

Peter McCormick
In Times Like These

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Peter McCormick

In Times Like These

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Situations, Resources, Issues

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*For the Younger Scholars and Students of Ethics
in Central and Eastern Europe*

“There is only one philosophical question: what could doing philosophy ever look like in times like these.”

Karel Kosík,
Prague, May 1978, in conversation

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Preface

In the late Spring of 1978, I took the train from Paris and travelled, not without difficulty, to Prague. My hope was to present to the still grieving family of Jan Patočka, the Czech philosopher and co-founder with Vaclav Havel of Charter 77, a newly published book.¹ The book included one of his articles in English that I had translated with a former colleague from the French.

Travelling to Prague at that time, however, I was at a loss. My problem was that I had no proper notion of either the extent of Patočka's disparate philosophical work, or of the unifying role the Socratic ideal of the care of the soul played in that work.

Nor did I have any idea either of the richness of that ideal for thinking freshly today about Europe's basic ethical values. Some of these matters I have only been able to take up now in the opening and closing sections of this book.

Once in Prague, however, and after meeting with one of Patočka's most accomplished former students, the Marxist social philosopher, Karel Kosík,² I then began to learn just how difficult it was at that time to get some proper sense of the extraordinary nature of Patočka's work.

Most of his work had never been published. Moreover, after Patočka's death at the age of 70 from a cerebral haemorrhage the previous Spring during non-stop interrogation at the hands of the secret police, the fate of his students and his manuscripts remained uncertain.

I met with Kosík in a seedy bar under Prague's old bridge. My purpose was twofold. I wanted to speak with him about just what philosophical questions Patočka had worked on. I also hoped to receive from him, after several strangely interrupted telephone conversations from abroad, the samizdat bibliography of all of Patočka's work. My intention was to take the work back with me to France and see to its publication.

That night under the bridge, however, Kosík was in dire straits. On orders from the secret police, the university had recently fired him from his regular university position as professor of philosophy. The police then had installed him precariously in a part-time job as a tram driver. They informed

him that at the slightest “provocation” he would be fired and then immediately jailed indefinitely on charges of “vagrancy.”

Moreover, his wife had also been fired from her job. Their children had been excluded from the university. The secret police had expelled the entire family from their state controlled apartment.

And now the secret police had just re-settled Kosík and his family in a narrow, dilapidated, and extremely noisy shack on the very edges of one of the busiest train tracks in the city. In case of “provocations,” the police warned, their next home would be the streets and then, on the grounds of “vagabondage,” prison.

Kosík was upset. He drank too much. Still, I managed to speak with him for an hour or so about Patočka’s philosophical interests. In the course of our talk, however, Kosík became increasingly agitated.

He finally got up and broke off the conversation angrily with the remark, “talking shop about Patočka’s work is absurd. There’s only one philosophical issue: what would doing philosophy ever look like in times like these.” He rushed off unsteadily towards the railroad tracks.

I never did get the bibliography.

The title of this book comes from that conversation. For even though the work here can make no claim to addressing such an elusive matter, nevertheless I think that Kosík’s memorable remark deserves careful philosophical attention. This is especially the case in Europe today where philosophical issues in ethics and in social and political philosophy are newly salient.

I completed the first draft of these revised essays just after the European elections and the Ukrainian elections of May, 2014. What especially marked those elections were not just the terrible spectacles of the armed annexation of Crimea and the brutal intimidation of voters in the Donbass.

Perhaps even more important were the truly unprecedented victories that anti-European and often extreme right wing parties gained, most notably in republican France, constitutional England, and in autocratic Hungary. After so much lying and anti-semitic and anti-islam hateful speech, and after so many violent actions, any persisting thoughtful concern with ethical values in Europe was difficult to discern.

Hegel’s maxim that philosophy is its own time caught up in thought may never have been true. Most likely, Hegel’s adage is not true today in Europe. Still, that maxim may have a point.

Today, so much of all the proliferating loose talk of “European values” seems superficial. Massive evidence continues to pile up about the very widespread confusion about the nature of ethical values and ethics itself. In such current contexts, Kosík’s expostulations in Prague long ago to the effect that doing philosophy cannot take place properly in a political, social, and cultural vacuum deserve protracted reflection.

