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New Frontiers in American Philosophy

At the age of 36, philosopher Saul Kripke has been described by a colleague as the ‘one true genius of our profession.’ A prodigy of mathematics and logic, he is now beginning to address some of the most fundamental aspects of human experience.

Mathematics has come to be the whole of philosophy for modern thinkers, though they say that it should be studied for the sake of other things. — Aristotle, *Metaphysics*

The object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a theory but an activity. The result of philosophy is not a number of “philosophical propositions,” but to make propositions clear. — Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

When Saul Kripke was 3 years old, he walked into the kitchen of his home in Omaha, Neb., and asked his mother if God is truly everywhere. Dorothy Kripke said yes, whereupon the child asked if this meant he had squeezed part of God out of the kitchen by coming in and taking up some of His space. “I was startled that Saul already seemed to have an intuitive grasp of the notion that two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time,” recalls Mrs. Kripke. “I found that a sharp question for a 3-year old.”

The Kripke parents soon discovered signs that their son was more than sharp. He was, in fact, possessed of an awesome gift. “It really began to dawn on me when Saul was in the fourth grade,” says his father, Rabbi Myer Kripke. “He came in one day with some numbers he had been playing with. He showed me two numbers. He had multiplied their sum by the difference between them, and he got the same answer as he did when he subtracted the square of the smaller one from the square of the larger one. He said that would be true of any two numbers. For a long time I didn’t understand what he was saying, but then I realized he was expressing something I knew from algebra: That $(a + b)(a - b) = a^2 - b^2$. I was excited but also a little frightened. He had no concept of algebra at that time, and he knew nothing of algebraic notation. He had just *seen* the idea. By the sixth or seventh grade he had gone through most of algebra that way.” Says Mrs. Kripke: “Saul once told me he would have invented algebra if it hadn’t already been invented, because he came upon it naturally.”

Few people could make such an astonishing statement without seeming to boast, but Saul Kripke was simply speaking in the manner of an explorer describing yesterday’s terrain. For he has gone on to become, at the age of 36, one of the most penetrating minds of our time. His achievements span the disciplines of philosophy, logic and mathematics. From his post at Princeton University, where he is James McCosh Professor of Philosophy, and his previous post at Rockefeller University, Kripke has established a towering reputation as one of the two or three most eminent philosophers in the English-speaking world.

Not long ago, in conversation, Professor Sidney Morgenbesser of Columbia University ranked all important philosophers according to four categories: Gods, Geniuses, Bright Guys and a catchall group called Competent Philosophers. Morgenbesser allowed only Plato, Aristotle and Kant into the circle of Gods. (Morgenbesser later declared that he had, upon reflection, added a fifth category called Minor Deities and that he had conferred that distinction upon Gottlob Frege, a 19th-century German thinker who was not even considered a philosopher until his work on the logical underpinnings of language was rescued from obscurity by Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein.) Though this may not be an age of philosophical gods, Robert Nozick, the Harvard political philosopher, has called Saul Kripke “the one genius of our profession,” and many of Kripke’s distinguished colleagues, who are not by nature given to lavish praise, say that he could one day rank with such legendary figures as John Stuart Mill and Bertrand Russell.

It is remarkable that someone so young has approached such a ranking, yet is so little known outside his

field. But philosophy has changed a great deal in the past century. While “social” philosophers like John Dewey and Jean-Paul Sartre are practically household names, they do not represent the mainstream of contemporary philosophical inquiry, which has become such an arcane discipline that it leaves most laymen gasping for meaning. Those who can easily grasp formulations like Descartes’ “I think therefore I am” are befuddled by a modern “analytic” philosopher’s equivalent: “To be is to be the value of a variable.”

British and American analytic philosophers have abandoned to science the “pursuit of truth” while claiming for their own logician’s and semanticist’s “pursuit of meaning.” Even the most well-educated persons in America today, who understand the metaphysics of Schopenhauer or the epistemology of Kant, founder in the mathematical thickets of such 20th-century figures as Rudolph Carnap and Willard Van Orman Quine. This alone would explain why philosophy has become an isolated field of knowledge, increasingly neglected even by the most intellectual circles of society. But there is another, more important reason. The analytic school to which Kripke belongs has taken philosophy into such esoteric realms that it is divorced from classic philosophic questions like “What is the good life?” The analytic philosophers do not seek to provide a synthetic, or universal, “theory of life.” Many students who came to philosophy drunk with Plato or spellbound by Santayana have dropped out after discovering that the ideas of the old philosophers are out of the way, refrigerated, while their professors work with equations. The professors speak of “ordinary language” with distaste and long for “perfect language” in which the meaning of all words will be as precise as that of numbers. The current philosophical journals are packed with some many equations and Greek variables that a large family of water bugs seems to be skating across the pages.

