

KIT AND THE PHILOSOPHER

An Introduction to Philosophy
in One Act

by

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CAST

BREN 30
KURT early 60s
KIT going on 22

Note: This play is based on Act One Scene 7 of the full-length work, *INCOMPLETENESS, AND THE REST*. The scene has been much expanded, and altered to reshape it into a stand-alone play in one act.

To the CASTING DIRECTOR:

BREN We eventually learn that behind the initial relaxed, even playful, mode, lies an intellect that is ultra-rare. Experience has proven that projecting such intelligence convincingly is difficult; moreover, the actor needs a persona that allows him to do it without alienating us.

KURT Perhaps a hint of German accent. KURT has an unfeigned continental poise and courtesy. His smoothness, even temperament, and politesse must not indicate he is in any way a mere lightweight of inherited wealth. Beneath, he is solid, reliable, complex, and without self-delusion.

KIT Kurt's daughter. She is edgy, quick, attractive, of computer-whiz intelligence, with an air of self-assurance and a hostility to this intruder she considers excessively admired by her parents.

SET AND SETTING

Time: recently.

One set: A studio-apartment built onto the beach-side of a large home on the shore in Stamford, Connecticut. Whatever trappings of such a one-room apartment are available would be welcome (e.g. bookshelves), but the only required elements are these: a coffee table and three chairs; a fruit bowl that includes an apple and an orange (which will not be eaten); two cognac bottles; three snifters; two cigars (which need not be smoked); an ashtray; a stack of three or four books; and a pad of paper and a pencil. A pair of opaquely dark eyeglasses.

SCRIPT NOTE

Deciding a pre-production script-style for silent readers and the company simultaneously can be problematic. Many of the stage directions, word-stresses, and three-dot pauses are primarily for lay-readers, designed to convey attitudinal postures and expressions, emphases, potential pacing, and other clues their inner eye and ear may not easily contribute. They are intended to convey what I saw and heard as I wrote, so perhaps they may be helpful in discerning authorial intent, but they are not an attempt to micro-manage the director or the actors. I write this preemptive note for those hands-on theater-professionals who much prefer not to be treated as other than exactly that – creative professionals who know their art.

Every script writer's work, when performed, is essentially dependent on the actors. The best actors will bring to the performance a desirable effect that no dialog-writer can unilaterally produce, regardless of how able he is. Restated: Truly memorable theater moments are always more to be credited to actors than to playwrights. I don't make this confession to pander to actors; because the opposite is also true: even the simplest-seeming dialog (and complex dialog even more so), though it be ever so good, can be ground from gleaming opal to drabby sand by an inadequate actor. But this is a defense wielded far less by worthy writers than by ungifted scribblers who will never concede their insufficiencies. Alack.

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KIT AND THE PHILOSOPHER

An Introduction to Philosophy

in One Act

[Nighttime. BREN sits alone, holding a cognac snifter and an unlit cigar. On the coffee table are an empty snifter and bottle, an ashtray with a second cigar, a small bowl of fruit, pencil and paper, a small stack of books. Enter KURT, opening fresh bottle.]

KURT

It's good to relax completely like this from time to time. It's a rarity for you, I think?

BREN

I was this "relaxed" once in college. I remember I was convinced everything I said was hilarious. It was a grim night for everyone around me.

KURT

Brendan, quickly: I've just taken the liberty of asking Kit to join us.

BREN

Kit?

KURT

I know yesterday you saw Kit's tongue has its edges. But you might enjoy a more relaxed hour with her. She's quite quick on the uptake.

BREN

And on the take-down? Does Kit ever relax? Is this a good idea, Kurt?

KURT

I think yes. I'm convinced a bit more time with you would be...healthy for her. Intellectually. She's encountered very few men -- few people -- who can hold their own with her. She might deny it's ever happened.

BREN

You do know Kit comes across as relentlessly judgmental? And I haven't had the impression she suffers me gladly.

KURT

Kit doesn't suffer anyone gladly. It's kept her experience narrow. And her opinion of others a touch cynical. Exposure to a mind like yours can only be good for her.

BREN

If I know Kit at all -- and myself at all -- it may be exactly the wrong kind of encounter for her.

KURT

I am unworried. I'm sure she won't end up with her usual complaints tonight...Elga says you go for a jog three or four times a week. Do you think about philosophy when you run?

BREN

I do, Kurt, but not voluntarily. So it's not my fault.

[Enter KIT, in opaquely dark glasses. Sits.]

KIT

Here as commanded by my optimistic father.

KURT

Kit! Where'd you find those glasses! It's nighttime.

KIT

They're comforting.

KURT

They're terrible, Kit.

KIT

They block unwanted brilliance.... Oh, all right.

[KIT removes the glasses, places them on the coffee table.]

BREN

That's good. Shades that opaque say to me, "Keep your assigned distance, Unworthy One."

KIT

My, my. How touchy!

KURT

Elga's off with the mayor and his gang to rezone our unfair city, and I told Kit she had to join me for a while with our learned guest.

KIT

Oh lovely -- cigars.

KURT

I've been angling to get Professor Francis to tell us why he's leaving academic philosophy. Given his stature.

KIT

Why do you care? Philosophy's not your thing.

KURT

I have reasons. You try. Maybe you have a better angle.

KIT

Angling's not my style. Direct question: Why'd you quit philosophy?

BREN

What do you have against indirect questions?

KIT

...Why'd you quit philosophy?

BREN

Because I am a serious man. Not for me the anything-for-a-laugh attitude of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Immanuel Kant.

KIT

Kurt, I fear our "serious man" is a comedian.

BREN

Is there any philosopher you like?

KIT

George Clooney. I'd have zero interest in what academic philosophers are saying these days.

BREN

That seems harsh. Some of them are writing about how we think and talk, and constantly get used by language. No interest in that?

KIT

The only living philosopher I can name is whatzisname, and from the little bit I've heard about him, he wouldn't hold my interest for two minutes.

BREN

How do you know if you don't look, Kit? Finding out what interests you: Could be as revolutionary as puberty.

KURT

You can name another philosopher, Kit. And he's becoming quite famous in that arena.

KIT

Yes but is he living? I wasn't sure. Are you living?

BREN

I'm living. Your only hope is that I'm no longer a class-room philosopher.

KURT

A fair cognac, this. Evocative, I hope.

[KURT adds to Bren's snifter.]

BREN

(Irish accent:)

Oah that's too much thank God.

KIT

Is he drunk?

BREN

No. It's the philosophy. Makes me sound strange, say weird things. I should admit, my philosophy-talk can be soothing. Do it long enough, puts people to sleep.

KIT

So you never talk it anymore.

BREN

No more, but in my day I've been sought-after for it. By battlefield-medics for example. "You, Francis! Talk your philosophy to this poor lad! We have to operate and we've run out of morphine!"

[KURT laughs; KIT stays reserved.]

KIT

He's not going to give you a straight answer. To your question.

KURT

Seriously, Brendan, I'd like to understand. All right, I'll come clean. Now Cambridge knows you're back in America and your hideaway is our studio, they're telling your pursuers. People from Stanford, Princeton and Brown have called. And a Professor Rado at Harvard who says they've offered you an endowed chair in philosophy, and you won't even discuss it.

BREN

I did that for twelve years. Studied it, then taught it. That taught me I'm wrong for the philosophy...arena.

KURT

You don't mean it's too difficult?

BREN

I mean I've been too belligerent. Reveling in the fight.

KIT

If you want an example of the Professor's elegant butchery, I can quote him. He's all over the web. Here's what he wrote to a victim in Paris: "People say either you plagiarize your thinking from an utter fool, or you're stone-stupid all on your own. In your defense, I tell everyone it's wrong and unkind to say you plagiarize."

KURT

You memorized it?

KIT

I thought the wording might come in handy some day. It reminds me of something I once said to a graduate-instructor whose idea of irresistible was to stuff my mail-box with suggestive limericks. I told him, "I'm trying to decide if you're colorful-stupid, or just plain stupid." I have to admit your Parisian was an anti-American dick who deserved it.

BREN

It seemed apt at the time. Less so now.

KIT

Did you fight with fellow faculty members in England? That must have made for daily fun.

BREN

No, my Cambridge colleagues were decent people. There are many sweet-tempered philosophers; I wasn't one. I'll finish this thing I'm writing, because I promised it -- and then...then comes then.

KURT

The people in Cambridge will be disappointed. Both Cambridges.

BREN

I regret that, I do. But it's over for me.

KURT

Rado said you have a rare philosophical mind. "Unfettered", he called it. About to shake towers ivory and Ivy.

BREN

Rado's a kind man. What he calls "unfettered", some Europeans call "unhinged".

KURT

Not many of them. Brendan, I make a dozen calls abroad every day. By now Elga and I have a fair picture of your reputation. She hears there's a colloquium in Warsaw this very month, just on your unfinished notes.

BREN

I hope they send comments. Any help to speed me through this paper, I'll take.

KIT

Yesterday you said you wanted to be a writer when you were in high school. A storyteller. So why not major in English?

