can debilitate judgment, first of all, whenever it shuts out criticism and feedback'

⁵⁵ For a measured endorsement of Ghazālī's influence in this regard, see A. I. Sabra, 'The Appropriation and Subsequent Naturalization of Greek Science in Medieval Islam: A Preliminary Statement', *History of Science* 25 (1987), pp. 223–43, at pp. 239–41. For a more sceptical evaluation, see D. Gutas, 'Philosophy in the Twelfth Century: One View from Baghdad, or the Repudiation of al-Ghazālī', in P.

Maimonides's case is different yet again: he is dealing with the Talmudic tradition according to which a teacher should reveal the esoteric truths of religion to no more than a single student.⁵⁶ But he himself makes it clear just how disastrous a policy this is, and that he has put his teachings into publicly available written form — albeit heavily veiled — precisely so as to rejuvenate theoretical inquiry in these domains. So, provided enough of the right kind of people are admitted into these circles, this third objection can be handled. It does not seem credible that the advancement of knowledge requires being willing to share that knowledge with *everyone*.

A fourth way in which esotericism might harm its practitioners is if the practice turned out to be self-undermining. This could happen if a policy of secrecy in theoretical domains became an obstacle to education. The previous objection showed why it is necessary for esoteric teachings to be sharable with at least some others. But once the question arises of whether a teacher's words are to be taken at face value, the fear may arise that the communication of knowledge will be badly disrupted. Should I, the student, take my teacher's words literally? Is there instead a code that I must unravel? Even if I take myself to have unravelled the code, am I right? Even if the teacher tells me that I am right, can that itself be trusted, or is this just another level of esoterica? The conditions of trust required for communication might easily cease to be satisfied. Consider, as a specific case, Ghazālī's discussion of the Prophetic saying that 'seeking knowledge is an ordinance [*farīḍa*] obligatory on every Muslim'. This looks, at face value, as if it speaks in favour of exotericism. But Ghazālī goes on to explain that 'people disagreed as to what branch of knowledge one is obliged to acquire, and as a result split up into about twenty groups'. Once Muḥammad's words are restricted in this way to certain branches of knowledge, it again becomes possible to defend esotericism in certain domains. But then Ghazālī goes on to mention one final, esoteric reading of the passage: 'Others said that it was esoteric knowledge [*ilm al-bāṭin*] whose acquisition is required, but required only of the special people who are the adept [*ahl*]. So they dismissed the saying according to its common meaning.'⁵⁷ Here we see

Adamson (ed.), *In the Age of Averroes: Arabic Philosophy in the Sixth/Twelfth Century* (London: Warburg Institute, 2011), pp. 9–26.

⁵⁶ See *Guide I*, intro, p. 7.

⁵⁷ *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* Bk I, in *Book of Knowledge*, pp. 30–1.

how, once esotericism gets in the door, the core text itself becomes subject to radical reinterpretation, effectively undermining the whole discussion. Although the Prophet seems to have taught that seeking knowledge is obligatory on everyone, perhaps he did not really mean that at all. As soon as we open the door to our teachers and texts not meaning what they say, it becomes unclear whether we can learn anything from anyone.

This is a serious objection, but it is hard to believe it could license a conclusion as strong as exotericism. To be sure, life would be simpler if every text, and every speaker, meant exactly, literally, what it seems to be saying. But in practice we all constantly have to cope with a certain measure of indirection. This is obvious in the political domain, where we take for granted that not everything can be revealed, but it is equally so in theoretical contexts. In the case of ancient texts, worries about esotericism may prove all but fatal to the project of interpretation, but of course plenty of people soldier on, trying to learn what they can. In the case of living authors and teachers, there is in principle a further remedy — one can attempt to study directly with the master. If I suspect that my colleague the utilitarian is holding back on some aspects of the doctrine, I can visit her office and push her on those points. Of course, she may decide that I am undeserving to be one of the initiated. There is no guarantee that she is giving me her views in full, unadulterated. This will generate a certain amount of suspiciousness, but it seems too much to say that it undermines the communicative process entirely. So although it is a serious objection to esotericism that it raises such obstacles to communication, these worries do not seem serious enough to warrant its universal rejection in principle.

The fifth and final argument is that the very idea of esotericism is fundamentally alien to the project of philosophy. Here I think the esotericist should simply grant that hiding the truth is contrary to the spirit of philosophy and other theoretical disciplines. Surely it is central to the very notion of theoretical inquiry that it takes as its goal the acquisition of knowledge. In turn, there would be something perverse about seeking to acquire knowledge without also seeking to spread that knowledge, as widely as possible. As Aquinas put it, in his discussion of the contemplative life that is our *summum bonum*, ‘better than simply to contemplate is to share one’s contemplations with others’.⁵⁸ Of course, one cannot share everything with

⁵⁸ *Summa theologiae* 2a2ae 188.6c.

everyone, and some are simply incapable or unwilling to go very far. But it seems integral to the project of philosophy to seek the spread of philosophical wisdom as far as it will go. Where there are those who seek to learn, the philosopher should teach them as much as possible, in the clearest, most transparent manner possible. Whatever we are to make of the reputed ancient practice of esoteric philosophical teachings, this looks like a departure from the ideal. We should instead take Socrates as our exemplar of what philosophical inquiry should look like — clear, honest, open to everyone.

But, of course, Socrates paid for this with his life. So even while we should affirm that the spirit of philosophy requires universal exotericism, we should be prepared for the possibility that philosophical deliberation will show that in some cases esotericism is better, all things considered. It would not be better from a narrow *philosophical* perspective, since philosophy demands exotericism, but there are presumably more important things in life than philosophy. Proponents of exotericism will depict themselves as the noble defenders of open intellectual inquiry, but it may be instead that they either fail to recognize philosophy's broader impact on the world, or fail to care about that broader impact. Either way, we should be suspicious if philosophical reflection leads to the conclusion that the demands of philosophy trump all else.

Note. I have benefited greatly from John Hawthorne's commentary on the occasion of the 2011 Dawes Hicks Symposium, as well as from audiences at Cornell University and the University of Colorado, and from suggestions by Dominic Bailey, Fouad Ben-Ahmed, Jeffrey Hause, Colleen McCluskey, Scott MacDonald, John Marenbon, Bradley Monton, Alastair Norcross, Sydney Penner, Michael Sechman, and Christina Van Dyke