I am completely normal. Even while I was carrying out the task of extermination, I led a normal family life.

Rudolf Höss, Commandant of Auschwitz

In 1945 Continental Europe was in ruins, Britannia on her knees. Political power had shifted to America and – in more raw and dreaded form – to Stalin’s Soviet Union. Nevertheless, there was a certain confidence that, with the benefit of an American protective shield – a necessity often treated by Britons with an envious or mocking contempt sometimes expressed pithily of GIs as ‘over-fed, over-sexed, over ‘ere!’ – things would return to an improved version of a cultural and intellectual ‘Western’ normality assumed to have remained more or less in place. Now that we were rid of Hitler and Mussolini, followed by Japan’s Tojo and fellow militarists, we could set about establishing a fairer social order: better health, education, housing, better working conditions – something of the Utilitarian’s vision of an ideal society.

Though we envisaged that society largely in material terms, some hoped that, especially with better and wider-spread education, there might be some sort of ‘spiritual’ – though not necessarily religious – revival. European art and culture would recover after the lengthy and literally devastating hiatus, with larger numbers equipped to share in it; thus, and with the despised Americans paying for our defence, we could go for a New Order – however bankrupt the ‘we’, not only fiscally but intellectually, morally, spiritually… Among us were still those who hankered for Revolution: Communist, even Stalinist. As did some in France, Germany, Italy, Greece. As did even...
2 CONFOUN D IN THE WEST

a few in what to them was ‘God’s Own Country’, our linguistic cousins in the United States.

The changes envisaged requiring clearance as the first stage, with the question of what we should improve arose the less openly discussed question of what we should eliminate. In Britain the problem seemed especially urgent with respect to education: this it was proposed to deal with by ‘comprehensivisation’ – raising the question of what to do with the existing ‘public’ and ‘grammar’ schools, the latter already offering bright children a superior educational experience attainable via examination: ‘the Eleven-plus’ (from the age at which it was sat by all primary school pupils) or just ‘the Scholarship’. Those benefitting from the so-called public schools were of more mixed abilities, being limited – apart from some few on scholarships – by parental ability to pay. For these, ‘Close down every fuckin’ one’, was the solution offered by Labour’s Anthony Crosland, playing the working-class lad. Others thought that too extreme, even too Marxist, and that temporising was required.

Thus arose the fateful question much discussed when we were students at Cambridge in the 1950s: whether to raise the new ‘comprehensives’ – inevitably large and complex like their American originals – to the standard of the better ‘public’, ‘private’ and ‘grammar’ schools, by providing them with more teachers of more subjects in smaller classes, with ‘streaming’ in at least ‘core’ subjects; or alternatively to lower the standards set by the academically superior schools, therefore reducing elitism by a venture in social engineering.

It was probably inevitable that the latter option, involving spending a lot less money, would be accepted by default rather than decided upon. The British example would soon find analogues elsewhere in Europe, and in that outcome we can recognise factors contributing to the present cultural confusion which is our subject matter. The incoming changes in schooling would encourage a sometimes deliberately engineered ignorance and misunderstanding of our past, even where there was the wish to retain something of its outlook and virtues. Some of the cultural effects can be recognised in the
general decline of knowledge of British and European literature and history as older works and older ages were adjudged either too demanding or ‘irrelevant’, so began to disappear from syllabuses in favour of less ambitious, more contemporary options. The decline in standards is well illustrated in the case of English literature. In 1945 Chaucer was a compulsory study at both Ordinary and Advanced Levels. By 2022 many University students of English have not read anything by ‘the Father of English Literature’; some would seem to have barely heard of him. As for history, by now few in our schools acquire any coherent knowledge of the world before the nineteenth century – at best, for too often the cut-off comes in the twentieth.