Kripke’s contributions to philosophy thus far have extended the boundaries of the most unfamiliar and technical regions of modern analytic philosophy—where philosophical reasoning intermingles with abstract mathematic theory. He has worked in the field of modal logic, a branch of formal logic that has introduced ways to distinguish *kinds* of true statements—between statements that are “possible” true and those that are “necessarily” true. The basic question is, if something is true, could it have been otherwise? Before Kripke, modal logicians—including the inventor of modal logic, C.I. Lewis—did not have the mathematical tools to analyze many of the most important kinds of English sentences. One of Kripke’s major achievements has been the invention of “possible world semantics,” a form of modal logic that has shown to the satisfaction of most philosophers that the common-sense understanding of the concepts “possibility” and “necessity” in true statements can be mathematically proved.

In Kripke’s analysis, a statement is possible true if and only if it is true in some possible world—for example, “The sky is blue” is a possible truth, because there is some world in which the sky could be red. A statement is necessarily true if it is true in all possible worlds, as in “The bachelor is an unmarried man.”

Kripke’s terminology was influenced by the philosophy of G.W.V. Leibniz, the 17th-century German philosopher who first showed that the world we live in is only one of an infinite number of possible worlds that might have been. Kripke’s achievement in this most esoteric field of modern philosophy would alone have established his reputation. He has pushed analytic philosophy far forward along the course set by the founders of the school. It is a further measure of Kripke’s enormous potential that he is now moving into new frontiers of philosophy that could change that course itself. In the past two years, Saul Kripke has used his fertile mathematical mind to address questions that have previously been considered too sweeping and cumbersome by analytic philosophers. He is beginning, with scholarly caution, to look at problems—such as the nature of human emotions—that have been relegated to “unfashionable” existentialists and phenomenologists. Only the rarest of philosophical minds could hope to excel in either one of these pursuits, much less span them both, but Kripke has been quite special from birth.

At the age of 6, Kripke acquired a working knowledge of Hebrew and delivered a surprise recitation for his

parents, who had not even known he was studying the language on his own. He read all of Shakespeare's works in the fourth grade. His voracious appetite for books gave pleasure to his parents, but it was always math that showed him to be more than just another precocious child. This is in the tradition of the prodigy. Math—along with related fields, like chess and music—had a core of such pure intuition that a child genius can display his powers quite early, not limited by experience like merely talented children. Instead of soaking up knowledge faster than their peers, prodigies seem almost disconnected from experience.

Kripke began teaching himself geometry and calculus in his last year of grammar school, and his teacher gave him so many books on mathematical theory to occupy his time in the classroom. By the age of 15, Kripke became convinced that some of his ideas in mathematical logic had never appeared in the professional journals. It was more than a little awkward for Rabbi Kripke to induce a well-known mathematician, Haskell B. Curry, to look at his son's work, but soon the young high-school student from Omaha was on his way to present his ideas to a convention of mathematics professors in Rochester, N.Y.

"We stayed up all night before Saul was to leave for the convention," recalls Dorothy Kripke. "We had two friends over to help us type the paper. Saul went to bed because we wanted him to be fresh, but we had to keep waking him up. We couldn't proofread the paper without him. None of us understood a word of it."

Kripke's first published article, "A Completeness Theorem in Modal Logic," grew out of this debut and appeared in the *Journal of Symbolic Logic* in 1959, when he was 18. By then, he was so well-known as a prodigy that the Strategic Air Command base near Omaha sent a troublesome math problem over to Ventral High School and asked Saul if he could solve it. He did. The boy's genius in math set him so far apart from normal people, and even from his scholarly parents, that it placed emotional obstacles between him and the world. "If not a great sorrow, it's at least a great frustration not to be able to understand the reaches of your own son's mind," laments Rabbi Kripke. For years, the parents tried to check their son's mind gently rather than to push it on, knowing that Job Stuart Mill's father had pushed him to emotional breakdown.

Philosophy helped. Whereas mathematics is ungrounded and can easily soar into foreign spaces, classical philosophy is welded to humanity by the very question that asks: What is real? What is it possible to know? What is life? Kripke took up philosophy in grammar school. "I remember first being struck by the problem of the external world," he says. "I asked my father how I know that I'm not dreaming. He answered that it was a philosophical problem, a very difficult one, and that when I got older I could read a philosopher named Descartes who wrote about it. So I had to go to the library on my own and search out all the *Meditations*. I read there about the problem I was interested in, though I found it rather strange that Descartes proved the existence of god before he proved the existence of the external world."

Next, for Kripke, came David Hume, the great Scottish philosopher and skeptic. In the eighth grade, Kripke picked out Hume's name from a footnote in Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*. "I loved Hume's phrase that the self was 'a bundle of perceptions,'" says Kripke. "I used to go around all the time repeating to myself, 'Bundle of perceptions, bundle of perceptions.' One of my close friends like the sound of the phrase, and he would repeat it, too." No other philosopher would strike Kripke with the force of Hume.

More than 200 years ago, David Hume destroyed the cherished connection between reason and the empirical world in his essay, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Among other arguments, Hume claimed that it is folly to think any observed effect follows any cause by force of reason. If a rock is dropped, said Hume, it is custom and experience that tells us the rock will fall, not reason. A scientist could do wonders with practical laws that describe the way a rock falls, but no philosopher could produce the pure reason why it had to be so and not otherwise. Hume showed that the truths of reason are true by definition, like mathematical axioms, but that the truths of the world we live in are based on experience instead of logic.