The nature of the times, Patočka’s and Kosík’s times in the Europe of Charter 77 yesterday and even the times of many philosophers working in Europe today, insist on philosophers trying to get some conceptual distance on their usually merely parochial interests. Perhaps some philosophers need to think differently.

The philosophical reflections here arise then, however imperfectly, out of just such concerns with investigating what doing philosophy in Europe might look like today. And these reflections are echoed in this book’s companion volume, *Blindly Seeing? Essays in Ethics: Discourses, Sayings, Sufferings*.

After an introductory section on “Orientations” where I begin with Patočka’s sobering reflections on the Europe of his own times, the book goes on to explore several topics under three main headings.

Starting from several aspects of the international situations in which doing philosophy now takes place, two essays in Part One, “Situations,” look into philosophical issues about minimum ethical standards in international banking and about the ongoing task of internationalizing the rule of law in the face of human contingency.

With these rather empirical reminders on hand, the two essays in Part Two, “Resources,” step back from the contemporary globalized contexts of philosophy in search of several philosophical reminders and resources in order to deal further with such problems as those sketched in Part One. I first look at the notion of the good of others in the contexts of late Stoic cosmopolitanism, and then at several related themes in late Stoic philosophical inquiry more generally.

Two further essays in Part Three, “Issues,” take up general issues underlying much ongoing work in philosophical ethics today. These include issues about relativism and objectivity on the one hand, and, on the other, issues about what is to be properly understood after all as “really real.”

A concluding section, “Re-Orientations,” returns to my starting point with Europe. There, I try to pick up some elements of Patočka’s reflections on the Socratic ideal of the care of the soul as they might look like today.

How much, if at all, any of these inquiries might sensibly assist some younger philosophers, those working in philosophical ethics especially in Eastern Europe today thinking about Kosík's question as to what philosophy might ever look like in times like these, I cannot say.

These revised essays have benefitted very much from the critical comments, suggestions, and philosophical worries of those who first invited their presentations at various professional philosophy conferences and from those who later accepted reworked versions for publication. I have tried to acknowledge these persons in the endnotes to each of the essays. I owe special thanks to Hans Reiner Sepp for his encouragements and for having accepted this collection and its companion piece for his distinguished series *Libri nigri*.

My most important assistance with various forms of these essays, however, and with much other work as well, has come from three philosophers from distinguished Central and Eastern European philosophy departments – Volodymyr Turchinovskyy from the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv in Ukraine, Martin Cajthaml from the Palacky University in Olomouc in the Czech Republic, and Czeslaw Porebski from the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Poland.

Despite our all too pronounced differences – in language, in philosophical training, in university experience, and of course in character – each most generously, and unfailingly, has continued to help me. And they have helped me not just as colleagues but as genuine friends.

I am deeply pleased to be able here sincerely to thank each of them individually and all three of them together. At least on the evidence here, it looks as if I will certainly need their friendly and professional help for some time to come.

Peter McCormick
Paris, 15 May 2017

- ¹ See Jan Patočka, “The Husserlian Doctrine of Eidetic Intuition and its Present Critics,” tr. P. McCormick and F. Elliston in *Husserl: Expositions and Appraisals*, ed. P. McCormick and F. Elliston (Notre-Dame: University of Notre-Dame Press, 1977), pp. 150–160.
- ² See K. Kosík, *Die Dialektik des Konkreten* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp: 1967), re-edited by J. Habermas, D. Henrich, and J. Taubes (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973); and *Moral und Gesellschaft*, ed. K. Kosík (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967).

Orientations:

Socrates and the Care of the Soul¹

“The human good, the knowledge of which a person at first naively claims to possess while not having even the slightest premonition of its sense, despite its mysteriousness and absence, is in some sense here . . . it is here as absent and yet also as an appeal to refuse all immediate (instinctive, traditional) and individual, fragmented, contingent ends, to refuse everything which pretends to be such an end and the human good. . . . the appeal to live this life is an appeal to live a unified, focused, internally consolidated life; it is the realization of a true and consolidated existence.”

