

## APPENDIX:

### A CHRONOLOGICAL COMPILATION OF TESTIMONIAL EVIDENCE FOR ESOTERICISM

Beginning with Homer and ending with Wittgenstein, I present here in chronological order all the major, explicit testimony concerning philosophical esotericism that I have found to date. It includes all the quotations of this kind used in the book as well as many others that were not used. Still, it is far from exhaustive. Readers with suggestions for additions can send them to [philosophybetweenthelines@outlook.com](mailto:philosophybetweenthelines@outlook.com).

The compilation includes statements of several different kinds. First, declarations by an author of his own esotericism; second, other remarks concerning to the phenomenon of esotericism in general; third, the author's claim that some other writer wrote esoterically; and fourth, some other writer's claim that the author wrote esoterically.

For statements of the latter two kinds, where A is attributing esotericism to B, I have for the most part chosen—at the price of some repetition—to reproduce the quotation under both authors instead of using a cross-reference for one of them. After all, this compilation is on line where space is not an issue and scrolling is. Also, A's ascription of esotericism to B tells us something important about A as well as B, which should not be slighted. It helps us to gauge how widely—and by whom—the phenomenon was known, acknowledged, and discussed.

In most entries I simply transcribe the testimony without comment. But where the material is more abundant or more in need of explanation, I supply, within limits, a more detailed account.

Finally, it should be emphasized that this compilation presents quotations shorn of context and potentially subject to problems of translation, authenticity, and interpretation. Also, some of the testimony is merely suggestive. And of course, when A attributes esotericism to B, A could always be mistaken. Thus, the inclusion of a statement should not be taken for an endorsement of its correctness. For a brief discussion of what testimony like this can and cannot prove, see “The Credibility of This Evidence,” in *Philosophy Between the Lines*, pp. 24-29.

#### Testimony about Ancient Philosophy as a Whole:

The ancient philosophers had a double doctrine; the one external, public or *exoteric*; the other internal, secret or *esoteric*.

– “Exoteric and Esoteric,” *Encyclopedia of Diderot* (translation mine)

The [ancient] philosophers thought to escape persecution by adopting, through the example of the priests themselves, the use of a double doctrine, by which they confided only to tried and trusted disciples opinions that would too openly offend popular prejudices.

– Nicolas de Condorcet, *Esquisse*, 121 (translation mine)

Some things they [the ancient philosophers] wrote for the needs of society, like their religions; and on that account it was reasonable that they did not want to bare popular opinions to the skin, so as not to breed disorder in people's obedience to the laws and customs of their country.

– Michel de Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, 379 (2.12)

In all the barracks of ancient philosophy you will find this, that the same workman publishes rules of temperance, and publishes at the same time amorous and licentious writings.... It is not that there is any miraculous conversion stirring them by fits and starts. Rather it is this: that Solon represents himself now as himself, now in the shape of a lawgiver; now he speaks for the crowd, now for himself....

For delicate stomachs we need strict and artificial diets. Good stomachs simply follow the prescriptions of their natural appetite. So do our doctors, who eat the melon and drink the new wine while they keep their patient tied down to syrups and slops....

– Ibid., 757 (3.9)

[I]n all the ancient nations the priestly orders kept all religious things secret from the plebs of the cities in which they lived. Hence, they continued to be called 'sacred things', that is to say, things kept secret from the profane. The Greek philosophers themselves also long hid their wisdom from the vulgar of their own nation, so that only after many years did Pythagoras admit even his own disciples to his secret audience.

– Giambattista Vico, *The First New Science*, 29

Hobbes speaks of the ancients, who:

rather chose to have the science of justice wrapped up in fables, than openly exposed to disputations.

– Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive*, 103

What shall we say about the distinction between the two doctrines so eagerly received by all the Philosophers, and by which they professed in secret sentiments contrary to those they taught publicly.... The philosophers were so comfortable with this method that it spread rapidly in Greece and from there in Rome.

– J. J. Rousseau, "Observations," in *Collected Writings*, 2:45-46n

Abbe Galiani in a letter to Madame d'Epinau:

All the ancient sages spoke in puzzles.

– Abbe Galiani, *Correspondence*, 2:141 (translation mine)

In their writings the most famous philosophers of the Greeks and their prophets made use of parables and images in which they concealed their secrets, like Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato.

– Avicenna, "On the Parts of Science," 85, quoted and translated by Leo Strauss in *Philosophy and Law*, 133n71

The ancient Sages did actually say one Thing when they thought another. This appears from that general Practice in the Greek Philosophy, of a two-fold Doctrine; the External and the Internal; a vulgar and a secret.