Hume's essay marked a great divide in the history of philosophy. By cutting reason off from the world, he undermined the hope that a searing rational mind could perfect an explanation of the entire universe. After Hume, notwithstanding the mighty labors of Immanuel Kant to rescue from philosophical force of pure reason from Hume's dilemma, philosophy has gone in two directions. One branch has maintained touch with the affairs of the heart by overlooking the limits of reason and by seeking the best possible interpretation of the world as we know it. This line includes existentialists, political philosophers and phenomenologists—forever in dispute, going in and out of style. Its most recent development on the Continent is France's "new philosophers." Most of the more popular philosophers of the last 100 years—such as Marx, Nietzsche and Sartre—have come from this line, which holds that the *only* true knowledge worth having is the knowledge that bears directly upon the human experience.

The other branch of philosophy has come to restrict the scope of its inquiries to coincide with the limits of reason. It has tended toward logic and math, and it has intensified philosophy's concern with the meaning, structure and precision of language. This is analytic philosophy, which focuses on the tools of inquiry more intensely than on its objects, tending to eschew that which cannot be rigorously proved. Its seminal figures are Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Over the last 75 years, analytic philosophy has come to dominate Western philosophy—first in England and now in the United States. So, for the first time in history, American philosophy is at the forefront—certainly in the English-speaking countries. Until recently, American philosophy has been only a small child to the great British tradition, and at times something of a ruffian in world philosophy. This new American preeminence is therefore an unnoticed cultural shock of the highest order—as though Ireland had secretly become the source of the world's fine wines.

Kripke's boyhood genius did not flicker out in the 1960s, when he studied at Harvard, Oxford, Princeton and Rockefeller University—or, more accurately, when he worked on his own at those institutions and had occasional contact with his surroundings. His academic training was unique. He ascended directly to full professorships without ever earning a doctorate, and he never earned a doctorate because no one could ever quite decide who would presume to teach him, or in what field. The universities let him alone and admitted him to their faculties when he said he was ready.

Kripke was usually off in his own tower, writing his own thoughts, oblivious to the myths growing up around him that would stretch his feats even farther than they went and would sometimes brand him as a little strange. He published exclusively in journals of logic and mathematics, creating new fields in mathematical set theory and modal logic, which will generate Ph.D. theses for years to come. But he considered himself a philosopher and the profession happily concurred.

In this decade, entering his 30's Kripke began allowing some of his lectures on philosophical topics to be published. These were important events in themselves as a kind of philosophical emergence. When someone with an awesome reputation in mathematics begins to address philosophical questions, it inevitably triggers memories of other great modern philosophers who were first mathematicians: Descartes, Leibniz, Mill, Russell. And Kripke's emergence caused further stir within the profession because he gave hints of heresy. At the very end of "Naming and Necessity," a landmark lecture on the theory of proper names, Kripke posed a challenge to the materialism that is overwhelmingly predominant in current analytic philosophy—that anything we cannot see or sense simply does not exist. "Materialism, I think, must hold that a physical description of the world is a *complete* description of it, that any mental facts are 'ontologically dependent' on physical facts in the straightforward sense of following from them by necessity. No identity theorist [materialist] seems to me to have made a convincing argument against the intuitive view that this is not the case."

In the past few years, Kripke has not only kept up his mathematical work and continued his philosophical investigations, but has also “dabbled” in relativity theory and other distant fields. These developments underscore his potential to become the kind of synthetic philosopher long considered extinct—the kind that causes people to see the whole world in a way they had not been able to imagine. Kripke himself calls that level of work a “big move,” stresses its difficulty, and uses Aristotle as an example.

Kripke’s potential, his controversial views and his position as the budding genius in the world analytic philosophy have combined to make him a man who inspires awe and excitement among philosophers. In fact, he has already become something of a cult figure in philosophical circles—gossiped about, studied, analyzed and claimed as a kindred mind. Some philosophers lose their reserve when speaking of him. The cult phenomenon is itself remarkable, for philosophers as a group have such large egos that they correct Aristotle as they would a schoolchild, and they have such a healthy sense of skepticism that they doubt whether such things as proper names exist. Even in groups of two or three, they lace their conversation with exit clauses and qualifiers to guard against having a trapdoor sprung under some private reality. They do not, in short, subordinate or let go of themselves easily, and yet Kripke has been known to bring to their brain-twisting conclaves the atmosphere of an early Beatles concern.

A herd of philosophers is an extraordinary sign—a vast sea of beards and preoccupied expressions, a concentration of physical eccentricities generally associated with the bird realm of the animal kingdom, a procession of highly individualistic heads passing beneath a thin haze of pipe smoke. Such a herd moved through the hallways of New York’s Statler Hilton Hotel more than a year ago, when the presentation of Saul Kripke’s “theory of truth” was moved to the Grand Ballroom because of an overflow crowd. Even the ballroom was too small. Philosophers sat in the aisles and stood around the edge of the balcony, several thousand strong. They fell to a hush when Kripke took a seat on the stage, folded his hands on the bare table before him, and began.