—*Jan Patočka*²

The distinguished twentieth-century Czech philosopher Jan Patočka (1907–1977)³ thought that the history of philosophy held lessons for his own troubled times. He also thought that re-examination of Socrates’ distinctive kind of philosophical inquiry could disclose a European ethical ideal called “the care of the soul.”

In particular, Patočka believed that critically returning to this ideal could provide moral strength for holding fast to democratic ideals in the threatened Eastern European countries of his day. At the time, however, history proved his philosophical beliefs false. Moreover, Patočka himself died in 1977 in Prague at the hands of the Czech secret police.

Today, times have changed, although perhaps not enough. The sovereignty and territorial integrity of Eastern European countries are newly threatened. And with freshly insistent memories of Sarajevo, of Munich, of the Shoah, and of the Holodomor in Ukraine, a need for moral and ethical steadfastness seems urgent. Perhaps reconsidering the Socratic ethical ideal of the care of the soul might have some fresh point.

Here, with Eastern Europe's freshly menacing situations in mind, I would like to reflect briefly on Patočka's earlier concerns. My underlying question throughout is what would a revised Socratic ethical ideal for Europe look like today. And after refining Patočka's earlier reflections in the light of some contemporary reflection, I would like to raise three particular questions for further discussion. These questions concern the philosophical fruitfulness of any such historical Socratic ethical ideal today.

The Deep Trouble with Europe Today

The deep trouble with Europe today is both historical and philosophical: today's Europe has forgotten yesterday's Socratic care of the soul.

Or so one might reasonably conclude from the central theme in the striking work, almost completely unpublished and relatively unrecognized in his own time,⁴ of the eminent twentieth-century Czech philosopher, Jan Patočka.⁵

That central and unifying theme is the patient, recurrent elucidation of one idea only.⁶ And this one idea is the claim that what most basically characterizes the Socratic care of the soul is not the good itself. Rather, this one idea is the necessity for constant inquiry into the nature of the good.

But what could Patočka's philosophical reflections on Socratic ethics in his own troubled times have to do with Europe's urgent situations today? That is, what could yesterday's philosophy have to do with Europe's current problems, with, say, Europe's baneful incapacities regarding Syria and Ukraine to harmonize the sovereign domains of the European Union's now 27 member states around shared basic ethical values?⁷

In other words, one general issue that summons renewed critical discussion is finally not Patočka's Socratic ideal of the care of the soul. Rather, the issue I have in mind is whether Patočka's philosophical account of a Socratic ideal of the care of the soul in view of Europe's history yesterday might be for our own quite precarious times in Europe today a viable ethical strategy.

What then would a not unsatisfactory Socratic ethics look like, both philosophically and historically, in times like these?

Jan Patočka's Double Conviction

But what exactly was Patočka's understanding of the Socratic ethical ideal?

Born in 1907, Patočka lived through the horrific evils of the twentieth-century world, the negative sublime,⁸ until his own untimely death seventy

years later in 1977 in the then Soviet occupied Czechoslovakia. That's where and when he did philosophy. No wonder that he came to believe that his historical concerns apparently led to an inescapable twofold philosophical conclusion.

His persistent argued conviction was, first, that the reduction of the very idea of human rationality to techno-scientific rationality only⁹ had happened mainly because the peoples of Europe had lost the original European ethical ideal of the Socratic care for the soul.

Patočka sensed that an inchoative union of European states was emerging. He sensed this in his endless discussions with Vaclav Havel¹⁰ and his other co-founders of the Charter 77 Movement. And he also sensed this in the multiplying signs at the time of incipient revolt against Soviet hegemony in Central Europe.¹¹

Hence Patočka argued, secondly, that any reasonable hope for such a newly emergent union of European states required philosophically recovering what historically had been lost. In particular, such a European union needed a retrieval of the original Socratic ethical ideal of a life always to be lived truthfully.

Patočka went on to specify this ethical ideal of a truthfully lived life as a Socratic ceaseless inquiry into the nature of a sovereign ethical good.¹²

Patočka's work was brilliant. And his work remains a brilliant philosophical and historical legacy for all in a troubled Europe today.

But was Patočka right? And even if Patočka was right about the nature of the Socratic ethical ideal and the need for its retrieval, how could such a Socratic ethical ideal give rise to a cogent Socratic ethics in Europe today?