– Bishop Warburton, *The Divine Legislation*, 2:14

*Clidophorus, or, of the Exoteric and Esoteric Philosophy; that is, Of the External and Internal Doctrine of the Ancients: The one open and public, accommodated to popular prejudices and the Religions established by Law; the other private and secret, wherein, to the few capable and discrete, was taught the real Truth stripped of all disguises.*

– Title of a book by John Toland

The ancients distinguished the ‘exoteric’ or popular mode of exposition from the ‘esoteric’ one which is suitable for those who are seriously concerned to discover the truth.

– G. W. Leibniz, *New Essays*, 260

Gotthold Lessing, in his explanation for why Leibniz defended certain tenets of Christianity that he did not really believe, states:

He did no more and no less than did *all the ancient philosophers* in their exoteric disquisitions: He had regard for the kind of caution for which our most recent philosophers have become much too wise. He willingly put his own system aside and tried to lead any individual to the truth via the path on which he found him.

– Gotthold Lessing, “Leibniz von den ewigen strafen,” in *Werke*, 7:180-81, quoted and translated by Chaninah Maschler in “Lessing’s Ernst and Falk,” 8 (emphasis added)

The method of the ancient masters [philosophers] was founded on good reasons. They had dogmas for the general public and dogmas for the disciples initiated into the mysteries.

– Pierre Bayle, “Aristote,” *Dictionnaire*, 1:329 (translation mine)

*It is well known*, that the ancient wise Men and Philosophers, very seldom set forth the naked and open Truth; but exhibited it veiled or painted after various manners; by Symbols, Hieroglyphicks, Allegories, Types, Fables, Parables, popular Discourses, and other Images. This I pass by in general *as sufficiently known*.

– Thomas Burnet, *Archæologiæ philosophicæ*, 67 (emphasis added)

Francis Bacon claimed that the ancients employed two different manners of writing, the “Enigmatical and Disclosed”:

The pretense [of the Enigmatical] is to remove the vulgar capacities from being admitted to the secrets of knowledges, and to reserve them to selected auditors, or wits of such sharpness as can pierce the veil.

– Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, 404-05

All ...who have spoken of divine things, both barbarians and Greeks, have veiled the first principles of things, and delivered the truth in enigmas, and symbols, and allegories, and

metaphors, and such like tropes.”

And why should I linger over the barbarians, when I can adduce the Greeks as exceedingly addicted to the use of the method of concealment.

– Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 233-34 (5.4), 247 (5.8)

Since ancient times it has been a custom to have the sacred fire of philosophy preserved by pure hands. During the glorious empires of the ancient world the first founders, i.e., the first sages of that world, sought to shelter truth from profane spirits, that is, from spirits undeserving of truth, by hiding it in mysteries. With the gradual advancement of culture, and with individual minds pushing beyond the barriers of these original institutions, philosophical schools were founded not for the purpose of committing philosophy to memory but to educate the youths. Moreover, these schools continued to hold on to the distinction between an esoteric and an exoteric philosophy long afterward.

– Friedrich Schelling, “Treatise Explicatory,” 114

**Homer** (8<sup>th</sup> century BC):

But Hera's bindings by her son, and Hephaestus' being cast out by his father when he was about to help out his mother who was being beaten, and all the battles of the gods Homer made must not be accepted in the city, whether they are made *with a hidden sense* or without a hidden sense.

– Plato, *Republic* 378d (emphasis added)

The character Protagoras in Plato's dialogue of that name states:

Now I tell you that sophistry [in the original sense of practical wisdom] is an ancient art, and those men of ancient times who practiced it, *fearing the odium* it involved, disguised it in a decent dress, sometimes of poetry, as in the case of Homer, Hesiod, and Simonides.

– Plato, *Protagoras* 316d-e (emphasis added; see also *Euthyphro* 3c; *Theaetetus* 152e; and *Cratylus* 402a-c)

Plato also suggests that Homer, Hesiod and some other early poets were covertly presenting Heraclitean ideas about nature when they gave their genealogies of the gods and other mythical accounts. As Socrates states in the *Theaetetus* (180 c-d):

Have we not here a tradition from the ancients who hid their meaning from the common herd in poetical figures, that Ocean and [his wife, the river-goddess] Tethys, the source of all things, are flowing streams and nothing is at rest?

– Plato, *Theaetetus* 180c-d

Those who ... seem to have classified most precisely the principles of the universe declare that some of these are efficient, others material—and it is claimed that the originators of their opinion was the poet Homer, who was followed by Anaxagoras.

– Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Physicists* 1.4

If we reflect upon those innumerable knowledges, those secrets of nature and physical philosophy, which Homer is generally supposed to have wrapped up in his allegories,

what a new and ample scene of wonder may this consideration afford us? How fertile will that imagination appear, which was able to clothe all the properties of elements, the qualifications of the mind, the virtues and vices, in forms and persons; and to introduce them into actions agreeable to the nature of the things they shadowed.... For when the mode of learning changed in following ages, and science was delivered in a plainer manner, it then became as reasonable in the more modern poets to lay it aside, as it was in Homer to make use of it.

– Alexander Pope, Preface to *Homer's Iliad*, vii

**Hesiod** (8<sup>th</sup> century BC):

In the *Theogeny*, Hesiod declares that the muses who taught him to sing “tell lies that resemble the truth.”

– Hesiod, *Theogeny*, 27

See also the passages from Plato's *Protagoras* and *Theaetetus* quoted above under Homer.

Aristotle also reads the genealogy of the gods in Hesiod to be a physics in allegorical form:

It might be inferred that the first person to consider this question [of the source of beauty and order in the universe] was Hesiod or indeed anyone else who assumed love or desire as a first principle in things.... And Hesiod says,

First of all things was chaos made, and then

Broad-bosomed Earth...

And Love, the foremost of immortal beings

thus implying that there must be in the world some cause to move things and combine them.

– Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 984b15-30

The man who employs fable aims at moral exhortation and instruction, though he conceals his aim and takes care not to speak openly because he fears being hated by his hearers. Hesiod, for instance, seems to have written with this in view.

– The Emperor Julian, *To the Cynic Heracleios*, 2:79 (207a-b)

**Aesop of Samos** (620–564):

Aesop of Samos ... was a slave by the accident of birth rather than by temperament, and he proved his sagacity by this very use of fable. For since the law did not allow him freedom of speech, he had no resource but to shadow forth his wise counsels and trick them out with charms and graces and so serve them up to his hearers.

– The Emperor Julian, *To the Cynic Heracleios*, 2:81 (207c-d)

Gaius Julius Phaedrus (c. 15 BC-c. 50 AD), the Roman fabulist explains, in the Prologue to the third book of his own *Fables*, why Aesop—and he in his footsteps—writes fables:

Attend me briefly while I now disclose  
How art of fable telling first arose.  
Unhappy slaves, in servitude confined,  
Dared not to their harsh masters show their mind,  
But under veiling of the fable's dress  
Contrived their thoughts and feelings to express  
Escaping still their lord's affronted wrath.  
So Aesop did; I widen out his path.

– Phaedrus, *Fables*, quoted and translated in Vico, *The First New Science*,  
136 (2.9.425)

Most of Aesop's Fables have many meanings and interpretations. Those who take them allegorically choose some aspect that squares with the fables, but for the most part this is only the first and superficial aspect; there are others more living, more essential and internal, to which they have not known how to penetrate; this is how I read them.

– Michel de Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, 298 (2.10)

Also consider, as a sort of latter day follower of Aesop, M. E. Saltykov-Shchedrin (1826-1889), the Russian writer who, taking Aesop to be the archetype of esoteric communication, coined the expression "Aesopian writing," which remains to this day the standard Russian term for esotericism.

I am a Russian writer and therefore I have two slave's habits: first, to write allegorically and, second, to tremble. For the habit of allegorical writing I am indebted to the pre-reform Department of Censorship. It tormented Russian literature to such a degree, that it was as though it had vowed to wipe it off the face of the earth. But literature persisted in its desire to live and so pursued deceptive means.... On the one hand, allegories appeared; on the other, the art of comprehending these allegories, the art of reading between the lines. A special slave's manner of writing was created which can be called Aesopian, a manner which revealed a remarkable resourcefulness in the invention of reservations, innuendoes, allegories and other deceptive means.

– M. E. Saltykov-Shchedrin, quoted by Ray J. Parrott, Jr., "Aesopian Language," in *Modern Encyclopedia*, 41

**Anacharsis** (6<sup>th</sup> century BC):

It is said that Anacharsis the Scythian, while asleep, held his secret parts with his left hand, and his mouth with his right, to intimate that both ought to be mastered, but that it was a greater thing to master the tongue than voluptuousness.

– Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 247 (5.8)

To the question, 'What among men is both good and bad?' his answer was 'The tongue'.

– Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, 1:109 (1.105)

**Pythagoras (570-495 BC):**

I am told by many that you discourse publicly, a thing which Pythagoras deemed unworthy.

– Diogenes Laertius, quoting a letter from Lysis to Hippasus, *Lives*, 2:359 (8.42)

[T]he rest of the Pythagoreans used to say that not all his doctrines were for all men to hear.

– Ibid., 2:335 (8.15-16)

It was their habit [the Pythagoreans], according to what we are told, to convey certain instruction more guardedly in the form of verse.

– Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 329 (4.2.3)

The existence of certain doctrines, which were beyond those which are exoteric and do not reach the multitude, is not a peculiarity of Christian doctrine only, but is shared by the philosophers. For they had some doctrines which were exoteric and some esoteric. Some hearers of Pythagoras only learnt of the master's 'ipse dixit'; but others were taught in secret doctrines which could not deservedly reach the ears that were uninitiated and not yet purified.

– Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 10-11 (1.7)

They say, then, that Hipparchus the Pythagorean, being guilty of writing the tenets of Pythagoras in plain language, was expelled from the school, and a pillar raised for him as if he had been dead.... It was not only the Pythagoreans and Plato, then, that concealed many things; but the Epicureans too say that they have things that may not be uttered, and do not allow all to peruse those writings.

– Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 255-56 (2.5.9)

In their writings the most famous philosophers of the Greeks and their prophets made use of parables and images in which they concealed their secrets, like Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato."

– Avicenna, "On the Parts of Science," 85, quoted and translated by Leo Strauss in *Philosophy and Law*, 133n71

All the disciples preserved perpetually among their arcana, the principle dogmas in which their discipline was chiefly contained, keeping them with the greatest silence from being divulged to strangers, committing them unwritten to memory and transmitting them orally to their successors. Hence nothing of their philosophy worth mentioning was made public, it was known only within their walls, but to those outside their walls—the profane—if they happened to be present, these men spoke obscurely to each other through symbols.

– Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras*, 64-65

There was a two-fold system of the world proposed in the school of Pythagoras, the one

vulgar, and the other mathematical; the latter passed among those who were initiated in the mysteries, and the former among those of duller apprehensions. For it appears that Pythagoras placed the sun in the middle of our world; and yet we meet with several things in Iamblicus and Laertius in the life of Pythagoras, which plainly favor the vulgar hypothesis [i.e., geocentrism].

– Thomas Burnet, *Archæologia philosophicæ*, 69

Pythagoras was the first to make use of the esoteric doctrine. He did not reveal it to his disciples until after lengthy tests and with the greatest mystery. He gave them lessons in Atheism in secret and solemnly offered Hecatombs [sacrifices] to Jupiter.

– J. J. Rousseau, “Observations,” in *Collected Writings*, 2:45-46n

Pythagoras professed a double doctrine and he had two sorts of disciples.... an enigmatic and symbolic philosophy for the one group, a clear and explicit one, freed of obscurities and enigmas for the others.

– Denis Diderot, “Pythagorisme or Philosophy of Pythagoras,” *Encyclopedia*

### **Simonides of Ceos (556-468 BC):**

The character Protagoras in Plato’s dialogue of that name states:

Now I tell you that sophistry [in the original sense of practical wisdom] is an ancient art, and those men of ancient times who practiced it, *fearing the odium* it involved, disguised it in a decent dress, sometimes of poetry, as in the case of Homer, Hesiod, and Simonides.

– *Protagoras* 316d-e (emphasis added)

### **Heraclitus (535-475 BC):**

According to some, he deliberately made it the more obscure in order that none but adepts should approach it, and lest familiarity should breed contempt.

– Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, 2:413 (9.6)

There are whole books which present the mind of the writer veiled, as that of Heraclitus *On Nature*, who on this very account is called ‘Obscure.’

– Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 251 (5.8)

### **Parmenides (c. 515-450 BC):**

We have often taken notice of this double method of teaching in the preceding books, agreeable to that saying of *Parmenides*, *There is a two-fold manner of philosophizing; one according to truth, and the other agreeable to the common opinion*. But the ancients had various ways of concealing the truth; sometimes by a figurative or symbolical speech, and sometimes by a low and popular representation; at other times by explaining things not according to the laws of nature, but by having recourse to a divine power, or providence.

– Thomas Burnet, *Archæologia philosophicæ*, 53

This writer [Philoponus] assures us that Parmenides in his Exoterics (or books accommodated to the public taste) says fire and water are the beginning or principle of all things, as if he had acknowledged the world to have been created; but that in his Esoterics (or books compiled according to truth) he says the universe is one, infinite, and immutable.