“The question asked by Pilate in the Gospel of St. Matthew was, ‘What is truth?’” Kripke paused, rocking slowly in his chair and rubbing his hands lightly as though beneath an air dryer, and added with a shy smile: “Uh, he didn’t get an adequate answer at that time.” A chuckle passed through the audience, in special appreciation of one who could take on no less a subject than truth and yet retain his droll sense of humor. Kripke went on to note that truth theory has long been bedeviled by certain snares, some of which also arise in the Bible. According to the epistle of Titus, even the Cretan prophet states that “the Cretans are always liar.” If this is true of all other Cretan statements, then the prophet’s words are true if, and only if, they are false. Thus the liar paradox. Kripke outlined another example: Bertrand Russell once asked his eminent colleague G.E. Moore if Moore always told the truth. When Moore said no, Russell replied that Moore’s answer was the only lie he had ever told. This celebrated exchange between the philosophers can easily be paradoxical: If Moore’s life had been an unbroken string of true statements, then his denial would be his first lie and his admission of the lie would simultaneously be another truth. His “no” would be true if, and only if, it were false.

Kripke toyed briefly with the implications of the paradox and then showed that it is not merely a trivial loop in semantics. An unfavorable set of facts can generate paradox and make it impossible to specify conditions for assessing the truth of almost any sentence. To illustrate, Kripke offered up a sample statement: “Most, that is, a majority, of Nixon’s assertions about Watergate are false.” After making a paradox of this, with some merriment, he introduced John Dean as a character and soon filled the ballroom with images of Nixon and Dean confounded in mutual paradox. His mental gymnastics were spellbinding, as though he were waving sparklers in the dark spots of the brain. Once, when he could tell that his listeners were getting dizzy in the rush of his calculations, Kripke paused, gestured to his blackboard, and said, “Uh, you can check this out at your leisure.” There was relieved laughter and scattered applause.

All this—the crowd, excitement and audience reaction—was unprecedented for a philosophical gathering in America. Kripke was special, and he was bridging great gaps in the fields. His topic was a “technical” one, approaching truth as a problem of language instead of substance. (His paper would have been little use to Pontius Pilate.) But Kripke captivated the non-technical philosophers, too, with his liveliness and passion.

He darted about the stage like a nervous entertainer, jerky and somewhat awkward of body. His presence was a mixture of boyish enthusiasm and formidable confidence. His beard showed sprouts of gray, but his longish hair gave him the look of a hippie prophet. He was dressed like a schoolboy in slacks and open shirt with heavy brogans, in contrast to the more formally attired elders who pay him homage. Kripke kept losing his chalk, and he would continue the lecture while looking for it half-heartedly. The audience generously granted him such affectations, which, in Kripke’s case, carry the make of something special—a runaway mind being chased by character.

He did no obscure the intuitive sense of his argument behind a cloud of jargon and Greek symbols. Kripke communicated with large numbers of people without excluding any of them unnecessarily. He was well into his lecture before the untrained had to take things on faith and the technical philosophers got their due. Then he sketched his theory of how to avoid paradox and “ungroundedness” in truth statements without resorting to a cumbersome hierarchy of languages. His goal was to preserve the words “true” and “false” as they are commonly used. Kripke took the linguistic philosophers through several mathematical somersaults, to their joy, while the others could only admire the grandeur of the venture. At the end of the lecture (“Well, that is the basic idea”), the ballroom hummed with interpretive comments. “When I hear something like that,” signed an Ivy League philosopher, “I want to leave the profession and go out and drive a cab.”

David Kaplan, chairman of the philosophy department U.C.L.A., offered an equally enthusiastic judgment: “That new theory of truth is an important even in the history of philosophy.”

Not long after the truth lecture, president Frederick Seitz took steps to abolish his entire philosophy program at Rockefeller University, where Kripke had worked since 1968. Seitz notified Kripke and the three other tenured philosophy professors that they would do well to seek employment elsewhere. Some chilly negotiations followed, in which the philosophers protested this violation of the tenure principle and Seitz told them they would receive “minimal” support of they held out for their rights. “Eventually we all caved in,” says Kripke. The philosophers accepted a generous settlement, swallowed their pride and moved on. Rockefeller’s trustees announced that they were paring the university down to a core group of life sciences, but the philosophy group was the only one to be removed *en masse* (the logic group was slowly dissolved). “Experimental physics was saved,” sighs Kripke. He went to Princeton, where he spent the past academic year.

Thus was philosophy done the dishonor of being exterminated at a university so prestigious that it has been described as “a spirit floating somewhere above the Ivy League.”

Saul Kripke found himself, in effect, fired. He had been celebrated and written about in 1973, when he became the youngest philosopher to give the John Locke lectures at Oxford, but at home he held less than a special place. His treatment brought a rude shock to philosophy—what observers elsewhere might feel if some credit agency were to dump Jimmy Carter and his belongings out on Pennsylvania Avenue.

It was not that philosophers have no heritage of controversy. From Socrates to the free thinkers, they have had their martyrs—not counting all those who still die in the name of one philosopher or another, such as Marx. Other philosophers have been fired. Cambridge fired Bertrand Russell in 1916 for his pacifistic views on World War I; two years later, Russell served six months in jail for insulting the United States, Britain’s wartime ally. It was in fact the *absence* of controversy that was surprising, and humiliating to the profession.