That is, did Patočka come to a historically and philosophically satisfactory interpretation of the Socratic ethical ideal of the care of the soul?

And could such a Socratic ethical ideal still serve us for the articulation of a not unsatisfactory Socratic ethics today?

For what could be the point for Europe of any Socratic ethical ideal after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the globalization of an extreme and murderous jihadism, the continuing European economic and financial crises, the geopolitical impotence of the European Union, the rejection of ever more destitute immigrants, a reviving and newly virulent anti-semitism, and the re-assertion of an irredentist Russian nationalism?

Patočka on Socratic Inquiry

During 1945 to 1948, shortly after the end of the Second World War and before the Iron Curtain's division of Europe, Patočka re-worked his "Lectures on Ancient Philosophy."¹³ In these reworked lectures he developed a mature version of what he argued was the philosophical core of Europe's ethical values.

This core Patočka took to be one of the most basic philosophical insights in Socrates' way of pursuing philosophical inquiry in the deeply troubled times of late fifth-century BCE Athens. Granting the differences, those times were still, he believed, very much like his own in the Czechoslovakia of that era.

Patočka oriented his researches largely by the path-breaking philological and philosophical works at the time of Swiss and German scholarship.¹⁴ And he characteristically argued from close and repeated philosophical examination of the Greek texts of the early dialogues of Plato.¹⁵

In these ways Patočka came to hold that Socrates' extraordinary practices of philosophical inquiry arose, mainly if not exclusively, from a singular understanding of what Socrates himself called "*elenchus*."¹⁶ Moreover, this complex and demanding philosophical practice, Patočka came to believe, was probably at the origins of most early rational articulation of the basic ethical values that still hold sway, however precariously, in today's Europe.

Patočka argued that Socrates' practices of philosophical cross-examination, when taken to their conclusion (which many of Socrates' interlocutors such as even the extraordinarily talented Alcibiades were often unable to do), develop through three successive phases.

The first phase of the cross-examination is one of astonishment and shock. This is the phase of what we might informally call here "cognitive self-discovery."

Socrates, we may recall, brings round an initially mundane public conversation with Alcibiades, one of the promising, leisured young men in Athens' privileged social and political life, to the newly problematic question in their own troubled times of what makes for a good life.

Socrates first asks just what the politically ambitious young man thinks the good life comes to. And, with characteristic self-confidence, his interlocutor replies. Then Socrates' further questions gradually make explicit important contradictions in his interlocutor's opinions about what the good life is.

Slowly it becomes evident to all that Socrates' interlocutor has not examined, critically and sufficiently, his own opinions. Hence, despite his believing so, in fact he does not actually know what the good life consists in, whether for others or for himself. And not knowing that raises serious questions about his suitability to hold public office. For how reasonable would it be to entrust such an unknowing person with actualizing the common good for his fellow citizens?¹⁷

Following the exchanges carefully, Socrates, Alcibiades, and Alcibiades' intelligent companions come to recognize that, however distinguished, Alcibiades is ignorant. For despite his admitted intellectual and social qualities, Alcibiades does not know one of the most important matters of all. He lacks genuine knowledge of what constitutes the good life for society, for the individual, and for himself.

But after first discovering his own ignorance, Alcibiades now experiences what we might informally call here a profound sense of shame and confusion. If the first phase of the philosophical cross-examination was strongly cognitive, then this second phase is strongly affective.

Previously, Alcibiades and his companions believed they knew what is essential to know if one is to make one's way successfully in social and political life. They believed they knew what it is to live the good life for oneself and for others. But now their replies to Socrates' persistent questions have demonstrated that their most basic beliefs about just what the good life is are not just mistaken; worse, their views are contradictory and hence simply false. Moreover, their habitual justifications for leading the self-confident and ambitious lives they are presently leading are now, evidently, utterly unreliable.

In short, these talented and privileged young aspirants to social and political prominence have most basically neglected themselves. They have neglected their spirits; they have neglected what Socrates calls their "souls." Despite all appearances then, Alcibiades and his friends have already failed; they have failed to "care for the soul."