– John Toland, *Clidophorus*, 70

**Protagoras** (490-420):

Socrates in the *Theaetetus*:

Can it be, then, that Protagoras was a very ingenious person who threw out this dark saying for the benefit of the common herd like ourselves, and reserved the truth as a secret doctrine to be revealed to his disciples?

The answer to this rhetorical question is clearly “yes,” in Socrates’ view, as becomes clear a few pages later when he promises to help Theaetetus to “penetrate to the truth concealed in the thoughts” of Protagoras.

– Plato, *Theaetetus*, 152c, 155e

See the passage from Plato’s *Protagoras* quoted above under Homer.

**Thucydides** (c. 460-c. 395):

Marcellinus (the sixth century AD biographer of Thucydides), writes:

Thucydides was the zealous emulator of Homer in artistic arrangement, of Pindar in the grand and lofty character, but a man designedly obscure in speech, lest it be accessible to all, and lest it should appear cheap, if easily understood by everyone. He wished rather to meet the test of the exceedingly wise.

– Marcellinus, *Life of Thucydides*, 19

And:

The teachers he had were, in philosophy, Anaxagoras—whence, as Antyllus attests, he was held in his day to be atheist, from the fact that he took his fill of his *theoria*.

– Ibid., 16

In the Introduction to his translation of Thucydides, Hobbes reports:

Marcellinus saith, he was obscure on purpose; that the common people might not understand him. And not unlikely: for a wise man should so write, (though in words understood by all men), that wise men only should be able to commend him.”

– Thomas Hobbes, *The English Works*, 8:xxix

In the same writing, Hobbes quotes, with high praise, the description of Thucydides in Justus Lipsius' *De Doctrina Civili*:

Everywhere for elocution grave; short, and thick with sense; sound in his judgments; everywhere secretly instructing and directing a man's life and actions.  
– Ibid., 8:xxxix-xxxii

On Thucydides. My friend, if thou art learned, take me in thy hand; but if thou art ignorant of the muses, cast away what thou canst not understand. I am not accessible to all, but the few admire Thucydides, son of Olorus, by birth an Athenian.

– Anonymous, *The Greek Anthology*, 325 (epigram 583)

One must follow him line by line and read no less clearly between the lines: there are few thinkers who say so such much between the lines.

– Friedrich Nietzsche, "What I Owe the Ancients," in *Twilight of the Idols*, 558 (aph. 2)

**Isocrates** (436-338):

According to Caeneus, [Speusippus] was the first to divulge what Isocrates called the secrets of his art.

– Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, 1:377 (4.2)

At the first, then, so it appears to me, this was the manner in which you reviewed and thought upon your problem. But since you knew that you had praised the government of the Spartans more than any other man, you feared lest you might impress those who had heard this praise as no different from the orators who speak without conviction or principle, if, that is to say, you censured on the present occasion those whom you formerly were wont to praise above all others. Pondering this difficulty, you proceeded to study in what light you could represent each of these two cities in order that you might seem to speak the truth about them both and that you might be able to praise your ancestors, just as you purposed to do, and at the same time to appear to be censuring the Spartans in the eyes of those who have no liking for them, while in reality doing nothing of the sort but covertly praising them instead. Seeking such an effect, you found without difficulty arguments of double meaning, which lend themselves no more to the purpose of those who praise than of those who blame, but are capable of being turned both ways and leave room for much disputation—arguments the employment of which, when one contends in court over contracts for his own advantage, is shameful and no slight token of depravity but, when one discourses on the nature of man and of things, is honorable and bespeaks a cultivated mind.

– Isocrates, *Panathenaicus*, 239-240

**Xenophon** (430-354):

Should you be willing to read his work concerning the ascent [i.e., the *Anabasis*] very carefully you shall discover how.... to deceive one's enemies to their harm and one's

friends to their advantage, and to speak the truth in a way that will not pain those who are needlessly disturbed by it.

– Dio Chrysostom, “On the Cultivation of Letters,” *Discourses* (18.16–17),  
quoted and translated by Bartlett, *Xenophon: The Shorter Socratic Writings*, 4

**Plato** (427-347 BC):

Readers in all ages have been struck by the strangely poetic, slippery, playful, and contradictory character of the Platonic dialogues.

For, as Plato liked and constantly affected the well-known method of his master Socrates, namely, that of dissimulating his knowledge or his opinions, it is not easy to discover clearly what he himself thought on various matters, any more than it is to discover what were the real opinions of Socrates.