The Rockefeller philosophers were eased out quietly, there was no outcry, and university spokesmen defended the action as an economy move.

Neither crude national pride nor reverence for the heirs of Aristotle protected Kripke and his colleagues. Times have changed since John Dewey was such a national fixture that it is hard to imagine his being quietly fired under any circumstances. The beam of philosophy, which illuminated the Western mind in ancient Greece and which provided a guiding light for science and progress in Europe, has passed on to the United States—only to be ignored.

Certainly the profession is now held in low esteem. Norman Bowie, executive secretary of the American Philosophical Association, says that philosophy has been singled out for special abuse during the current fiscal crunch in American academia. “The only people who tend to suffer more are the classics departments,” Bowie laments, “and that’s because the only thing more “useless” than philosophy is Latin.” Last year, the philosophy department at M.I.T. underwent a forced absorption into the linguistics department. Elsewhere, philosophy courses have been gobbled up by political scientists, logicians and even English professors. College administrators have grown accustomed to picking on the philosophers. Bowie estimates that there are more than 2,500 unemployed philosophers in the country. Every year, eight new philosophers compete for each job opening.

At a recent convention, a caucus of unemployed philosophers debated a series of desperate proposals. One called for the hiring of a public-relations firm to publicize philosophical achievements, and another called on philosophers to follow lead of the economists and psychiatrists by persuading corporations to hire “house” philosophers. One graduate student shouted that the profession would never get on its feet until philosophers realized that they are oppressed as part of the working class. Then a nattily dressed and securely employed professor read a formal paper urging his listeners to take comfort from the fact that unemployment in philosophy is not real. “In Kantian terms, the job crisis for philosophers is phenomenally real but noumenally mythical,” he declared, to the groans of the assembled job hunters.

The philosophical mode lives on even in the midst of hardship. Only at a national gathering of philosophers can one hear a scholar solemnly pronounce that “official Marxism is not, therefore, flatly incorrect, but, in a Hegelian sense, it is one-sided.” The intrepid philosopher offers assertions knowing that his colleagues are lying in ambush, waiting to make a pincushion of his ego. At a session entitled “Can Statements Be Identified With Sentences?” one scholar, working under the aegis of Kripkean semantics, sallied forth with a hopeful yes by employing set theory as it might apply to possible worlds in which a model of all sentences might be constructed. His critic then attacked at length, scoffing that the presentation was “unfounded,” “not well motivated” and based on “arguments which I find mysterious” (mysterious is the unkindest cut of all). The original speaker, wounded mortally, could barely manage a wistful reply: “I am happy to see, by the way, that I finally succeeded in making a mysterious argument. It has always been my ambition.” He laughed nervously and fell silent. Then a foolhardy man in the audience spoke up: “May I ask one naïve question? Why does everyone shrink from using the term ‘proposition’?” This unguarded query drew such a withering response from the eminent Ruth B. Marcus of Yale that sympathetic embarrassment for the man wafted through the room.

Philosophical debates often resemble two people racing up ladders of air to reach the superior height, from which position the loser can be dismissed out of hand. The put-down, which is highly developed, is the principal jousting weapon along the way, and the most effective put-down is the dreaded counterexample. At a rarefied seminar in England, a philosopher of language once presented a formal lecture in which he announced that a double negative is known to mean a negative in some language and a positive in others but that no natural language had yet been discovered in which a double positive means a negative. Whereupon professor Sidney Morgenbesser is said to have piped up from the back of the room with an instant, sarcastic, “Yeah, yeah.” This convulsed the audience in laughter and put a blot on the speaker’s

career. (He would suffer afterward from the philosophical equivalent of the Ralph Branca syndrome.) Morgenbesser is a feared counterexample man.

The cycle of assertion and riposte never ends. This in itself can be reassuring—like taking a drive out of the city and finding that the earth is still being plowed—but the philosophers always seem to wind back at ground zero. Such journeys, forever circular, give rise to the stereotype of the philosopher, as someone who, when pushed, has nothing more to offer about life than an honest shrug of the shoulders. Because such a stereotype prevails, ordinary philosophers get fired and pushed around on campuses, and the genius of a philosopher like Saul Kripke is neglected outside the profession.

The philosophers themselves tend not to deny that they are isolated, but the “technical” and “nontechnical” philosophers often quarrel heated over both cause of this isolation and the significance.

“If you are really interested in man and the universe,” says David Kaplan, “you have to solve some problems in math.” This is a kind of abbreviated credo for the dominant analytic school. In a metaphorical tribute to their supremacy, the language philosophers and the Association of Symbolic Logic were assigned to the Hilton’s Sky Top Room at the New York convention, while Marxists, the radicals and the caucus of the unemployed were relegated to a basement called the Play Penn.