BREN

I read Shakespeare. Austen. Dickens. Joyce. Fitzgerald... Mailer Roth Bellow Saunders.

KIT

We all read them.

BREN

Did you ask yourself if you could do what they could do?

KIT

That is so useless, that question. So, no, I never did ask it.

BREN

I did.

KIT

...You going to light that thing or what?

BREN

If I lit it, soon I wouldn't have it any more.

KIT

I wonder: Has poor baby had a trauma that's left him unable to be serious?

BREN

May be! I've often labored with solemn grit to get something toward right, only to have people say, "You can't be serious!?" ...I majored in philosophy because I wanted to go to college but I was broke, and it was the philosophers who gave me a scholarship.

KURT

They came to you in high school? How did they hear of you?

BREN

Blame my high school English teachers. They -- and their textbooks -- said the thing to hunt for in fiction, the thing that made it worthwhile, was "the meaning of" the story. 'Man needs his illusions. Jealousy is bad. You can't recover the past, you can't escape the past' --

KIT

-- So? All true, no? Well, mostly true.

BREN

Back then I called it mostly worthless. Read fiction for its non-fiction platitudes? The same hackneyed homilies you could also claim to find in a million awful stories?! There went any recommending letters from my English department. Even worse, their method tells kids that stories have a "the meaning of". They don't.

KIT

Stories are meaningless?!

BREN

...It's complicated.

KIT

You said all stories are meaningless??!!

BREN

I said no story has a "THE meaning of". Teachers who assert "The meaning of 'The Great Gatsby' is such and such" are befuddled. Another reason my elders judged I was unsuited for college English. And for diplomacy!

KIT

...So how did high school whoopee like that get you a scholarship in philosophy?

BREN

That. And Lewis Carroll. And fifty logic and language books I found in the local library where I hung out. In my steam about the high-school teaching, I wrote an essay: "'Meaning', and the Myth of 'Understanding'". It was so untamed the philosophers at Princeton invited me to come on down.

KURT

You enjoyed it there?

BREN

I liked the questions. I came to hate the way I handled them.

KURT

I'm not sure I follow.

KIT

Kurt, I just quoted his warm-hearted style.

KURT

I don't know what the Parisian said. It's hard for me to imagine Brendan being uncivil in a reasonable exchange.

BREN

You're a publisher, Kurt -- of narratives. So you'll get it if I say explaining why I quit would call for a "show-don't-tell" answer.

KIT

What? No. Give us the "tell" answer. Tell us why you're banishing yourself.

BREN

All right I'll rephrase it: To me, philosophy was like terrific cognac. Nothing better. But I turned out to be a savage drunk. So now I'm on the wagon.

KIT

There it is, Kurt. He's in recovery. From thinking. What happened -- annoyed colleagues arranged an intervention?

KURT

I was impressed by how much Rado was impressed.

KIT

I know ONLY TOO WELL! how much you and Elga are impressed by Bren! I have to say this, Kurt: It's more than a little irritating that you both assume his mind has so much new to bring to my mind.

KURT

I merely thought, maybe a new experience...

KIT

It won't be a new experience, I've met his type before.

KURT

Maybe not, Kit. Not this time. ...Brendan has been writing -- an "Incompleteness Theorem for Language" is it? Rado says those who've read excerpts report it's left them feeling...unmoored. They're all convinced Brendan as a philosopher is a sure thing.

KIT

Really. I never met a "sure thing" before. Are you a "sure thing"?

BREN

At what? Seeing the world as we stipulate it? Or as it is.

KIT

Uh-oh. Careful, Kurt -- you'll have a philosopher full of cognac explaining "the world as it is". At which point even I'll want to be smoking something.

BREN

I recognize that tone! You remind me of me! Oh. Nasty thing to say. Sorry.

KIT

...So let's hear some philosophy-talk. From the "sure thing".

BREN

While you poise like a lizard with a long, long tongue to flash out and bag the bug.

KIT

Well, now, if that bugs the philosopher...

[KIT flicks her tongue out and back.]

BREN

No, I'm used to it. Been there many times.

KIT

Not with me you haven't.

BREN

...Maybe I have. Kurt, your daughter requires a sample of my philosophy-talk. Is it all right with you if I...

KURT

Perfectly.

BREN

Okay. Been a while. Let's see -- what can I teach you? In philosophy.

KIT

Professor, know this: I'm not intimidated by -- or even interested in -- scholarly reputation. MANY PAPERS! Each one an armful. But to pick up their ideas you need a tweezer. Judging from what I've heard till now, maybe I can teach you things. Why don't you try to tell us your Theorem?

BREN

No, that'd be... No.

KIT

You think it'd be too hard for us. For our handicapped heads.

BREN

Kit, many good citizens simply find it soporifically academic. In England some horny tutors are using it as a date-rape drug. It's simply not for...certain minds.

KIT

You wanted to say "average" minds, didn't you! Do I sense evasiveness in our professor? I wonder if he even has anything to "show".

BREN

I may. But given the way you are, I'd guess you're not right for philosophy.

KIT

No argument there! You can keep philosophy. It's wrong for me.

BREN

Only while you're wrong for it. In a mind that's right for it, it can be engaging, energizing, and fortifying for almost every other job we ask our brains to do....I know: I should teach you about text and tone.

KIT

What's that supposed to mean? No! Tell us your Theorem!

BREN

....Maybe I can do both. I'll talk a few theorem-bits-and-pieces: words, names, meanings. I'll try to keep it seemingly simple.

KIT

You won't have to do that, Professor. I'm strong on languages. My whole family is. You speak seven, don't you, Kurt.

KURT

Five is more like it. Your mother is the linguist.

BREN

This isn't about languages, plural. It's about language. Singular. Verbal communication.

KIT

I majored in communications! And I graduated summa, of which they're were only three in my class of fifteen hundred. I think I'm sufficiently familiar with "language singular".

BREN

That's what most people think.

KIT

Said he, insinuating most people are wrong. You're about to learn that I am not most people.

BREN

...Most people would say you're right about that... Some of my best, memorable, hours have been when I've gone into a topic believing I knew just about everything, and come out realizing I'd known just about nothing. You enjoy that sort of thing?

KIT

Can't tell. Never had that experience.

KURT

That's part of why I thought it might be good for you to get to know Brendan better. See another gifted brain at work.

KIT

Oh joy. Yet another candidate. Professor! You going to bring something new into my mind?

BREN

I haven't said that. I can believe I'll get nothing into your mind.

KIT

Implying what? That my mind is too feeble?

BREN

Too closed. Your tone conveys you don't want to hear anything new from me.

KIT

...Are you ready to say why you're leaving philosophy or not?

BREN

Is the heckler ready for the "show" answer?

KIT

Si. Montrez-moi. Muéstrame. Zeig Mal. See can your "cognac" get me drunk.

BREN

I'm half-way home: You're already belligerent.

KIT

...Pour.

[BREN sizes-up KIT; his gaze sharpens. KURT smiles; this could be the encounter he hoped for. BREN will rise, stroll, display the command and even theatricality of a confirmed academic star. No hint of drink:]

BREN

All right: Language, and why we've had conversations all our lives, and not once known what was going on as we talked -- and listened.

KIT

"We"? Speak for yourself, Professor.

BREN

I won't be doing that, Kit. All this will apply to both of us.

KIT

Not possible: You don't know the least thing about me.

BREN

The least thing? Maybe I do know that. You say you're ready.

KIT

I'm more than ready. I'm ready in ways you can't imagine.

BREN

Coolish! Then this'll be easy for you.

KIT

But maybe not for you!

BREN

...Back in the eighteen-nineties, over a good claret at a Cambridge High Table, one philosopher said to another,
(*a touch of high Brit:*)

"I see there's a German chap has his leather knickers in a twist over the way words work. Yes, he's only a muddled Hun, but the Queen's English is shockingly untidy. Full of rubbish like vagueness, irony, double-meanings. Buggers up understanding one another. I suppose it's up to us to put it right -- "

KIT

-- Pull over. Is this going to be your canned performance for freshmen? Verbatim?

KURT

Kit, Brendan was teaching faculty seminars.

BREN

Won't be verbatim. I keep trying it in different ways, still groping for the most effective.

KIT

Can't find the best words, Professor? After years of trying?

BREN

Can't find the best sounds.

During the next century of "putting it right", philosophers tried to create new realms of abstractions that would get rid of the ambiguities in language. And bridge the gaps in human understanding. But along the way many of them made basic errors -- like assuming words, and names, and *Hamlet* "have meanings". Problem: Such things neither "mean" nor "have".

KIT

Did you just say words don't have meanings? We must lend you a nice little book we have. It's called a 'dictionary'.

BREN

I've seen those. As a kid I even read a nice little one, all the way through. Didn't find a single meaning. All I found were dictionary definitions --

KIT

-- Only definitions! Scandalous! Kurt, would you help the Professor write this down?: A definition IS A MEANING!