After the cognitive discovery of profound ignorance and the affective experience of shameful confusion, "there are," as Martin Cajthaml has observed, "only two ways out of the extremely unsettling situation" which the Socratic elenchus induces. "One must either run away from Socrates with ears blocked, as Alcibiades does in Plato's *Symposium* [216b5–6]. Or one must accept the hard-to-bear fact concerning one's own condition as Alci-

biades does in Plato's *Alcibiades* [124b6–7] and be immersed in Socratic questioning . . . accepting the life-program of the care of the soul.”¹⁸

If Socrates' interlocutor accepts his condition both of being basically ignorant about the essential thing for leading one's life truly and of suffering greatly from shame and confusion that unknowingly one is so basically ignorant, then the third and final phase of Socratic cross-examination comes into force. This is the phase of what we might informally call here “perduring engagement.”

For Socrates, coming to lead one's life truly is engaging oneself unremittingly for one's whole life in the pursuit of and critical inquiry into a special kind of knowledge. This is the twofold knowledge of what is the true good for human beings and of what this knowledge of the true good entails for living one's own life with others.

Such a commitment, on Patočka's distinctive although not uncontroversial interpretation of the Socratic care of the soul, must be ceaseless and life-long. For, as Patočka argued in his 1947 lectures, “the Socratic search for the human good never finds a definitive answer. . . . [yet] only such an endless search for the ever elusive good can give human existence its highest perfection.”¹⁹

Thus, for Patočka the Socratic elenchus proceeds in three phases – first to the discovery of one's ignorance about the most important matters, then to shame and confusion, and finally, if only occasionally, to a life-long engagement in critical inquiry guided by a basic belief.

That basic belief is that the essential element in leading truly a human life is the belief in the cardinal necessity for human beings of the care of the soul. And the key expression, the care of the soul, is taken as “an intellectual path marked by a constant refutation of insufficiently reflective moral convictions concerning the human good. . . .”²⁰

Envoi

This then is the understanding of the Socratic elenchus that Patočka thought of more than a generation ago as implying the Socratic ethical ideal of the care of the soul. And this Socratic ideal then will be the underlying theme of the varied and often much more concrete essays that follow. In turn, those essays will lead us back in the final text here, “Re-Orientations,” to the critical viability of such an ethical idea for Europe today.

Endnotes

- 1 This essay is the initial part of a text first presented in shorter form at the meeting of the *Institut international de philosophie* in Rome, September 24–28, 2014 on the theme, “The Relationships of Philosophy with Its History.” A revised version of the second part appears below in “Re-Orientations.” An extended version of this text was first published as part of my “Preface” to Martin Cajthaml’s fine book, *Europe and the Care of the Soul: Jan Patočka’s Conception of the Spiritual Foundations of Europe* (Nordhausen: Traugott Bautz, 2014), pp. xi–xxvi.
- 2 “Lectures on Ancient Philosophy,” Ms 1991/7, p. 115 at the Jan Patočka Archive in Prague <http://www.ajp.cuni.cz/index_e.html>.
- 3 Cf. R. Jakobson, “The Curriculum Vitae of a Czech Philosopher,” *The New Republic*, May 7, 1977, and P. Ricoeur, Preface to J. Patočka, *Essais hérétiques*, tr. E. Abrams (Paris: Verdier, 1999), pp. 7–19.
- 4 Although Paul Ricoeur, Walter Biemel, and Jean Ladrière were among the exceptions, at the time of Patočka’s death few philosophers in Europe or elsewhere had suspected the extent, the suggestiveness, and the inner coherence of Patočka’s work. For example, when not without difficulty I went to Prague in the late Spring of 1978 in hopes of presenting to Patočka’s still grieving family a copy of a Patočka article in English that a colleague and I had translated from the French and then of returning with a samizdat typescript of Patočka’s bibliography, I was at a loss. For despite thorough bibliographical and library research, I had no proper notion of Patočka’s very extensive philosophical work. At the time, almost of all of that work was unpublished. In his extraordinarily extensive life-long philosophical work Patočka succeeded in publishing only one book before his tragic death in the hands of the Czech secret police at the age of 70 in 1977 in the aftermath of the Charter 77 movement. Moreover, I had neither any proper idea of the unifying role that history and philosophy, the Socratic ideal of the care of the soul and Europe’s fateful turns, played in that work. Nor did I know of the potential of that ideal for thinking freshly today about Europe’s most basic ethical values. See Jan Patočka, “The Husserlian Doctrine of Eidetic Intuition and its Present Critics,” tr. P. McCormick and F. Elliston in *Husserl: Expositions and Appraisals*, ed. P. McCormick and F. Elliston (Notre-Dame: University of Notre-Dame Press, 1977), pp. 150–160.
- 5 The most recent biography is the brief one of Martin Cajthaml in *Jan Patočka, Platone e l’Europa*, a cura di G. Reale (Milano: Vita e Pensiero 1997), pp. 255–263. The most recent bibliography, although not entirely up to date, is on the web page of The Jan Patočka Archive at <http://www.ajp.cuni.cz/index_e.html>. See also two relatively recent bibliographies: L. Hagedorn and H.R. Sepp (eds.), *Jan Patočka. Texte, Dokumente, Bibliographie*, München/Prag: Karl Alber/Oikoymenh 1999, p. 523–777; and *Jan Patočka, Platone e l’Europa*, a cura di G. Reale, Milano: Vita e Pensiero 1997, p. 267–338. The standard chronology of his work is also on the web page of The Jan Patočka Archive. Cf. E. Tardivel, *La liberté au principe; Essai sur la philosophie de Patočka* (Paris: Vrin, 2011) and F. Karfik, *Unendlichwerden durch*