Because analytic philosophers have been driven by a desire to elevate philosophy to a science, there is a certain amount of “science envy” among them; the adherents speak of “mistakes” and “breakthroughs” as though they were scientists. They also prize the mathematician’s inspiration (which partially accounts for their awe of Kripke). “I love logic for the sheer joy of achievement,” says Bas Van Fraassen, a highly regarded philosopher and logician from Toronto. “The thing about logic is that when you see the problem it is terribly frightening. Then you solve it and you’re thrilled. For me, it’s like parachuting.”

The same pure oxygen can motivate the study of language. “If you wander into a lush natural forest,” says U.C.L.A.’s David Kaplan, by way of analogy, “what do you see? You see all kinds of colors and tangles and shapes—things growing every conceivable way. And you say, ‘This is a jungle.’ But the naturalist sees it differently. He sees a structure to all the plants, an order to them. It seems like an amazing thing to me that there can be a science to botany—that there can be an order to it—but there is. People said the same thing about natural language, and about the possibility of making it a science and making it all logical. They said, ‘Language is a jungle,’ where it seems that anyone can say anything. And we say, ‘No, it’s not like that. There’s a lot of order. It’s complex but it’s not a jungle.’ Now we know at least that it’s not a jungle.”

Analytic philosophy is an adventure that promises to free the discipline from its nomadic wanderings and vast cosmological speculations, to give it a home of solid doctrine at last. From this perspective, the call of the “social” philosophers to wrestle further with the old conundrums becomes a siren song indeed. Even if some philosopher were to conjure up a magnificent new worldview, it would last only until the next counterexample washed it away.

Besides, social philosophy often seems incompatible with philosophical reason and dispassion. Philosophers who step out into contemporary affairs have a habit of making fools of themselves, or worse. Martin Heidegger wound up an open admirer of the Nazis, and “Bertie” Russell reinforced the image of the doddering philosopher by taking tea at some of his numerous demonstrations. His international tribunal, which convicted Lyndon Johnson of war crimes in Vietnam, was widely considered a laughingstock, especially within the profession, although many of its factual allegations were subsequently proved true. And many in the profession wince at the memory of a band of Harvard philosophers who went out and

joined the Progressive Labor Party in the 1960's, possessed of an ideological fervor that moved them to chant and proselytize and do all manner of things they soon came to regret. Analytic philosophers may have their own ethical views, but it seems wise to divorce them from the task of building a scientific foundation for the discipline.

Such is the position of the establishment, and dissenters of many stripes inveigh against it. In the past 10 years, philosophical hippies burst into American Philosophical Association conventions and placed copulating fogs in the midst of the astonished professors to show them how far the profession has removed itself from the rhythms of life.

Some veteran philosophers, in a less urgent way, have criticized the dominant strain in the profession for being dull. "There is an extraordinary amount of formulized philosophy," observes Prof. Arthur Danto of Columbia. "One knows precise what one has to master in order to be successful, and all you have to do it do it." The very triumph of the analysts has made the profession predictable. "A lot of people are tired and desiccated," said Robert Nozick of Harvard, "and they have a feeling of being at a dead end." Discoveries still come along and fresh specialties appear as divisions of old ones, but none of this has come close to giving language or logic any magical new powers over the ancient philosophical problems.

Saul Kripke, from the apex of analytic philosophy, inspires those around him who are committed to the partnership between philosophy and mathematics. Surprisingly, Kripke himself thinks this partnership has been overblown. "Many people think that philosophers have become mathematicians," he says, "but most philosophers are far from being experts in the field." Only a handful of philosophers, including Kripke, attended the last meeting of the Association for Symbolic Logic, and Kripke believes the inevitable has already come about: The mathematicians have taken over logic after the philosophers nurtured it for 75 years. Once again philosophy is crowded out. ("Philosophy is mother of sciences," says Prof. Morris Lazerowitz, "but she herself is sterile.")

Kripke is equally skeptical of any claim that analytic philosophy has thorough scientific objectivity—a claim that enables them to dismiss the desire for a more traditional philosophy as emotional and therefore unscientific. Kripke believes that philosophers do no escape their desires entirely; they only suppress them. "Take Quine [W.V.O Quine of Harvard, the senior eminence of American logic]. I think parts of his views are a kind of materialism or physicalism in which everything is physical and behavioristic—there are only physical causes of behavior. And with that view comes the view that philosophy should be a scientific enterprise, continuous with science. And that's a view in his work that's almost not even argued for, but assumed at the beginning. And I should think that's high personal, in a way. The notion that philosophy should be continuous with science can itself be a sort of religion."

Kripke shies away from the scientific self-image, but this does not mean he is ready to minister to the world with incantations. He does believe in "consumer" philosophy. "Some people from outside philosophy want something that's emotionally gripping," he says, "with no corresponding thought to the analysis behind it. The mod has been strongly against that. And I've often thought that certain views got a lot of attention because people felt they were in some way exciting rather because of the quality of the argument behind them."