BREN

No. A dictionary-definition is only this: The result of a lexicographer's attempt to write something such that reading it will cause certain notions to rise in the reader's mind -- notions that are commonly, roughly, like what's in minds of people familiar with the word.

KIT

...? And how could that possibly happen if words don't have meanings?

BREN

How? When you hear any familiar sound -- a siren, a growl in the dark, a familiar voice, a word-sound -- this pullulating lump of links retrieves unruly associations connected in your mind with the sound --

KIT

-- Associations?

BREN

If there are any. Let's learn some Swedish.

[BREN picks up an apple, displays it.]

BREN (CONT'D)

Apelsin! [AH-pell-see-in] Apelsin! Apelsin! An hour from now, if I say "apelsin", you'll connect the sound with the apple-image you just stored in your head. You'd say you've learned "the meaning of" a Swedish word. That's typical of early language-learning. Say "Milk!" to a girl every time you give her a glass of the white stuff, and she'll soon recall the white stuff whenever she hears "Milk".

KIT

That's your profound Theorem? That made the Brits go weak in the knees? I'm not being "belligerent" when I say that is EMBARRASSINGLY OBVIOUS!

BREN

Good. You agree. What's less obvious is this: your agreement implies you'd describe "learning a word" by citing only a sound and notions your memory links with it. No alleged mind-independent "real meanings" are required -- to explain what goes on when we learn to talk.

KIT

...? I have memories I connect with "milk". And you say that shows the word has no meaning. But exactly what I'm connecting IS ITS MEANING! Kurt, your "Brendan" is ready for Comedy Central.

KURT

Why not wait to see where he's going with it, Kit?

KIT

"Where"? Your big guru of "communication" is saying not only stories but words are meaningless! Where can he go with that?

BREN

I'm claiming the idea that words have, possess, somehow enclose, intrinsic "meanings" is an illusion -- a flat out mistake. I'm not the first guy to claim that, but those others --

(shakes his head in mock disdain)

-- they were crackpots --

KIT

-- "They" were crackpots!?

BREN

I wrote an article, "The Amazing Act of 'Having'". Said "having" isn't just an invisible event, it's imaginary, a verbal dodge, an alias. "Having" never happens. I sent it to the Reader's Digest, but they claim they don't have it.

KIT

...? Kurt, we need a little reality check here. To test if your "Brendan" is even rational. Here's a sound problem. It's an old one, but let's see you have at it.

(MORE)

KIT (CONT'D)

"If a tree falls in the forest and there's no one around to hear it, does it make a sound?"

BREN

Ah. The "sound waves" puzzle. Does that knotty problem baffle you, Kit?

KIT

Would I test you with a problem I can't solve myself? Just untie it.

BREN

You're citing two separate events. One is a physical event in the world outside your skull -- vibrations in the physical air. The other is a mental event - the aural sensations, the hearing that occurs inside the skull. Can you accept that distinction, Kit?

KIT

Yes, I can accept that distinction, thank you. Can you accept speeding up a notch?

BREN

Call the vibrating air "noise", and only the aural sensation "sound". There's certainly "noise" when the tree falls, but no "sound" -- if there aren't any ears around to hear. When you call noise waves "sound waves", you're calling two different things the same, and confusion is sure to follow. Does that untie your naughty test, Kit?

KIT

...I said it was a old one.

BREN

Remember that distinction, we'll use it again: between what we can think of as notional entities like sounds, and non-notional "real world" entities, like noise. The "real", physical, iron structure we call the Eiffel Tower is in Paris; our various fuzzy notions of the Tower are in our various fuzzy heads.

KIT

I don't think about such useless -- and obvious -- things.

BREN

You're doing it right now.

KIT

What I'm doing right now is fearing you are seriously going to try to tell me there is no Santa Claus.

BREN

Oh there "is", but only mentally. A cluster of associated notions that differs from mind to mind. Think of it as the sound's quirky personal scrapbook in your mind. You can bet your father's Santa-scrapbook is different from yours.

KIT

Keep digging, Professor. About six feet of that nonsense should be enough for my purposes.

BREN

Now a confession. I tricked you: When you say "Apelsin!" to most Swedes, the image that comes to their minds is not of an apple --

(holds up an orange)

-- it's the image of an orange! I misled -- not about imaginary entities called "meanings", only about the conditioned workings of most Swedish minds.

KIT

Our Professor?! Misled us?!

BREN

Damn. I'm like those other guys after all. You've been misled about this all your life. You've been told you learn "meanings". You don't. --

KIT

-- You mean you don't.

BREN

You've been told a definition is a "statement of a meaning". It isn't. Wittgenstein famously said "the meaning of a word" is "its use" by the people in a given language-community. This suggests that when all those people utter or hear a spoken sound, they all conjure the same notion in their minds. They can't. Their notions are as dissimilar as their varying brains and experiences.

KIT

You believe this stuff.

BREN

I believe this stuff.

KIT

But it's so blinkered! You've never noticed how much we understand one another when we talk?

BREN

Oh, our talk-sounds usually work well enough -- in the kitchen, on a ball field or a battlefield --

KIT

-- What else is there?!

BREN

...Now, that's an interesting world-view... They work well enough because our minds all associate simple sounds like Milk! Run! Shoot! with similar sensations --

KIT

-- Professor, is it possible that no one has told you?? IT'S NOW GENERATIONS since they shot down the idea that learning a language is only a matter of memory!

BREN

It's not only a matter of memory --

KIT

-- No it isn't, is it.

BREN

Start by noticing how close all our experiences are when we first hear that kitchen sound "milk" --

KIT

-- But we're not in a kitchen right now --

BREN

-- No, we're on a battlefield --

KIT

-- And I'm saying listen to us! We're using words a lot more complicated than 'milk' and we're understanding each other!

BREN

We are? 'Life', 'oppression', 'freedom', 'causation', 'meaning', 'same' -- Ess, Ay, Em, Eee. When we hear those sounds from religion, politics, philosophy, we all conjure notions --

KIT

-- Yes we do, don't we! Marvelous how words do work!

BREN

-- but our notions are unspecific, unstable, and, most important, unlike. Different from one mind to another. Wittgenstein went wrong because he inferred too much from kitchen-simple sounds, preferably one syllable. This led him to believe there are generic notions --

KIT

-- Wait. In your meek and modest way, you claim Wittgenstein, the philosopher of the century -- was wrong and you are right?

BREN

He and I have both been wrong in our fashions, but yes, on this I'm right, and he was wrong. He also talked his whole life and never got what was going on as he did it.

KIT

How humble you are! And here I've been thinking you were the most arrogant and pretentious man in the West!

BREN

Only in the West? ...There is no uniform "use of" philosophy's sounds -- in any community. Did you know before Rorschach used ink-blot tests for his test, he tried sounds? "I asked what comes to my mind when I say 'Art'. 'ART!' Zome said Garfunkel, zome said Picasso, zome said a Hail Mary."

KIT

Professor, your fishing-for-giggles doesn't work on me. Rorschach died before Garfunkel was even born. You were going to prove your cockamamie thesis that meanings don't exist.

BREN

Close enough. No "the meanings of". No fixed "semantic values". Only "me-meanings". Your mind's personal scrapbooks.

KIT

"Me-meanings." "Scrapbooks".

BREN

You know what they are --

KIT

-- Nobody knows what they are!

BREN

I'll show you you know. Suppose I say "hypostatize" to you. What notions rise?

KIT

..."Hypostatize"? Everyone knows that. It's a kinky sex position from the Kama Sutra. You made the word up. To me, it's meaningless.

BREN

Right. 'It's "meaningless" to you.' Which you say because the sound "hypostatize" connects with nothing in your mind.

KIT

But 'hot' and 'milk' do connect! So do 'justice', 'beauty', 'art'. You trying to tell me they're meaningless?

BREN

You wouldn't call them meaningless! Because if anything comes to your mind when you hear them, you'd say: "There! Those are obviously the meanings for me!"...See? You did know what I had in mind with "me-meanings". Smart head.

KIT

...So they're meanings!

BREN

But me-meanings are your own particular brain's current notions, not the sounds' alleged "real meanings".

KIT

I know I seem impatient, but, see, I figured we were in for exactly this kind of meaningless hair-splitting. It's what makes philosophers seem so ludicrous to me.

BREN

If I prove there are no mind-independent "real" meanings, only me-meanings -- diverse, idiosyncratic association-scrapbooks in individual heads, will that be meaningless?

KIT

To me it will. Like -- not to be belligerent -- everything else you've said so far.

BREN

I'll try to show this isn't always useless hair-splitting --

KIT

-- Cope with this absurdity: What you're saying implies no doo-doo-for-brains can be wrong about the meaning of a word. Or even about whether or not something is a word!

BREN

So it does! I love that kind of absurdity: the kind that's true. Doo-doo gets called "wrong" only by someone wielding a stipulated rule, his fiat. "Here's how we'll judge a sound: If it's in the dictionary it IS a word!"

KIT

Sounds like a good test to me.