– Augustine, *City of God*, 248

[s]ome have considered Plato a dogmatist, others a doubter. . . . From Plato arose ten different sects, they say. And indeed, in my opinion, never was a teaching wavering and noncommittal if his is not.

– Michel de Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, 377 (2.12)

[Plato] resorted to allegories and riddles. He intended thereby to put in writing his knowledge and wisdom according to an approach that would let them be known only to the deserving.

– Alfarabi, *Harmonization*, 131 (sec. 12)

Plato has employed a variety of terms in order to make his system less intelligible to the ignorant.

– Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, 1:333 (3.63)

Aristotle, in a well-known passage, speaks in passing of Plato’s “unwritten doctrines.”

– Aristotle, *Physics* 209b

Nietzsche speaks of Plato’s “secrecy and sphinx nature.”

– Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 41

Plato wisely providing for his own safety, after the poisonous draught was administered to Socrates... wrote rather poetically than philosophically... by epically transforming the nature of things, the elements, and the celestial globes... into Gods, Goddesses, Geniuses, and Demons.

– John Toland, *Clidophorus*, 75

The first man to set down in writing the clearest and boldest argument of all about the shining and shadowing of the moon [ie., lunar eclipses] was Anaxagoras. And neither was he ancient nor was the argument reputable, but it was still secret and proceeded

among a few and with a certain caution or trust. For they [the many] did not abide the natural philosophers and the praters about the heavens [meteorolesches], as they were called at that time, because they reduced the divine to unreasoning causes, improvident powers, and necessary properties. But even Protagoras went into exile, the imprisoned Anaxagoras was barely saved by Pericles, and Socrates, who did not concern himself with any of such things, nevertheless died on account of philosophy. But later the reputation of Plato shone forth, on account of the life of the man and because he placed the natural necessities under the divine and more authoritative principles, and took away the slander against these arguments and gave a path to these studies to all men.

– Plutarch, *Nicias* (23), in *Lives*, quoted and translated by Ahrens Dorf in *The Death of Socrates*, 12

Here is how Montesquieu read this all-important passage:

See in Plutarch, *Life of Nicias*, how the physicists who explained the eclipses of the moon by natural causes were suspect to the people. They called them meteorolesches, persuaded that they reduced all Divinity to natural and physical causes.... The doctrine of an intelligent [i.e., divine] being was found by Plato *only as a preservative and a defensive arm against the calumnies of zealous pagans*.

– Montesquieu, *Mes Pensees* 2097, in *Œuvres complètes*, 1:1546-47 (translation mine; emphasis added)

[W]hen they [Plato and Aristotle] diverted themselves with writing their *Laws* and *Politics*, they did it as an amusement; it was the least philosophic and least serious part of their lives.... If they wrote on politics, it was as if to bring order into a lunatic asylum; and if they presented the *appearance of speaking of a grand thing*, it is because they knew that the madmen to whom they spoke believed themselves kings and emperors. They entered into the latter's principles in order to make their madness as little harmful as possible.

– Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées*, 93 (aph. 331) (emphasis added)

Turning to Plato's own writings—or what have been handed down to us as such—we find that numerous passages strongly support these oft-recurring claims. Specifically, in the Second and Seventh Letters, Plato openly states—more, he fervently insists—that he purposely avoided an open disclosure of his deepest thought as something that would be corrupting to most people as well as demeaning to the truth.

If it seemed to me that these [philosophical] matters could adequately be put down in writing *for the many* or be said, what could be nobler for us to have done in our lifetime than this, to write what is a great benefit for human beings and to lead nature forth into the light for all? But I do not think such an undertaking concerning these matters would be a good for human beings, unless for some *few*, those who are themselves able to *discover them through a small indication*; of the rest, it would unsuitably fill some of them with a mistaken contempt, and others with lofty and empty hope as if they had learned awesome matters.

– Plato, *Seventh Letter* 341d-e (unpublished translation by Jenny Strauss Clay)

For this reason every man who is serious about things that are truly serious avoids writing so that he may not expose them to the envy and perplexity of men. Therefore, in one word, one must recognize that whenever a man sees the written compositions of someone, whether in the laws of the legislator or in whatever other writings, [he can know] that these were not the most serious matters for him; if indeed he himself is a serious man.

–Ibid., 344c (unpublished translation by Jenny Strauss Clay)

Any man, whether greater or lesser who has written about the highest and first principles concerning nature, according to my argument, he has neither heard nor learned anything sound about the things he has written. For otherwise he would have shown reverence for them as I do, and he would not have dared to expose them to harsh and unsuitable treatment.