Among analytic philosophers, the prevailing view is that their isolation is normal. They scoff at our image of a past when statesmen and ordinary citizens kept abreast of philosophical developments, when politicians got together to discuss Montesquieu instead of slush funds. They say philosophy was always too difficult for anyone but the specialist. Intellectuals only pretended to comprehend quality work. Some philosophers,

such as Hilary Putnam of Harvard, go so far as to argue that isolation from the outside world is itself a sign of strength—if outsiders could understand enough to get interested, it would mean the profession had gone soft. Kripke stops short of this Vince Lombardi standard of philosophical fitness. He thinks it is unfortunate that there is so little lay interest in modern philosophy, but he also believes outsiders have unrealistic expectations: “The mind-body problem is still around in philosophy, but it probably wouldn’t help any sophomore through his identity crisis or help him decide whether to be a Communist or a Catholic, and it probably wouldn’t appear as the theme in many novels.” There are archscientists in philosophy who would like to see linguistic and logical tools polished to perfection, however long it takes, before tackling the old stumpers again. There are also romantics around who would like to bring forth some earthshaking new worldview by natural concentration, the way a hen lays an egg. As preposterous as these extremes may seem, there is precious little middle ground.

In the past few years, two philosophers have attempted to apply new analytic techniques to general theories in political philosophy. John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* and Robert Nozick’s *Anarchy, State and Utopia* are synthetic approaches that sparked attention both within philosophy and outside it. Both men are highly respected in the profession. Rawls is one of those rare people who is almost universally admired for his personal qualities and also for his painstaking scholarship, and Nozick is respected for the analytic skills that took him to top positions at Princeton, Rockefeller and Harvard. Yet philosophers tend to be polite about these books. Rawls’s work is in the Adlai Stevenson spirit of social obligation, buttressed mainly by modern economic utility theory. And Nozick’s book lies somewhere in the Thoreau-Ayn Rand spectrum of individual rights, buoyed by symbolic logic. In both cases, the theory is hardly new and the analysis plays a secondary role. The analysis looks impressive and scientific, but it is nevertheless a kind of chrome plating over rather standard models of liberal and conservative philosophy.

Grave peril awaits and philosopher who wanders outside the safety of technical work. Even Kripke is no immune. When word that Kripke had granted an interview to the *New York Times Magazine* passed quickly around the New York convention, a number of philosophers pressed eagerly to learn of his thoughts. (Timidity and decorum have prevented most philosophers from asking Kripke much. He remains something of a mystery figure, and informal chatter from and about him is high prized.) One professor asked if he had spoken of Watergate. Kripke had in fact remarked on the hypocrisy of certain media commentators; they lionized Nixon after the 1972 election even though they had known him for years and the basic facts of Watergate were already available. Then they professed to be shocked and dismayed when the scandal came to a head. Upon hearing of Kripke’s remark, the inquiring philosopher, who by his own account was overwhelmed with admiration for Kripke’s truth lecture, instantly lost his humility. “Then Professor Kripke should confine himself to modal logic,” he said icily, drawing himself up to full height. “For that strikes me as false.”

Kripke spends almost of his time at Princeton, where he tries to take daily walks along Lake Carnegie. They are hardly the leisurely philosophical stroll, for Kripke takes off at breakneck speed and keeps it up for five miles or more, arms flailing as though moving ski poles. Because of his velocity, he usually winds up by himself, but when he talks to someone it is in spurts. He can stop abruptly, gaze off intently at a family of ducks or at nothing, and then return a minute later to the exact point of the sentence he broke off earlier.

The person normally struggling to keep up is Kripke’s wife, Margaret Gilbert, a British philosopher who has taught at Princeton, U.C.L.A. and Oxford. They married last year, and Gilbert shows no signs of difficulty adjusting to her position as spouse of the most outstanding member of her own profession. She specializes in philosophy of the social sciences, a subject that has less of a laboratory flavor than Kripke’s modal logic. Her brother, Martin Gilbert, is a biographer of Winston Churchill.

Kripke and his wife tend to speak with a suppressed chuckle running beneath the voices. (Kripke lectures that way.) There is an undertone of amusement when discussing serious philosophy. The amusement vanishes only when they seem to take their minds out of gear temporarily, at which time they weave perfunctory conversation about a tax form or some missing household item. Such talks can be quite solemn, but humor returns with a mention of Sartre or Tychonoff's theorem.

A sense of whimsy may have been instilled in Kripke quite early. Before he started kindergarten he was entertained around the house by his mother, who recited passages from Gilbert and Sullivan. Kripke memorized them all, and his imagination led him to try some storytelling of his own. He has written unpublished manuscripts of detective novels and a play, in Hebrew, that was performed at a summer camp in his youth. As a child, Kripke dreamed up an entire fantasy world inhabited by gremlins and kept up a running series of gremlin episodes for the benefit of his two younger sisters. Even the gremlin world contained philosophical puzzles. "It was an absolute monarchy, of course," smiles Kripke. "The king was infallible. He had every possible quality—like he was both the tallest and the shortest. Or so the gremlins thought."

His interests still roam. In order to play with the concept of black holes—implosions of matter in space—he has intensified his sideline work in physics. He dissects books on selected contemporary characters—for example, Kim Philby, the Soviet spy who for years was a high official of British intelligence and who moved in the loftiest of Britain's intellectual circles. Kripke is fascinated by the mixture of truth and falsity, of contrary passions, that must have been contained within Philby's double life.