BREN

But that "rule" is also solely in the judge's mind, a test he's concocted because he likes it, and it's convenient. Like choosing which dictionary will decide Scrabble arguments. It's in character that he thinks he's cited a "real-world fact-of-the-matter".

KIT

Sorry, there's no resisting this: "YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS!" Among other things, you're saying if Doo-doo confuses the real meanings of 'uninterested' and 'disinterested', that's okay by you: It'd be arbitrary and bestial to use a dictionary to show him he's wrong.

BREN

Doo-doo can't possibly confuse "their real meanings".... You -- and some philosophers -- are like children who believe in tree-spirits. In effect, you think inside every "word" dwells a "meaning" imp. In this stack of books, you assume there are half a million inkyimps, each at work twenty-four-seven, pounding away at their "correct", specific, assignments of "signifying", "designating", "denoting", "picking out". Wonder the table don't collapse under all that truckin'.

KIT

Now you're trying too hard.

BREN

That's a weakness of mine.

KIT

I mean I'm not a Doo-doo you can blind with special terms.

BREN

I don't want to. Those imps are as mythical as angels. All those terms for what your talk-sounds are allegedly doing? I want you to see the terms for what they are: Aliases. Facade words as familiar -- and as misleading -- as the storefronts on the set of a Hollywood western.

KIT

Well, I certainly agree there's a person here who's misled.

BREN

Keep up that thoughtful tone. We'll need it.

I'll recast my point, because this is crucial -- and hard to reel in. I can only offer it. It's up to you to take it on board. If you find it too difficult, let it go. I wouldn't want you pulled into the ocean.

KIT

Do you hear how disdainful you sound? How superior?

BREN

I do, yes. That's deliberate tonight. Kind of you to notice.

KIT

...All right, let's hear your "crucial" hard-to-grasp offering.

BREN

Whole books have been focused on the question, "How do words mean?" But word-sounds don't "mean", ever -- in the way most people assume --

KIT

-- Ah. "Most people" again.

BREN

They believe word-sounds and scribbles are able to do things, perform actions. How? A scribble, a printed word-sound, is as inert, as passive, as a rock. Yes, a geologist might say the rock's makeup "means" things. He'd almost be ready to say the rock is talking to him. Why not? The sound 'geology' is derived from the Greek for "earth-speech". But rocks don't speak. They do nothing. They are inert. It's the geologist's mind that's at work -- inferring. Same with a word.

(MORE)

BREN (CONT'D)

Except: a word-sound's scrapbook in your mind has more pits, crannies, and crevices than any rock. Cavities where not minerals but memories lodge.

KIT

Oh, God -- sounds like a profundity. You know why most profundities echo? Because they're hollow.

BREN

Good one, Kit. Some philosophers who want to sound profound use generalities just obscure enough to allow anyone to interpret their lines as they will. So let's live dangerously. Let's write specifics on a piece of paper.

[BREN writes on a pad.]

BREN (CONT'D)

'Meryl Streep'... And 'hypostatize'! Some people believe --

KIT

-- Professor: I am also not "some people".

BREN

That's good. Because those people believe the reason words and names are able to do specific things is because of the "meanings" and "referents" and stuff they "have". They assume the alleged "meanings" mean things, indicate, point at things. And that's why we "understand" one another. But that's wrong.

KIT

-- This is your "philosophy-talk". England must be one mixed-up country if their best thinkers take it seriously. If I read a word, and an idea, a meaning, comes to my mind, it's obvious the word is causing that meaning.

BREN

No, it's not. The word-sound isn't causing anything. Your brain is. Kit, right there you confuse what I'll call a cause with an occasion.

KIT

"Occasion"? Words aren't causes -- they're only "occasions"?!

BREN

Like what clerics have in mind when they tell you to avoid "occasions of sin". Clerics tend to be against teenage boys' keeping Hustler Magazine in the bathroom. Diet savants tell us keeping quarts of ice cream in the frig is a no-no. If you break your toe on a rock, you might say the rock broke your toe. Even though the inert rock was innocent. IT DID nothing. It's only the occasion for YOUR doing something. Sidebar tip: People only confuse themselves more if they call something a "cause" when it doesn't move, doesn't act.

KIT

Wait. That's loony. That's saying ice cream doesn't make us fat; eating it does.

BREN

Not quite. True: If we don't consume it, it has no effect on us. But once we do consume it, the big difference is, ice cream has inherent ingredients. Word-sounds don't. Are you confused yet?

KIT

...Oh no no no! How could anyone be confused when you talk?!

BREN

Well, it helps to arrive in the room confused.

[A new wariness makes KIT just stare silently.]

BREN (CONT'D)

...When you read, there is action going on. You want to say it's the "word" that's doing things. Via the meaning it "has".

KIT

-- You "smart head", you! How'd you know I want to say that!

BREN

-- when in fact all the action is by your brain.

KIT

Yes! It's recalling the words' meanings!

BREN

No! It's recalling memories connected with those sounds and inky shapes. And a smattering of grammar and syntax. Your brain then pieces together notions you've never had before.

KIT

Like the marvy new notions you're kindly donating right now.

BREN

No, I'd guess my donations are blocked just inside your eardrums by a barricade of delusions, facades, aliases, and personal antipathy.

KIT

...This is totally nuts! "Meryl Streep" is a name! It's doing something! It names someone! It does denote!

BREN

You mean this man here?

KIT

...?! Nooo. Not Kuuurt. The actress, the famous actress!

BREN

How can you tell?

KIT

..."How can I tell?" Is that a trick question?

BREN

Suppose I take this piece of paper with 'Meryl Streep' written on it and show it to a shepherd in the Andes, or a farmer in western China, and I ask, "This name -- whom does it refer to, designate?"

KIT

Can they read?

BREN

They can read. They pronounce out loud what's on the paper. "Meryl Streep!" And they still draw a blank.

KIT

That's because we aren't born knowing what every word or name means! Those people never heard of Meryl Streep, they've never learned anything about her!

BREN

Why would they have to have learned anything? About a name OR a word! Answer that! If the word itself does the meaning, signifying, designating, picking out, why would memories, already-connected notions, be needed?

.....What's the sound going to pick-out from if not your memory -- Plato's Big Book of "real meanings"? ...When I say "milk", "designate", "republican", "muslim", or even "Meryl Streep!" -- what arise in your mind are solely scraps of memory linked to the sounds in your past and now retrieved and mosaicked by your racy brain. ...Sometimes you teach more by teaching less. I think I'll back off now, and let you think about it.

KIT

No, you don't do that to me. I've seen Meryl Streep. I know the person that 'Meryl Streep' -- the name -- is referring to.

BREN

Okay, let's see if I'm getting your idea straight. You believe the ink on this paper is actively doing something. In its own way, the ink is creating a "real-world" action as mind-independent as a laser beam, yes? It's "referring to" the famous actress. And the referring activity is not just a notional imagining in your head. So if I destroy this paper and don't say that name out loud, the "referring to someone" has stopped -- at least in this room. Is that how it works?

KIT

Referring and meaning are real actions. You don't make them unreal by cartooning them. They're not laser beams.

[KIT stands.]

KIT (CONT'D)

Professor, If you don't know -- if it isn't obvious to you --

BREN

-- Every time I hear that sound "obvious", I start to worry.

KIT

...If it isn't obvious to you what 'referring' and 'meaning' mean, I'd say you're right to leave philosophy. You've been in the wrong line of work! If you don't have something less jokey, something more substantial to say about your pop theorem, I'm asking my father for permission TO LEAVE NOW!

BREN

The theorem is unlikely ever to be pop. It's unlovable. Who wants to be told they haven't known what they've been doing all their lives? Besides, it implies language is far more disorderly than you'd like it to be. Maybe poets wouldn't mind, though. Because they count on the downtowns and outposts of memory, not non-existent "meanings".

I'll get more substantial. You might want to sit for this.

KIT

I might want to stand. For a quicker get away.

BREN

Look at the writings of all the leonine philosophers of language. What they've had to account for is this deluding observation: When a speaker has an idea or image in his head, if he speaks and phrases things right, a similar notion -- never identical but roughly similar -- will arise in the listener's head across the room. "Please pass the salt" works! How? An outside-the-skull transmission of a notion from inside his skull to inside the listener's skull? The "transmission" part is easy: When he speaks there's a noise, and that goes across the room. The listener processes the noise into a sound - a sound usually very like what was in the speaker's head.

But here's the nub --the kernel and the general: You can send a noise, but not a notion. Heard sounds are not notions. No man, noise or scribble can ever assuredly "deliver a message".

KIT

But you think you're delivering a message now, don't you.

BREN

I sure don't. And not only because you choose not to listen. I was wrong to say I'd keep this simple. This is hard. Teaching philosophy's abstractions can be like shoveling sand with a pitchfork.

When you want to connect -- in someone's memory -- a sound with a fruit or a face, you have something you can hold up, point at.

(MORE)

BREN (CONT'D)

What do you usually display when you're trying to convey "the meaning of" one of those abstraction-sounds? Another abstraction-sound!