– Ibid., 344d-e (unpublished translation by Jenny Strauss Clay)

It is probably impossible to determine with any certainty whether these letters are truly Platonic. But what can be demonstrated, I believe, is that at least with respect to this particular issue, they were written by someone who understood and followed Plato’s thoughts, as expressed in the dialogues, very closely.

The argument compressed into these short passages may be spelled out in five steps. First, philosophic knowledge is the supreme good of life, and thus helping others to acquire it is, where possible, an act of the highest beneficence. This is a theme found throughout the dialogues.

Second, the inevitable consequence of locating the human good in something so high above our ordinary humanity is that it will be beyond the reach of most human beings. It thus leads directly to the very stark distinction, employed in this passage and very familiar from the dialogues, between the “many” and the philosophic “few”—as described, for example, in the famous cave analogy of the *Republic*. As it is put in the *Timaeus* (28c) (echoes of which one hears in the above passage):

To discover the maker and father of this universe were a task indeed; and having discovered him, to declare him unto all men were a thing impossible.

– Plato, *Timaeus* 28c

Third, it is not a matter of indifference whether people are exposed to ideas that they cannot understand. Philosophy is not only something far above most people but, as such, positively harmful and corrupting for them, producing a misplaced contempt in some, an unwarranted arrogance in others. And this idea too—the great danger of knowledge (or half-knowledge) in the wrong hands—is a recognizable Platonic theme. It is a crucial element, for example, in his critique of sophistry.

When men *unworthy of education* come near her and keep her company in an unworthy way, what sorts of notions and opinions will we say they beget? Won’t they be truly fit to be called sophisms?

– Plato, *Republic* 496a (emphasis added)

Again:

“Don’t you notice,” I said, “how great is the harm coming from the practice of dialectic these days?” . . . “Surely its students . . . are filled full with lawlessness.”

– Ibid., 537e

Fourth, such general harm and corruption cannot be left unaddressed. Plato famously argues—most memorably in his critique of the poets in the *Republic*—that to avoid corruption there must be *ensorship*, including, in the best case, self-censorship. And that is precisely what Plato, in the above passages from the Letters, is proclaiming that he practices: he, as any truly serious man, refrains from the attempt to “put down in writing for the many” the wondrous things that he knows. He reiterates the point as a general principle in the Second Letter:

Now, considering these things, watch out that you never regret things that fall into unworthy hands. The greatest safeguard is not to write, but to learn by heart; for it is not possible for the things that are written not to fall [into such hands].

– Plato, *Second Letter* 314b-c (unpublished translation by Jenny Strauss Clay)

There is nothing at all strange in any of this since it is precisely the argument of the *Phaedrus*. Socrates—who does not write—explains in just these terms why he refrains from doing so.

[E]very [written] speech rolls around everywhere, both among those who understand and among those for whom it is not fitting, and it does not know to whom it ought to speak and to whom not.

– Plato, *Phaedrus* 275d-e (I have slightly altered the translation)

Fifth, if it is clear why Socrates, as a serious man, does not write, that raises the question of why and how Plato himself *does* write. The answer would seem to be indicated in the first passage from the Seventh Letter quoted above. Plato says he realized that a written statement of his deepest thought would not be “a good for human beings, *unless for some few*, those who are themselves able to discover them *through a small indication*.” This implies that communicating his deepest thoughts to others through writing—which he clearly longs to do—would, after all, be permissible and beneficial so long as these writings were fully understandable only to “some few” who might catch on through a “small indication,” while remaining opaque to everyone else. He can write if he writes in hints and riddles.

This suggestion receives explicit confirmation in the Second Letter, which is partly written in response to Dionysius’ request to hear a fuller explanation of Plato’s metaphysical doctrine of “the first thing.” Plato replies in his letter not as one might expect—that he would never write about such things—but rather that he can write about them, but only in hints.

It must be conveyed to you in riddles so that if the tablet [i.e., the letter] suffer something “in the folds of the sea or the earth,” the one reading would not understand it.

–Plato, *Second Letter* 312d (unpublished translation by Jenny Strauss Clay)

But as logical and textually grounded as this five point argument may be, someone still might ask—as certain scholars have—whether such esoteric practices were really something that Plato could have conceived in his time. Aren’t we just reading later, neo-Platonist concepts and practices back into his mind?