Such educational ‘reforms’ are more widely informative, their implication and their effect being to hold that the world has changed and we must change with it; hence, in the rush to produce a social ‘equality’ too often viewed as homogenisation, an ulterior aim has been to eliminate the past from our common awareness. With this unthinking social progressivism has competed a wishful thinking about politics and history. In the United Kingdom (as in France over Algeria and ‘Indo-China’), many assumed that the British Empire could carry on as before the War, with its ideals, real or projected. In 1956 the Suez crisis would put an end to that, with America waving the big stick to compel our withdrawal. Thereafter the United Kingdom would indulge a cut-and-run policy of abandoning her colonies, with ‘imperialism’ now adjudged a Bad Thing and the British Empire, with its drain on national income – and despite its by-and-large equitable system of government and provision for education and social relief – to be viewed as on a par with Mussolini’s land-grabs – perhaps even Hitler’s.

As students, many of us naively liked to assume that with black rule in Africa there would ensue a corruption-free Garden of Eden, ‘original sin’ (as the Christians remaining among us might have put it) being non-applicable to the untainted non-Europeans. In fact the largely European-educated – usually English- or French-speaking – native rulers
who took over the Black Continent too often proved not merely more incompetent than their predecessors, but some decidedly rapacious and corrupt. That could be explained away as a secondary effect of imperialism – for another feature of our times has been European willingness to deny obvious and global facts. The ensuing and encroaching blending of reality and unreality would make for further conceptual confusion.

Traditional Europe had been, even with its quarrels, wars and oppressions, a Christian entity in which the clergy were generally respected if not obeyed – and after World War II the mainline churches prepared to continue as before. But not only were their congregations soon to diminish (after, in some cases, a wartime ‘bubble’) but their Christianity was already dissolving. For not only was contempt for a past deemed irrelevant eroding serious interest in Greek and Roman antiquity, but ‘scientific’ study was attacking that other root of an older Europe, the Christian church based in Judaism, its Bible and traditions. By a large constituency of European adults, most ‘Bible stories’ are by now unknown and many have barely heard of Moses, some even of Jesus. Attitudes to the post-war formation of the State of Israel as a haven for Jews and more generally to – and by – those Jews would contribute to this.

For while few earlier Christian believers had taken metaphysical accounts of the Trinity too seriously in what had become largely a national or tribal religion, theological ignorance did not keep bums off pews. By 1945, however, ‘advanced’ Protestants had more or less given up their belief in an historical Jesus with much resemblance to the icon previously worshipped or even to His New Testament portrait. In addition, they were finessing their traditional moral beliefs, particularly about sex and marriage. That hybrid conglomerate, the Church of England, had backed divorce and contraception since 1930 (though officially only in 2002 approving remarriage in the lifetime of a spouse). With morality uncertain and the Bible widely viewed as legendary [including by not a few clergy], the eventual disappearance of congregations, after a certain post-War burgeoning, could have been predicted. At the time of writing, the institutional Protestant
churches still muddle along – with ever more ‘chiefs’ and fewer ‘Indians’ – exhibiting their confused and confusing combination of traditional religion and contemporary scepticism: to be joined latterly by the paradigm Western ‘Roman Catholic’ Church with a hierarchy long resistant to the Zeitgeist and members widely accepting a mental compartmentalism as the price of continuance in the faith. We shall inevitably be revisiting this, the Great Church under whose auspices the structures of what we call European civilisation had been developed out of Graeco-Roman and Jewish roots.

Meanwhile in Germany, fountainhead of Protestant theology, Christian behaviour – especially but not only as presented by the transmutation of much Lutheranism into ‘German Christianity’ under the Nazis – left many to conclude that Churches should, with the Nazis, pass into history (while still being allowed to collect tax revenues for social services such as marrying and burying). On the wider scene it could be recognised as something of the catastrophe of European Christianity predicted by many, most notably by both Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky. Too often it would seem as if all ‘Christians’ had to offer came down to outdated moralising coupled with a vague ‘spirituality’.

Plus, it all happened so quickly: the remaining Church scaffolding torn away, leaving some clinging on (it might be to their benefices), others just confused.