KIT

What you're saying isn't "hard". It's thick!

BREN

...In his thick, muddled way, the speaker figures the salt gets passed to him because he has landed what he calls "words" in a listener's mind, and "words" intrinsically "have meanings" that get released in a hearing or reading mind. But all I or any speaker can ever hope to land is sounds -- or scribbles, or the image of a gesture. What follows the sound in that hearing mind of yours depends not on a mythical "meaning" the sound "has", but on your willy-nilly scrapbook of associations with that sound, and on your retrieval apparatus, and on your reconfiguring brain. Try asking for "salt" in Tibet.

The speaker has no reason for his "meaning" beliefs beyond his thinking he needs them to explain "communication". Need is the mother of delusion. You're not going to sit?

KIT

I should sit to make you comfortable?

BREN

I was actually thinking of your comfort... If the speaker is lucky, the notions his sounds occasion will be roughly like his own notions. As usually happens with "salt". In America. But far less often with abstractions. Anywhere.

KIT

Are you finished?

BREN

No. Now comes the fun. Here I get mortally exquisite: Each person's notions are always indeterminate, indefinite, multiplex, and transitory. All of them. Picture Abraham Lincoln. In your image, how many hairs in his right eyebrow? It's indeterminate.

KIT

"Lincoln's right eyebrow"!?

BREN

Okay, a better example: picture an ocean wave. How many notional drops of water are in that notional wave? It's indeterminate. How long is it? It's indefinite. And its many-parts makeup is unstable, constantly morphing like a writhing cloud.

KIT

Maybe for you! Maybe you suffer from attention deficit.

BREN

I have just enough attention to know you're not picturing the same wave I am. And I can never, with surety, reconjure that exact same wave-picture myself. Think of something that is, believe it or not, more like an abstraction-sound: New York City. Do it now.

There's no "referring" or "meaning" beam or imp that assembles the scrapbook of notions that rises in your mind when you hear "New York City!". Instead, at this moment three different retrieval mechanisms are scrambling through three different memory inventories. So there's no chance whatever that the three of us are entertaining totally identical thoughts.

KIT

Well, that's for sure.

BREN

Hey -- you agree again! Centuries, even millennia, of philosophical effort have been hobbled by thinkers taking it as a given, a fact not even worth questioning, that "words" refer, designate, mean. And by their treating "words", "meanings", "designating", and the rest, as "real world" objects and actions and not just mental figments.

KIT

How lucky for them they at last have you! Kurt, I say making me come in here tonight qualifies as child abuse!

KURT

No, it's parenting at its best. I'm responsible for your education, Kit!

KIT

Do you know what he's talking about?

KURT

The subject, somewhat. Though I don't always follow what Brendan is saying.

KIT

Is that maybe because Bren is a loony bird?

BREN

Sorry you feel that way, Kit. But this is fundamental, and here's something interesting: The more fundamental something is, the harder it is to be aware you've already unthinkingly taken a firm position on the matter.

[KIT is again held in pause as she senses she's heard something she's not fully grasping.]

BREN (CONT'D)

You're convinced of the complicated delusion that a given sound somehow can "HAVE a meaning" -- that you don't know.

(MORE)

BREN (CONT'D)

But the more basic, less complex notion that utterances and scribbles never "mean" or "designate" at all -- that's beyond your grasping. You'd readily agree that Swedes "know the meaning of" lots of sounds that you don't. If I ask you, "Why is that? How come?" You'd say, "Use your head, Bo! -- them words is in Swedish!"

KIT

Am I supposed to react to that?

BREN

Yes. But not necessarily out loud.

KIT

...Stick to English --

BREN

-- Why?

KIT

Because in me English words cause me-meanings! You said that.

BREN

No: I said your brain causes the me-meanings. The sound is only the occasion for them. Kit, I didn't make up 'hypostatize'. So why didn't it "cause" a me-meaning to arise in your mind? ...How do your "me-meanings" get assembled? Where do the hazy mosaic pieces come from?

KIT

"The hazy..." I don't know what you're...groping for.

BREN

Grope for what your brain does now, Kit: "Cleopatra and Meryl Streep are sitting on the branch of a golden tree, sipping from hydrated silica mugs."

KIT

-- Wait. Slow down --

BREN

-- You think your fuzzy notions of Cleopatra, or Streep, or a golden tree come from bolts shafted down by Plato or Zeus?! How mean and inconsistent of them not to include an image of hydrated silica also.

KIT

Slow down!

KURT

But don't stop. I see Kit is fascinated. Which fascinates me.

KIT

Fast-talking is a cheap magician's trick! Overload so you don't give anyone a chance to... Can I have some of that, Dad?

KURT

You want a cognac?!

[KIT sits.]

KIT

Yeah. Please. It's either that or I smoke a cigar. And I'm not going to do that, even if it is Cuban.

[BREN fetches a snifter while talking:]

BREN

There's a tree-stump in the backyard of a house where I lived as a kid. I wouldn't claim the stump "has a meaning". And it doesn't "refer", or do anything. But in a weak moment I might say it's "meaningful" to me -- because it's the occasion for a me-meaning: Whenever I see it, I remember the tree-house up there before the tree was found by lightning. And: Some days the pages that arrive from that scrapbook are different from other days.

KIT

That's it! That's the explanation: You're out of your tree.

KURT

Katrina, now you're being uncivil.

BREN

How tedious to have to wait for the irrelevant noise to stop so you can get off your next zinger...You believe in wavy entities outside your head, yes? Radio waves, infrared, ultraviolet, X-rays. They're "real", they're measurable. There are other people who believe in witch-doctors. They're sure that from the moment a "curse" is put on someone, there's a new action-entity out there in the world, the hexing activity of the jinx at work -- like the harmful rays that an evil eye is said to project. I claim the action you call "meaning" is as imaginary as that hexing activity -- or the rays from an "evil eye". Or the alleged persistent action of a gift called "luck". What you believe about "words" and the alleged "meaning-they-do" is a delusion, a superstition.

KIT

Well, I do have to grant you are an expert on delusions. Because everything you just said is CRAZY TALK! I think you got kicked out of Cambridge!

KURT

I can assure you he was not, Kit.

BREN

Why do the me-meanings that come to mind often far overflow anything a neat dictionary definition would occasion? To answer that, don't ask how "words" work. Ask how the mind works.

(MORE)

BREN (CONT'D)

How the great indoctrinaires worked: Hitler, Lenin, Churchill, Freud, Plato, Mohammed, hellfire preachers and other politicians. They all built attitudes, emotions, accusations, celebrations, into what comes to mind when we hear their flagship sounds.

KIT

As, of course, Doctor Brendan Francis does.

BREN

Well, could be. If we keep this up long enough, you may never think of 'meaning' in the same way again. After Hitler got through with it, the sound "Juden" occasioned different notions in his thralls than it ever had before. Marx did that with 'capitalism'. It's what happened with the sound "Jap" during the Second World War. And with "liberal" and "muslim" in our time, in America.

Don't say a mysterious and absolute "meaning" the sound had has changed. What changes is the hectic and malleable neurons in our brains. Scribbles are inert, but our brains are not, and they change themselves forever whenever they mull. Great poets and indoctrinaires are skillful, infectious molders of memories -- and therefore of thought.

Consider the demagogue's use of the homogenizing and would-be entifying 'the'. Tee-aitch-ee: "THE Jews", "THE rich", "THE immigrants." "THE PEOPLE!" That Parisian on the internet once treated me to a tirade that began, "Like ALL THE Americans, you --" I let him finish, I did. Then I said, "THE Americans are smart, they are dumb; they're thoughtful, they're obtuse; we're young, we're old, we're straight, we're gay; we are white, black, yellow, red, and colors in between; the one thing we Americans ARE NOT is ALIKE!"

KIT

Ooh! Did you just get agitated?

BREN

Not "just". ...Remember those notions with nothing you can display or point at to convey what's on your mind? "Causation", "Belief", "Existence"? You'd insist you have meanings for all their sounds. You'd insist it because when you hear them, notions readily come to your mind, yes? ...Yes?

KIT

...Yes. Of course. So?

BREN

I'll bet they're not the notions that come to MY mind!... And there's no "Big Book of Real Meanings" on a shelf up in Plato's heaven that decides if one of us is right.

KIT

Screw Plato's Big Book! You already said it: Just look it up in a dictionary! Webster's Third! If it's there, it's a word, and there's its meaning!

BREN

A totally arbitrary procedure for settling disputes. Suppose it isn't in The American Heritage Dictionary?

KIT

...! I don't care which dictionary you --

BREN

-- And suppose I further stipulate that, when a dictionary-definition in Webster's Third is read, the notion that comes to mind isn't just a me-meaning, it's the real meaning!...You sense a tiny flaw in my "stipulation" there, Kit?

KIT

...Comes to whose mind?