It is this same lively spirit that motivates Kripke to shake loose the technical confine of contemporary philosophy. "People used to talk about concepts more, and now they talk about words more," he says, capsulizing the profession. "Sometimes I think it's better to talk about concepts."

Some of the new work has already been done and is lying "in a drawer somewhere." Kripke says it will flesh out earlier hints of his attack on materialism. This may be the reason his philosophical papers have been banned in the Soviet Union, where his work in modal logic is translated and approved. "In metaphysics, the Russians are against what they consider idealism," laughs Kripke.

"And yet they approve of parapsychology," says Margaret Gilbert. "I don't quite understand them."

Kripke says he plans to do some work on "time" and "on technical questions, like whether the future will resemble the present." For non-philosophers who might be led to expect the definitive trip in the time machine, Kripke warns that his work "would be on some really special aspects of time."

Most surprising, Kripke takes a professional interest in the philosophy of human emotion—a topic that is so far removed from the mainstream of analytic work as to be a non-subject. At a seminar not long ago, an analytic philosopher said in passing, "The emotions? There are no emotions, really. Inclinations, perhaps, but not emotions."

What I think is important is whether the motions have something like a felt quality," says Kripke. "Like feeling a tickle. Like feeling a sensation ... whether the emotions have a felt quality like that of a sensation—have introspectable qualities. An emotion isn't a pure sensation, but how the concepts are related intrigues me.... There is some stuff in the literature that's materialist, you know, that fear is just the sensation you have when certain physical properties come into play—that behavior is important.... You can't imagine a tickle if you've never experienced one—that seems true—but I was wondering whether that property of sensations applies to emotions like hatred or fear. I would think that fear isn't just a belief that something is dangerous and a corresponding tendency to avoid it. There's something more, and what is that?"

Saul Kripke is possible the only living philosopher who may be able to rattle the world of philosophy with unorthodox work in such fields as time, materialism and the emotions. If these theories are to be supported by the same level of technical work that had led him to be called a genius, they will embroil the whole profession in debate. Many analysts find the very undertaking of such work offensive, and others would find the substance of the theories deplorable. Still others would be inspired. Kripke could produce the kind of overall philosophy that would make philosophers butt heads again. The noise might even draw the interest of those outsiders who could penetrate the jargon of debate, and to them philosophy would become more than a historical echo. Beyond that, no one knows what might happen.

Back in Omaha, the Kripke parents are quite gratified by recent developments. In May of this year, their son returned home to receive an honorary doctorate from the University of Nebraska in both mathematics and philosophy. “His genius and precocity have made him a legendary figure in the philosophical circles of all English-speaking countries,” states the degree. “It is amazing to realize that a man could accomplish so much in such a short time.... And the character of his work leads the members of his profession to expect even greater achievements from him in the future.”

The Kripkes are proud of his career but feel especially warm about the recent work in philosophy. Mrs. Kripke believes Saul always had too much moral passion to restrict himself to technical pursuits. In the sixth grade, she said, he refused to take the standard psychological profile test required for high school. The questions on the test—for example, Is the world getting to be a better place to live?—were fishing for the well-adjusted child, who would be rewarded with a high score. “Saul knew what answers they wanted,” says Rabbi Kripke, “and felt that if he took the test he would be caught between telling a lie and doing an injustice to himself. She he wouldn’t take it.” School officials and the Board of Education pressured him for a year, to no avail. “So far as the Board of Education was concerned,” laughs Mrs. Kripke, “Saul had no personality at all.”

Rabbi Kripke is thankful that his son’s philosophical leanings have brought him closer to the tradition of the *Ilui*, as geniuses in rabbinical studies are known.

Saul Kripke is a cautious, tentative revolutionary in the world of modern philosophy. He moves restlessly in the corridors of what is known. Technical philosophers hope he will help fashion a key to open some of the locked doors, while romantics hope he will discover an entire new hallway. The technicians dream of one master key that could make a science of all philosophy, while the romantics dream of “the big move” that would make philosophy grab the world again and prove that philosophical intuition had not run dry.

Kripke is caught between the two dreams. His safest course would be to fulfill neither—to remain at the top of analytic philosophy by turning out good work, while sending out a stream of teasers for the romantics. He teeters at the brink of trying something more. “When I was younger, I hoped I might be another Aristotle,” he smiles. Now perhaps not: “Most of the big moves have already been tried.” He reels off a list of all the great philosophers who never married, and frowns. Then he takes comfort from the marriage of George Berkeley (“finally”) and Russell (“a lot”). And then he smiles. He jokes that his greatest fear is that a philosopher at a convention many years hence will remark about some fellow name Kripke, who was “only a figure in the middle period of American philosophy.” He would rather be the founder of a new philosophy.

By struggling with the nature of reality itself, philosophers have touched the most sublime and most absurd chords of the human ego. “Kripke may want to build a whole cathedral,” said a dazzled philosopher after the truth lecture, “but I’d settle for one of his little stained glass windows.”



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Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Taylor Branch is the author of the trilogy on America during the Martin Luther King era and *The Cartel*, a Byliner Original.

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