

Anti-Blurb: On Intended Outcomes

ὅτι μέλλεις τὴν ψυχὴν τὴν σαυτοῦ παρασχεῖν θεραπεῦσαι ἀνδρὶ, ὡς φηῖς, σοφιστῆϊ· ὅτι δέ ποτε ὁ σοφιστὴς ἔστιν, θαυμάζομι· ἂν εἰ οἴσθα. καίτοι εἰ τοῦτ' ἀγνοεῖς, οὐδέ ὅτω παραδίδωξ τὴν ψυχὴν οἴσθα, οὔτ' εἰ ἀγαθῶ οὔτ' εἰ κακῶ πράγματι.

You are going to commit your soul to the care of a man whom you call a Sophist. And yet I hardly think that you know what a Sophist is; and if not, then you do not even know to whom you are committing your soul and whether the thing to which you commit yourself be good or evil. —Plato, *Protagoras*, 312b, Trans., Jowett, 1871.

The people who manage the business of education are called administrators. They are nowadays anxious about "learning outcomes." This means they want to know—and they want *you* to know—before you commence this or that course of study, exactly what it is that you will know* after completing it. Never mind the arrow of time: administrators do not prepare appetizers, soups, or main intellectual meals; nor do they care for desserts; their eyes and concerns will focus only on menus, the weather, and bills.** That's well and good; it's their job, after all. However, let it be said that if you, the student, cannot discern from the objectives, texts and topics noted on the course syllabus what sort of understanding you can expect to extract from this class, then you are unlikely to notice much in the way of learning outcomes—intended, serendipitous, or otherwise—in any case. *Caveat emptor*.



About Philosophical Writing

Wie alles Metaphysische ist die Harmonie zwischen Gedanken und Wirklichkeit in der Grammatik der Sprache aufzufinden.

Like everything metaphysical the harmony between thought and reality is to be found in the grammar of the language. — Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, 55, Trans., Anscomb, 1967.

Academic styles and their textual apparatus are certainly more like dialects than religious sects, so it is curious to consider how often style sheets are advocated in cadences of orthodoxy. Yet, this being the case, prudence, if not curiosity, would recommend familiarity with several styles. Most philosophical journals are rigorous in their attention to style. Sometimes this sort of rigor is rewarding: where a sense of style contributes to the invention or maturation of an idea, principle, hypothesis, and so on. More often than not, however, style sheets are oppressive documents; they are rarely transgressed with impunity. In this course, Laius declines the oracular gambit. But styles are, after all, very much like dialects; just to speak is to adopt one, or even several at once. In the latter case, one should, if at all possible, avoid sounding like a mindless polyglot; when fusing two or more styles, the effort should serve a point of substance.

*There are two flavors of academic knowledge: knowing-that and knowing-how. What remains can only be savored directly; in the lab, in the field, in the heat of analysis and discovery; it is what the French call *savoir*, and it cannot be taught. *Bon Appetit*.

**If we asked cooks to forecast *culinary outcomes* on their menus, they would say things like, "Diners will feel full; they will say so, and pay their bills." Why should we expect to hear anything less nonsensical when we ask instructors to state *learning outcomes* on their syllabi?