BREN

Yes! ...Go ahead: stipulate. It's your attempt to describe your notion, hoping to make clearer the notion you want people to conjure when they hear your sounds. But stipulation is not creation. What a rule or definition can't do -- whether it's your fiat or Webster's description -- is create mind-independent Platonic categories: a Noah's ark of every archetype of meaning and other alleged activities in Plato's heavenly vault of entities.

KIT

Now, see, Kurt? Is that loony or what?

BREN

Another ark for objects -- archetypes for every mythical "noun-word", "meaning", "referent" -- present or past.

KIT

LOONY!

BREN

Yes. But entailed by your philosophy.

KIT

...? Wait --... What are you saying about words? Are you aware of what you just said?

BREN

Should have said that earlier. Words don't exist.

KIT

Excuse me? Excuse me!? Watch this!

[KIT picks up a book, riffles pages.]

KIT (CONT'D)

I see thousands of words printed on paper! Right here! Wheeee!

[KIT tosses a couple of books to BREN.]

BREN

I catch your drift, Woman. But no. You see ink on paper; you've never seen a "word" in your life. Or heard one. "Foopgoom!" You heard a sound there. But did you hear a "word"? How would you tell? Run to your nice little dictionary? The latest ones have lots of "new words". But they're only sounds they've at last decided to call "words". What was their "is-ness" before?

KIT

Their 'is-ness'. What's their "is-ness"?!

BREN

You know -- that fictitious "essence" thing that you believe makes a thing not merely what you call it, but what it "really IS"! "Wordness" -- like all "nesses" -- is a strictly mental invention, like unicorns. And etiquette.

KIT

Not fictitious! Some sounds are words, and some just aren't!

BREN

I'll bet you never thought about how some lucky sounds get to become "words". Remember Clarence, in *It's a Wonderful Life*? He has to remain an "angel-second-class" until he gets his wings and somewhere a bell rings? "Sounds-second-class" are like Clarence. Here's how.

One winter in Switzerland, I found a thing in my room that I called a 'foopgoom'. I thought it was so apt a label, I put my case to Plato and his Word Committee way up there. In their meeting last Thursday, they unanimously declared 'foopgoom' to be a real word! And they made it official by ringing a big bell they call the verbell! That Swiss object now really IS a foopgoom!...Get the point, Kit?

KIT

That's a bad joke.

BREN

Isn't it! ...Should I stop there?

KIT

Yes! No! You're nowhere! You think you're going to persuade anyone there are no words or meanings?

BREN

Okay. I'll noise on.

KIT

Do you hear yourself? Who talks this way? Did you learn English from a CD?

BREN

You can't learn English from a CD.

KIT

Evidently!

BREN

This isn't just rarefied philosophizing --

[KIT sips cognac, coughs, grimaces.]

KIT

God! This is horrible stuff!

BREN

Please, Woman, I'm on a roll! When a man is on a roll, a lady doesn't change the subject! Even if it is with "God".

KIT

That was a roll? I hope you know there are people at large who'd laugh out loud if you try to tell them everything we say is meaningless.

BREN

I haven't quite done that, have I?

KIT

It could sound that way!

BREN

Only to bad ears. I've said whenever you hear familiar sounds, linked and mosaicked memories scamper into your mind. That's your brain creating a me-meaning. When these evolving scrapbooks arrive at once bang!, they don't feel like something tracked down by an inner librarian after searching a billion memory-neurons. The clusters feel like "meanings" instantly beamed in from Plato's Universal Meaning Channel. That feeling is wrong.

KIT

...This is...All of this, it isn't... -- Kurt, what can I say?

KURT

-- No need to thank me, daughter, this is fun for me too.

KIT

Daaad! I'm saying he must have gone off-track, because I can't follow him! ...? Wait, I don't mean exactly that.

BREN

Here's a hint how these seemingly rarefied philosophical points might have "real life" impact: When the Chief Justice of the United States was required to address the question of gay marriages, he sounded hesitant, bothered. He worried the court was being asked to "change the definition of marriage". The most he could have reasonably had in mind is the arbitrary stipulated definition in the Federal statutes. But if he thought he was pondering "THE meaning of marriage", he should indeed have been worried.

Pro-life advocates assume the term 'life' has a determinate "meaning". But confusion reigns. They'd concede a difference between a "live" sperm and a dead sperm. But "by definition" that's not the "life" they want to protect. They don't feel comfortable accusing male masturbators of mass murder.

There is no THE definition of 'marriage' or 'life'. Or 'fair', 'insanity', 'human rights', or anything. So no legislature can ever frame a law that reflects some absolute, mind-independent, "self-evident" ontic law. We all want to believe "morally wrong" is just such a prevailing verity of the universe. But it isn't. There's the mind's realm -- notional entities; and the physical body's realm. But there's no third realm of non-temporal, non-spatial abstract entities -- truths, facts, judgments, "essences", "relations". All such abstractions are notional, products of our brains at work.

Nevertheless legislatures can pass laws that, arbitrary though they are, can still be approvable by your brain, and Kurt's, and mine, and those of other like-minded folk. The great challenge to a lawmaker is what standard to choose in approving and disapproving. We both, I hope, are happy there are laws -- and law-enforcers -- against child-molesters, and those who kill for the fun of it. But less happy remembering there were once arbitrary stipulated laws supporting slavery and denying women the vote.

...I figured you wouldn't buy any of this word-to-the-wise about language. But ideally you would. Talk-sounds are psychoactive, hallucinatory. You need to develop an immune system, antibody reactions to faulty noise... You probably believe in countless entities solely because you have a word for them.

KIT

Like? I want examples.

BREN

Follow that deluding figment 'IS'. "What IS art? What IS a miracle? A sin? The soul? The origin of the universe? What IS 'The Good Life'?" The very form of the question gulls many minds into accepting the thing exists in the first place, our only job now is to go find it.

KIT

So you don't even believe in art. What's art by you?

BREN

..."What is art?"...This is now getting...I'm aware there are many very different objects people call "art": Van Gogh's sunflowers, concertos by Mozart, poems by Dickinson. And, because those people believe in "nesses" -- Platonic "qualities" -- they'll own up to a conviction that all these objects must have "artness". And that many diverse activities must have "artness".

I also know there are people who think they explain something with those sounds. All of Beethoven's symphonies have a cherishable effect in me. I may be able to specify where they do it, but I have no idea why. My "aesthetic experiences" are still a mystery to me. I certainly don't think I "explain" anything by saying they must "be art", or "have artness", any more than I think I've explained any event by calling it a "miracle", or saying it must "have" "miracleness". I'm aware that to use such terms is simply to seize on aliases to cover my ignorance.

The word-sound 'IS' is always an alias. Always. We use it to convey countless different kinds of fuzzy notions. We'd say - as though this clarifies things - that we're talking about "existence", or "sameness", or "predication", "classification", "appellation".....Look, this is now far beyond what I have any hope of making clear over a bottle of cognac.

[KIT, lacking retort, gapes at BREN.]

BREN (CONT'D)

You suddenly look about ten years younger. That's good. When you were younger, you were less dumb, because you weren't encumbered by so much faulty learning. Like a bigot before she was taught bigotry.

KIT

I'm not a bigot.

BREN

About what?

KIT

...I'll tell you something you're a bigot about and I'm not: You obviously don't like dictionaries.

BREN

I love dictionaries! And the best lexicographers! Love the Fowler brothers! Granted, every dictionary I've studied is fog-bound in its entries on 'meaning', 'definition', 'statement' --

KIT

-- God, what an ego you have!

BREN

I once read that's an occupational requirement for a philosopher. Webster's Third is fogbound when they say right up front their assignment is to give the "meanings" of "words" -- which they cannot possibly do. But, happily for us, that's not the assignment they pursue. Look up 'run' in Webster's Third some time. Or 'set'. Ess-ee-tee. Or 'get'! GEE-ee-tee. You'll find over a hundred sub-entries for each. Wow! So many meanings for such short words! No. Those aren't inherent meanings; they're only attempts to describe various notions people might have in mind as they make the noise or hear the sound. The best lexicographers are truly gifted at that.

[KIT takes another tiny sip of cognac. Frowns.]

KIT

You know, I now get if you drink enough of this stuff it'll make you want to fight someone.

BREN

All right, what have I said so far?

KIT

You tell me.

BREN

No. You tell me.

KIT

....You want me to say we can have me-meanings, but never the meanings.

BREN

How 'bout names?

KIT

What do you want? That we can't "have" them? That they can't "designate" because they're inert "occasions", like rocks and ink?

BREN

And what they occasion varies from mind to mind. Just don't let anyone say, "But that's the intention of the word when I say such-and-such." We can defend people having intentions; but not sounds. Not scribbles. "The word means what I intend it to mean!" Not if words never "mean" at all.

KIT

But, look -- when we hear a familiar word --

BREN

-- Sound.

KIT

Sound: "Tomato". "Hungry". "Hate". We all get the same what you call 'notion' --

BREN

-- Never exactly the same.

KIT

Close enough. How could that be if words don't have.... Okay. I know what you're going to say: Common experiences when we first learn the words --

BREN

Close enough.