This change in the ‘West’ from 1945 on – with the ensuing intellectual chaos – cannot be explained entirely in terms of world-events and the rise and fall of Empires; such may go hand in hand with literary and philosophical novelty. Neither Marx nor Nietzsche was an emperor or a general, and nor were those older gurus – Rousseau, Hume, Kant – whose works have been influential far beyond the ivory towers where they were conceived. In times of cultural reassessment, social and political changes – which may in part result from economic fluctuation – and the thoughts of philosophers (often inaccurately transmitted by journalists and publicists) will play into each other. Thinkers may offer ideas that a public has long, even secretly, been
waiting to hear, while the public, exerting social and political pressure, encourages intellectual adventurism and careerism.

Never was such interaction so liable to produce cultural ferment as in this recent age, with its growing contempt for a past viewed not merely as irrelevant but as surely more wicked than our noble selves. And with communications made all but instantaneous: whereas decrees of earlier potentates, civil or ecclesiastical, might take weeks or months to reach the bounds of their authority, acceptance or rejection of orders and ideas can now occur within seconds; moreover, when imbibing the thoughts or feelings of varieties of ‘celebs’ on ‘social media’, the imbibers have little means of checking their truth, nor the instigators much suasion to be truthful. As we know – or can know – much ‘fake news’ is passed around anonymously.

So what – old or new – have Western philosophers, pundits and public intellectuals been passing around in the past half-century? That in part is what the following chapters set out to recount. First we should ask what happens more generally in those palmy university days when, as students, we are apt to take upon ourselves to settle the ‘big’ questions. At the outset our student – he or latterly more probably she – has (perhaps more than with any other ‘humanities’ subject) only a vague idea what ‘Philosophy’ is, or might or ought to be, and is inclined to think of those who teach it as ‘doing’ philosophy: thus philosophy must be what they do – and not only in general terms, but usually (though a few rebels – more commonly male – may dissent) in the specific questions and possible answers with which the student concerns him or herself.

But what if our teachers are asking the wrong questions? What if they are accepting (or rejecting) only the questions proposed by their own teachers, who have been doing likewise – and so on back into time. And what if those questions were originally confusingly posed? The new student of philosophy may believe that he or she is learning to be wise while actually confronting questions which have evolved to be ever and exponentially more malformed: in which case, one can
expect the current philosophical scene to look trivial, absurd or even pointless. Already in the fifties of the last century some smarter undergraduates in our own Alma Mater were deciding that, with the philosophy on offer looking trivial, they would do well to study something else. And if our academic philosophy looks trivial, we should expect an inability to engage in ethical thinking and prioritising to permeate everyday life, accompanied by a growing irresponsibility – or perhaps a ‘virtual’ responsibility. Since World War II, and increasingly, that has been the case.

It might seem, indeed, that in addressing such questions that are ‘on the (academic) table’ or ‘in the (broadcast) air’, we have lost a sense of what philosophy is, or should be, about. Though admittedly that has been one of the perennial questions treated by philosophers, this will not be the forum in which to elaborate an answer to it. Instead we shall rely on the approach pioneered by Plato, who thought that philosophy could be recognised by comparison with sophistry, its shadow self. The sophist, says Plato, is like a bad carver, hacking up the meat into ill-assorted bits and so making rhetorical capital out of the ensuing confusion ‘on the table’; the philosopher is he – the English pronoun he/him/his is throughout this work to be taken as gender-inclusive; likewise our use of the English word ‘man’ shall assume the reader not to be of that over-literalist breed of gender-warriors who insist on regarding it, erroneously, as denoting exclusively the male of our species – who is capable of looking at the world and at himself and ‘cutting it up’ – which is what the Greek-derived ‘analysing’ means – in terms of its natural and intelligible divisions: that is, he will distinguish (Latin ‘Distinguo’, as the medieval scholastic was taught to reiterate) between such pairs as: being-and-non-being, being-and-becoming, same-and-other, like-and-unlike, even-and-odd, right-and-left – even male-and-female.

It will be a major thesis of the present book that most Western heads are filled to bursting with a collection of incompatible ideas, even while their owners may believe they think coherently. As our analysis of these heads and their content aims to show, they will be at...
best intellectually compartmentalised, banalities jostling with important principles to produce a general philosophical confusion to serve as a guide for life. That this is often the case can be tested by a thought-experiment.