die Endlichkeit. Eine Lektüre der Philosophie Jan Patočka (Berlin: Königshausen u. Neumann, 2008).

- 6 “Patočka’s most important contribution... is his account of European spiritual history in terms of the formation, trans-formation, and decadence... of the [Socratic] care of the soul [“truthful human existence”]... the specific perfection of the human soul is not derived from its capacity to know the Good as the ultimate end of human life and to base on this knowledge a vision of a good life, but from the capacity to search for this Good, ceaselessly and endlessly” (Cajthaml 2014, book ms., pp. 82–83).
- 7 For extensive discussion of these issues see P. McCormick, *Restraint’s Rewards: Limited Sovereignties, Ancient Values, and the Preamble for a European Constitution* (Olomouc, Czech Republic: Olomouc UP, 2014).
- 8 On the philosophical significance of such times see for example P. McCormick, *The Negative Sublime: Ethics, Warfare, and the Dark Borders of Reason* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2003), esp. pp. 97–101.
- 9 Cf. B. Saint-Sernin, *Le rationalisme qui vient* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), esp. pp. 197–260.
- 10 Cf. V. Havel, *Living in Truth* (London: Faber, 1990).
- 11 Cf. K. Williams, *The Prague Spring and its Aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics 1968–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997).
- 12 For the development of Patočka’s thinking on these topics, first in the 1930’s in his critique of both Masaryk and Husserl, then in the 1950’s and finally in the 1970’s, see E. Tardivel, “*La crise de l’humanité européenne selon Patočka*,” *Le Phénomène Europe* (Caen: Presses universitaires de Caen, 2010), 131–144.
- 13 These lectures are in The Jan Patočka Archive in Prague.
- 14 Patočka relied heavily on the works of the distinguished Swiss historian of philosophy at Fribourg and Berne, Olof Gigon. See for example his *Der Ursprung der griechischen Philosophie* (Basel: Schwabe, 1945).
- 15 These texts were those established by J. Burnet in his standard work for three generations of scholarship, *Platonis Opera*, Oxford Classical Texts, 5 vols. (Oxford: OUP, 1900–1907. Burnet’s standard edition of Plato’s Greek texts are in the process of being revised. Two volumes of the revised *Platonis Opera* have appeared so far. The first volume from 1995 includes, among other texts, the so-called “Socratic dialogues” that Patočka analysed, and the second volume includes Plato’s *Republic*, Book I of which is particularly important for interpreting Socrates’ own presumed views as opposed to those of Plato. Cf. T. H. Irwin, “The Platonic Corpus,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*, ed. G. Fine (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), pp. 63–87, with bibliography.
- 16 Perhaps we might informally call this kind of inquiry here “friendly philosophical cross-examination.” “Friendly” because unlike the cross-examination most famil-