KIT

Wait. This is better. A name-noise makes for a name-sound that the brain --...

BREN

Processes.

KIT

Processes. And as part of that processing the brain comes up with a picture of somebody. So in effect a name designates!

BREN

I don't come up with much of a picture.

KIT

What? What do you mean?

BREN

I mean I'm not a good visualizer. My brain doesn't compare to the brain of a great artist or movie director.

KIT

What's this -- you're going humble on us now?

BREN

I'm asserting that if the sound were doing the picking out, we'd all have the same picture or notion. But what a sound occasions for me, what comes to my mind, is my brain's doing, and I'm no Michelangelo....Kit, the "real" "designating" action you attribute to the sounds and scribbles you call "names" is totally imaginary, notional, a sleight of mind. I don't care if the day you were born you were baptized with a name-sound, and called that sound all your life --

KIT

-- Hello!? I'm Jewish! I'm kinda hazy on memories of my baptism! Go on to something else. I assume you have more.

BREN

Oh there's lots more. When you read philosophy, you have to stop-and-search every word-sound no matter how familiar and innocent-seeming. Do it with cheerful uncertainty, like a detection-dog sniffing each package with an acute nose. So-called "words" are like bacteria. Some helpful, some harmful.

(MORE)

BREN (CONT'D)

If you don't have -- up here -- an immune system to attack bad sounds, you're in for trouble. You need to know when to spit it out. Stick your finger down your throat if you have to.

KIT

Now, see -- in any language that is absolutely disgusting.

*[KIT pauses, puts the opaque glasses back on.
At last comes THE pause...]*

KURT

...I believe you have Kit...thinking.

[KIT snatches the glasses off.]

KIT

It's not like I've never done it before, Dad! ...So I take it you're like, not much moved by poetry recited in Bulgarian.All right, maybe I see -- ...

(new energy:)

One meaning I don't believe exists is "the meaning of life". The witless "Why are we here?" question.

BREN

...There's a different notion behind that use of "meaning". When people use it that way, they usually have in mind some ragged notion they'd call "purpose".

KIT

Well that's what I don't believe -- that there's a purpose, or a purposer, behind any of us.

BREN

...That's a subject, but it's not this subject.

KIT

I just wanted you to know that.

BREN

Why do I believe I already did know that -- about you? On the other hand, since we agree to accept whatever comes to your mind as a "me-meaning", you can argue 'life' has a headful of meanings. Your head's meanings, not the sound's. Not life's.

KIT

You know what I'm saying.

BREN

J'ever notice what we have in mind when we utter the sound 'say' changes from one use to the next? One minute, with 'say' we're thinking "the sounds uttered": "You said exactly those words!" The next we're thinking of notion behind the utterance. "What you're saying is..." and we try another description of the idea we think the speaker had in mind. The sound and the notions it can occasion are various and distinct. Even with an eentsy word-sound like 'say'.

[More silent gaping by KIT.]

BREN (CONT'D)

...Back to the "meanings" you do believe in --

KIT

I haven't taken any position on that. I'm only listening.

BREN

This is you "only listening"? ...Then listen to these: "This drawing is honest realism, but that drawing by Klimt is obscene!" "This Norman Rockwell painting is "pretty"; but the one by Rembrandt is art!" "All Muslims are murderous fanatics who think Allah wants them to exterminate the other four-fifths of the world's population who can't believe the Koran!" "He's another greedy Jew, a greasy spic, a bog-Irish mick who's the dumbest white man I've ever known."

Young people often like to repeat weighty adult pronouncements like that. Makes them feel like sage grown-ups, worth listening to. Utter sounds like that in front of a child enough, and no "real meanings" get created, but she'll conjure fuzzy notions roughly like what's on your mind. And in a childish way, she'll think her me-meanings are the "real" thing.

KIT

I never exactly said I think "meanings" are what you call "mind-independent" things.

KURT

Brendan does have a nimble mind, don't you think, Kit?

KIT

...Very nimble.

BREN

A woman once made me wince by saying that. "My, what a nimble mind you have." I knew she didn't mean it as a compliment.

KIT

You're nimble. You're quick.

BREN

Is that praise or condemnation? Every teacher has to be nimble. I used lots of kitchen-sounds in the classroom. I used 'is', I used 'word'. I even used 'mean' as a verb. I shouldn't have ever said "noTIONZZZ" because that suggests they're discrete items in your flow of consciousness, and they're not. But I wanted to put the class in at least the same vicinity as this new stuff they'd hear.

In class, I made other noises, to occasion different notion-burps. Like this: "Real", non-notional "meanings" are an anxious fiction, like non-corporeal "souls".

(MORE)

BREN (CONT'D)

We invented "real meanings" to impute authority to our talk, and "souls" to impute durability to our lives.

KIT

And we invented a "Creator" to give "meaning" to our existence.

BREN

Kit, we both may have been wrong about you.

KIT

Meaning? I mean, what does that mean? Agh!

BREN

I mean you're not as closed as I thought. And your interest in this stuff is not as zero as you thought.

KIT

Do you lecture like this? Say these things to students?

BREN

I did if the students were nimble. And quick. Like you. ...The bigamy of "language" is what makes possible its inexhaustible company. A bad philosopher would pave over the poet's garden with ontofactive stipulations. "What?! Is 'ontofactive' a word?" Ah-ah: Careful: Philosopher General's Warning: All questions of the form "Is X a Y?" are hazardous to your thinking. Nothing "is" anything. Nothing has "is-ness". Nothing has "has-ness". In fact there are no "nesses" out there. J'ever notice when Hamlet wanted to sound crazy he talked like a philosopher?

(to KURT:)

You met Heidegger. I used to say his head defied a law of physics: It produced sonorities in a vacuum. As did his girlfriend Hannah Arendt [HAHN-ah AHR-rendt]. "All thinking is in words," she said. "Speechless thought cannot exist." Imagine how impoverished her "thinking" was. It takes a mind that destitute to embrace Heidegger.

That's enough lizard-baiting for this session. Three suggestions: One, don't work solely to find something wrong in what you just heard. Two, as you conjure rebuttals, be slow to assume I don't have rebuttals to your rebuttals. Three: to paraphrase André Gide: 'Please don't "understand" me too quickly.'

KIT

...You set this up, Dad.

KURT

Yes I did. Doing my duty.

KIT

...You think I haven't been following all this.

BREN

Kit, I know you haven't. You can't see what theories it's addressing, and whose. I skipped the hard stuff, in favor of the "embarrassingly obvious". If you like, in tomorrow's class we can go beyond the simple. ...Yes! -- let's do that!

It'll be more fun than a thesaurus! I can show you the existential howlers in set-theories and various irrelevant logics. In one of those logics the most used formula begins, "There is an X such that for any X --" Wait! Is that X a notional thing or non-notional? They never thought to ask, even though so much hangs on it.

I'll give a catchy demonstration that no one -- via CD or otherwise -- can "learn a language", because there is no such entity. I'll argue there are no generic notions, no "the concepts of" liberty, justice, "the" aesthetic, knowledge, "necessity", or anything whatever.

Finally, I'll claim all my hard-won opacity entails that perfect mutual understanding is forever beyond our reach. It's not that every word-sound is a total failure every time. Lingo is very often very serviceable, and it's improvable, but it'll always be incomplete. Even if, against billions-to-one odds, two people ever did momentarily entertain totally identical notions, they could never know it. Examining a notion-scrapbook is a good example for the uncertainty principle: You can't examine a notion without changing it. Devious little suckers our notions. Making fun of us constantly.

Put aside the text. Did the tone I flushed seem familiar, Kit? The callously unveiled contempt, arrogance. The weary assumption this is all far too recondite for you to grasp. The unshakable surety I have it all right, and isn't it too bad how few others on this globe are capable of seeing why -- and how inexorably -- "language" and human "communication" fall short. That tone, that odious, self-important, deranged tone, is what philosophy can do to a susceptible mind. For those at risk -- like me, like you -- the derangement is less of beliefs than of attitude -- toward others. Last November, in my ear I heard the tone I've been reeking for five years, and I decided I never, ever, want to hear it again.

[BREN drops heavily into his chair.]

BREN (CONT'D)

Thus spake Sara's rooster.

[Stunned silence. KURT finally stirs.]

KURT

Do you feel "shown", Kit?

KIT

You mean "shown up"... Maybe a little.

KURT

That's our Kit: Sometimes touchy, but always honest.

KIT

What an odd mind. You make your every-other line sound lunatic. At first. S'funny: You don't look like a horny tutor. Have you really never had any doubts?

BREN

Kit, in philosophy there's nothing so dubious as the lack of doubt.

KIT

Okay: When was the last time you had doubts?

BREN

Not all that recently, actually.

(glances at his watch)

Must be upwards of four or five minutes.

KURT

I must say, Brendan, from the way you announced this "Show, Don't Tell," I expected much more of an onslaught, more scorched-earth. I don't know how Kit feels, but I think you let her off rather lightly. Kit?