Pick three or four important moral themes on which you would take your stand: for example, to do with social justice, racism, capital punishment, population control – you name it! Then ask yourself on what principle you feel so strongly about each of them. If you go back far enough in your self-analysis you are liable to find that the essential first principle for one or more of your beliefs contradicts the first principle for one or more others: put in logical terms, that you believe ‘p and not-p’ (p being a proposition) at the same time. A good example is provided by the woman who urges that capital punishment be banned, even for serial murderers and torturers, because human life is somehow ‘sacred’, while simultaneously insisting on her ‘right’ to kill her innocent pre-born child a day or so before she would ‘expect’ to be born. (Of course, in attempting this test you will have to answer your own questions honestly; giving yourself the benefit of the doubt will weaken your chance of uncovering any possible truth.)

If the analysis we are about to undertake, of the history of Western thought from Socrates to Heidegger, Parfit and Rawls, is essentially correct, and if it shows the plethora of data to which we are now exposed to be an incoherent mass, then what is to be done? For a start, universities would have to be persuaded to rethink a narrow obsession – and not only in philosophy – with the contemporary, let alone with the merely economically advantageous. Philosophy departments in particular would have to give far more time to how our contemporary and supposedly ‘relevant’ questions became so contemporary and [supposedly] relevant. Thus the history of philosophy would have to be taken much more seriously, with older problems again admitted to ‘the table’ – not ‘rephrased’ as though they were our identical own: all this to clear the ground for a better understanding of what has proven compatible philosophically and...
culturally with what. Only then may we proceed to more contemporary observations.

But why, you may wonder, start with the Greeks? Since the first men, civilisations have come and gone, some few highly organised and literate: why not start in Babylon or ancient Egypt or China? Or with ‘mitochondrial’ Eve? The answer to that will depend on our keeping the actualities in mind. Yes, there were civilisations before Greece and Rome, though with limited intellectual influence on these which (along with Ancient Israel) provide our significant cultural inheritance. If others besides these three roots are to be called on to help us now, we need to discover whether they – or others yet more remote – have in fact produced anything philosophical or more generally cultural to help relieve our latter-day discontents, which is not a call for more cultural archaeology, however interesting such a study might in itself be.

If the answer to our question whether a specific pre-Greek culture has intellectual (as distinct from, let us say, architectural or artistic) interest is ‘Yes’, then let us indeed learn from that culture – even as thinkers in the Middle Ages and Renaissance were able to enrich their philosophical patrimony (consisting as it did of a limited number of the writings of Plato, Aristotle, the ancient Stoics, Sceptics and Epicureans) as further texts were recovered and those already known shown to allow of an improved understanding. Nothing need be ruled out *a priori*, but compatibility and coherence must be kept ever in mind – as it too often has not been in the recent European past.

But what if the answer to our question about the cultural and intellectual relevance to us of pre-Greek societies is ‘No’? Then we need to face that reality without sentimentality, affected anti-Eurocentrism or other contemporary shibboleths.
Homer was not an Athenian, but by tradition a blind and wandering bard of the isle of Chios, off the Ionian coast. However, the first ‘edition’ of the Homeric poems was produced in sixth century BC Athens and marks the beginning of an intellectual and artistic achievement which laid the groundwork for the ‘Western’ culture we and the world have inherited and which we shall henceforth refer to as the Original Tradition.

Not that earlier Greece had contributed nothing to the enlightenment to come: apart from Homer, the variegated poetical output of such as Hesiod, Sappho, Alcaeus and Pindar and the intellectual originality of many of the Ionian Greeks – to include not least Heraclitus, Parmenides and the ‘atomist’ Democritus – lay behind the Athenian miracle.