KIT

Yeah, I thought you'd put up a better fight! Like with that Parisian.....Why the frown? I said the dick deserved it.

BREN

Agreed, Kit, he's one of the multitude who have no idea when they have no idea. But in those last five years at Cambridge, at the height of my day as a bird of prey, loving my bloody beak and claws, I should have given him a pass. If some fuzzy minor philosopher was a kindly chap, I usually just receded, went silent. The Paris guy was certainly minor, but he was also irresistibly nasty.

KIT

That's why he should be whacked! Letting someone like that off with just a disappointed look is...gratuitous non-violence.

BREN

Nah. What I used to crave was confronting big bad guys -- regal, scornful, predators - like me. I remember sulking because the freezing, scalding, bullying Wittgenstein wasn't at Cambridge anymore, so I couldn't call him out. Guys like him, the enthralling lions of their generation, doctrienate the reason out of too many heads around them. For decades you find a hundred papers echoing a lion for every one that says, "Wait!" Then comes the next generation's lion.

KIT

So you laid off me because you thought I was too dumb.

BREN

Not dumb, just inexperienced. My heart wasn't in it. So I blew my show-don't-tell. But cheer up. You were so quick with your contempt you almost won me over. I came this close to relapsing into lip-smacking barbarity.

KURT

You said something happened "last November". You heard yourself in a class, lecturing?

BREN

No, I was at a graveside, speechless.

KURT

Your mother's?! In Ireland?

[BREN nods. KIT peers tentatively at BREN.]

KIT

I thought your mother lived here for decades. Why's she buried in Ireland?

BREN

She'd never wholly arrived here, so I took her back home. Where she won't lie in tears amid the alien accent.

KIT

We're missing something. What happened at your mother's funeral?

BREN

.....All right, why not? It's apt.

[BREN looks at the dark glasses, puts them on; breathes, takes the glasses off.]

BREN (CONT'D)

No. Not for me now. ...Five years ago I went to my mother's hometown, Galway, to lecture for a semester at the University there. And I found out for the first time what my birth meant. Essie had been a dancer, a supremely gifted Irish dancer, the national heir apparent in her teens. It was a few years before RIVERDANCE ram-tapped Irish dancing onto the world stage in the early nineties. But she wasn't in Ireland for the rise of RIVERDANCE. She was three thousand miles away, in America, exiled here to hide her sin, because she'd got pregnant with me, and was determined to carry me through. She never danced again.

I knew none of this till that Galway semester. When I met her sister. Who told me everything. My mother'd never said a word. I never knew she'd danced at all.

I'd been decent enough up till then, but I was so slammed by learning what followed from my...happening to her, I was effectively deranged. Smacked wacky.

(MORE)

BREN (CONT'D)

Without me, at what she wanted to do she would have been... the best in the world! And all those years I thought she was just the Mom around the house. My Mom. For some reason dedicated to doing for me.

It was in Galway that the notion of incompleteness rolled over me -- in more than just language. My aunt told me Essie had never been bitter, cursed no one else, said the decision to hug temptation had been hers. So I was bitter for her, against "authorities" who banish better folk. I wasn't great chums with myself either. I took it out on too many around me. A snapped power-line left lashing in the street by a storm, not to be touched.

Then, last November, came the funeral. Of my self-muting mother. In the silence at her graveside, I had an arclight of insight on her horror if she'd known how eloquently, wilfully, barbarous her son had become. Standing there, I felt a curative rip within me, like restricting scar-tissue finally releasing. I wouldn't, I couldn't, be like that anymore... When I think of her, see her moving in my mind, silk-sleek she goes. And I hear Robert Herrick's line: "How sweetly flows/ that liquefaction of her clothes."

KIT

...Oh wow. ...As for your born-again episode in the graveyard: a little fire can be cool. I wouldn't want a raging bull around the house, but the potential for anger is kind of...desirable in a man.

BREN

Not our kind of anger.

KIT

"Our" kind?

BREN

Yes. Here's an interesting thing about philosophy: It's a test of intellect, but having a quick intellect tests your decency. That's where you and I both flunk. I've grown to cringe as I recall myself being gorgeously, hideously, clever, and feeling a gladiator's glee.

KIT

Look, I got that lesson, I really did, okay?

BREN

I learned this: Question yourself -- what you believe. But also question the way you fight for those beliefs. Defend your beliefs, but not your brain. And you know damn well when you're promoting your brain more than your argument.

KIT

You haven't done that?

BREN

Repeatedly! Disdaining, ridiculing, publicly whirling a mocking matador's cape of contempt. "How you like Essie's little bastard now, Bishop?!" No one better at being bad. Then -- at a burial -- it came to me that overt contempt is almost always contemptible. ...Here's something I would say to freshmen verbatim: It's critical not to be intimidated by philosophy's giants, those colossal "thinkers". There hasn't been one, not one, without flaws. So question them -- but not too quickly, and almost never disdainfully. If they have huge self-confidence, egos, just smile inwardly at their foolishness, because you can know they're profoundly wrong somewhere in their philosophy.

KIT

Does any of that apply to you?

BREN

All of it.

KIT

...Okay, here's my question: You taught me something today, but have I taught you nothing? Is your mind so closed you found no lesson for you in today's class? You still so sure you have to leave philosophy when you finish your paper?

BREN

"Avoid the occasions of sin." With my character, philosophy was an occasion for being wicked.

KIT

"Was"! For your homework tonight, I want you to ponder this: You weren't perfect today, but don't think I missed what was going on. I know about going for someone's throat, their brain, but you -- you were only after my mouth... Or maybe you were after my brain -- whatever. YOU DON'T HAVE TO QUIT PHILOSOPHY! There! Thank God you're slow-witted, so there's no danger of your understanding me too quickly!

BREN

...I said, "Then comes then".

KIT

So think about what I just taught you!

BREN

The savagery? Suppressible. But the arrogance? Not so easy.

KIT

You still think you're smarter than the rest of those guys. At this stuff.

BREN

No doubt about it! ...See? ...That's this year. I also don't doubt I'll eventually be -- because all of us are -- superseded.

KIT

.....A different question. I wonder this: If someone's a storyteller and her words have no fixed meaning, how can she control what the story's designed to say?

BREN

She can't, not with absolute surety. In any case, I'd never write a story to "say" something. Guaranteed: Except for a few passing rants, Shakespeare didn't write *Hamlet* to say something. He wanted to do something. Which he could -- to those who listened and saw, and felt. He was a storyteller, and a storyteller is like someone who gives you money in the hope you'll buy with it roughly what he'd want you to.

KIT

...Your Theorem -- what do you hope for? What do you expect?

BREN

Nice contrast there!: Between hope and expect. I expect that few people will get around to focusing on the ontology. They'll read a few lines and say, "This guy doesn't believe there are real words, or artworks, or even right and wrong. He's obviously nuts." And they'll stop there....I'll write it, and by the time it's published, I'll be elsewhere. Trollope used to do that. He'd finish a manuscript and stick it in a drawer until he was deeply into his next one. By then, he wouldn't care about the reception of his last one, so that's when the publisher got the new one.

KIT

You're going to write another book?!

BREN

No. No more books. And I won't spend any time defending this one. I'll leave that to others, if they want to. It's a sure thing the sounds I've chosen will occasion lots of notions I wouldn't choose, awry interpretations. And I have no doubt someone can improve it. But I'll have moved on. Did you know that Wittgenstein's major work, his big book, wasn't published till two years after he died?

KIT

You haven't answered my question. What do you hope for?

BREN

...If someone out there sees no value or interest in trying to clarify -- to some degree -- what goes on privately as we think, and then publicly as we talk or write -- then for him the theorem probably has little to offer. For others, ideally it'll boost some immune systems, expose some verbal villains. Stop some germey sounds from infecting us -- with false assumptions, and misguided actions. That seems worth doing.

...I'm about used up on the theorem, and I know there's a long way yet to go. But that's okay, inevitable. What the hell, it is an incompleteness theorem.

KURT

Brendan, you have reconfirmed that philosophy is not my *métier*.

BREN

I'm sorry, Kurt. I'm still working on not rising to every challenge.

KURT

(standing)

No, I enjoyed it, seeing how refreshing it was for Kit! I'm feeling quite light-headed. Turned out to be an excellent cognac!

KIT

...Have you ever been in love, Bren?

BREN

...? You mean...? No.

KIT

Why not?

BREN

...Wittgenstein had a good line for that: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." He followed his maxim in some areas, but, luckily, not in others. He was often wrong, but interestingly wrong.

(stands; new tone, to KURT:)

Now you know why I thought I should leave philosophy --

KIT

-- "Thought"? Past tense?

BREN

-- As Robert E. Lee said: "It is well that philosophy is so terrible, else we should grow too fond of it."

KIT

I don't think Lee said that.

BREN

No. He said, "It is well that war is so terrible." But back when I read it, my me-meanings had me waging philosophy as though it were war. And I was wrong. I was wrong.

BLACKOUT/CURTAIN