Nor was that miracle to fade away, but to be handed on as Greek culture spread over the near East and beyond with the conquests of Alexander the Great and consequent ‘Hellenization’ of much of the known world. With the collapse of that ‘Hellenistic’ world and its subordination to Rome, the Romans too, with their practical appreciation of the powers of language, recognised their opportunity to pass on what the Greeks had given them while enriching their own civilisation. They thus formed a secondary source from which Europe and its worldwide offshoots were to be watered.
As for Athens, just as we have few original works (even counting copies) of her most famous ancient sculptors, Pheidias and Praxiteles, so the great majority of her literary output did not survive and played little more than a ‘local’ role in the development of Western civilisation. Of the hundreds of tragedies and comedies performed in fifth-century Athens, we have some forty masterpieces; they include Aeschylus’ the Oresteia, Sophocles’ Oedipus the King and Antigone (the former judged by Aristotle as the greatest of the tragedies), the Hippolytus and Bacchae of Euripides, and the Clouds, Frogs and Lysistrata of Aristophanes, to name some of the best known. Alongside these comes Thucydides’ massive History of the Peloponnesian War: not the first History written in Greek, for Herodotus and others had preceded Thucydides, but foundational for historical methodology and political science.

Athens had thus become, in world intellectual history, a – indeed the – intellectual foundry from which were soon to emerge the basic structures of our Western philosophical tradition. Historically this tradition grew out of challenges to prevailing social mores crystallised by a cosmopolitan group of thinkers, the ‘Sophists’: not before Plato a pejorative term, but rather indicating professionally wise men lured to Athens, a cultural centre and home to rich patrons.

‘Sophistic’ reappraisals of Greek culture and society were preceded and accompanied by more widespread intellectual curiosity and moral puzzlings. Herodotus had suggested that the Olympian gods were invented by Homer and Hesiod ‘some four hundred years before my time’. The heroine of Sophocles’ tragedy Antigone challenges King Creon to explain why the laws of the state should override the laws of the gods. ‘My tongue has sworn, my heart remains unsworn’, claims a character of Euripides – while another asks, ‘What is base unless the spectators think it so?’ Meanwhile Thucydides exposes the thuggery of politicians who distort moral language, telling their hearers that moderation is lack of virility, justice the last resort of the weak.

Yet it was the ‘Sophists’ who provoked the replies of Socrates, that self-styled ‘gadfly’ who punctured, by holding up to scrutiny, the
intellectual pretensions of the new teachers, as well as his fellow Athenians’ unexamined acceptance of the conventions these disputed. That challenge, fatal to Socrates himself, would prompt the composition by his pupil Plato, then by Plato’s pupil Aristotle, of those works of genius which even now can be seen to provide the rational foundation of our Western philosophical edifice.

The achievements of Plato and Aristotle – though by now long superseded in the areas of natural and biological science – rest primarily on foundational tenets in logic, mathematics, political theory, ethics, aesthetics and metaphysics (to include theology). Many of these advances would be scrutinised and supplemented in the various ‘schools’ of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds which, formal or informal, developed in the wake of Plato’s ‘Academy’: a proliferating output of ‘philosophical’ (the Greek-derived word denotes ‘love of wisdom’) activity which would continue for centuries, and indeed never entirely die out.

Socrates, so far as we know, wrote nothing. His abiding significance was secured by Plato making him the central figure in the majority of his philosophical dialogues. Prior to that, we know that he had obtained instant acclaim – also notoriety – among his contemporaries, and after his hemlock-execution by admirers down the centuries. Though Socrates himself claimed to know nothing, the oracle of Apollo at Delphi – source of the philosophically seminal maxim ‘Know Thyself’ – had hailed him as the wisest of the Greeks.

Largely abandoning his intellectual predecessors’ attempts to understand the physical universe in material, or rather in vitalist terms – a task which for some involved a ‘cleaning up’ of traditional religion and mythology – Socrates had set out to discover what the Oracle could have meant. His attention was on what he perceived to be intellectual confusion among his compatriots about those virtues, such as justice and ‘holiness’ or reverence, they thought they held dear, and on the clearing away of such confusion as a necessary first step to the acquisition of moral and political integrity. Beyond this preliminary demolition work, his aim was to ward off the threat of