The answer to this question admits of no uncertainty. In several of the dialogues, both Socrates and Protagoras explicitly speak of an earlier tradition of esoteric writing, attributing it to Homer, Hesiod, Simonides and several other poets: these writers used the mythical form, they claim, to express their Heraclitean philosophical opinions in a hidden way for the sake of the few. See above, Homer.

It is, as Socrates explains in the *Theaetetus*:

a tradition from the ancients who hid their meaning from the common herd in poetical figures.

– Plato, *Theaetetus* 180c-d

Again, Socrates says something similar of Protagoras himself:

Can it be, then, that Protagoras was a very ingenious person who threw out this dark saying for the benefit of the common herd like ourselves, and reserved the truth as a secret doctrine to be revealed to his disciples?

The answer to this rhetorical question is clearly “yes,” in Socrates’ view, as becomes clear a few pages later when he promises to help Theaetetus to “penetrate to the truth concealed in the thoughts” of Protagoras.

– Ibid., 152c, 155e

And Protagoras asserts, in the dialogue of his name:

Now I tell you that sophistry [in the original sense of practical wisdom] is an ancient art, and those men of ancient times who practiced it, *fearing the odium* it involved, disguised it in a decent dress, sometimes of poetry, as in the case of Homer, Hesiod, and Simonides; sometimes in mystic rites and soothsayings, as did Orpheus, Musaeus and their sects; and sometimes too, I have observed of athletics . . . ; and music was the disguise employed by your own Agathocles. . . . All these, as I say, from *fear of ill-will* made use of these arts as outer coverings.

– *Protagoras* 316d–e (emphasis added)

Again, in the *Laws* (967a–d), the Athenian Stranger asserts that most of the pre-Socratic philosophers were actually atheists—although they all certainly claimed to be believers of some kind. It is certain, then, that Plato was well acquainted with various forms of esotericism.

Furthermore, not only is Plato clearly familiar with the idea of esotericism, but at no point does he express any disapproval of it. On the contrary, the author of the infamous term “noble lie” obviously believed in the moral propriety of socially salutary fictions. And the author of the *Apology* was obviously very much preoccupied by the great danger of persecution that philosophers typically face. There is no good reason to believe, therefore, that Plato would have stopped short of the logical conclusion of the five step argument outlined above.

**Aristotle** (384-322 BC):

Since ancient times, there was constant mention of Aristotle’s esotericism. He was seen as the classic case of the esoteric philosopher. In the second century AD, for example, he was so well-

known for his esoteric doubleness that this trait is identified as one of his most distinctive characteristics by the Greek satirist Lucian (117–c. 180 AD). In his comic dialogue *The Sale of Lives*, Lucian depicts a slave auction of philosophers arranged by Zeus, with Hermes as the auctioneer. We pick up the action after the sale of Pythagoras, Diogenes, Heraclitus, and some others.

Zeus

Don't delay; call another, the Peripatetic.

Hermes

. . . Come now, buy the height of intelligence, the one who knows absolutely everything!

Buyer

What is he like?

Hermes

Moderate, gentlemanly, adaptable in his way of living, and, what is more, he is double.

Buyer

What do you mean?

Hermes

Viewed from the outside, he seems to be one man, and from the inside, another; so if you buy him, be sure to call the one self "exoteric" and the other "esoteric."

– Lucian, *The Sale of Lives*, 2:503

The initial source of all this emphasis on Aristotle's esotericism is the fact that on nine distinct occasions in the extant writings, he refers in passing to "the exoteric discourses" (*exoterikoi logoi*). See *Politics* 1254a34, 1278b31, 1323a22; *Nicomachean Ethics* 1102a26, 1140a1 (consider also 1096a4); *Physics* 217b31; *Eudemian Ethics* 1217b20, 1218b32; and *Metaphysics* 1076a28.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, he says:

But some points concerning the soul are stated sufficiently even in the exoteric arguments, and one ought to make use of them—for example, that one part of it is nonrational, another possesses reason.

– *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1102a26

Again, in the *Eudemian Ethics*, in the context of a brief discussion of Plato's doctrine of the ideas and his objections to it, Aristotle remarks:

the question has already received manifold consideration both in exoteric and in philosophical discussions.

– *Eudemian Ethics* 1217b20, translated by Grant in "On the Exoterikoi Logoi," 402

Purely from the examination of these nine Aristotelian uses of the term, it is not clear exactly what he means by an "exoteric discourse," but it seems to mean a simplified, subphilosophic account of some kind. It is only from later sources—Plutarch, Cicero and others—that we first hear what has been broadly accepted ever since (including by contemporary scholars), that Aristotle's corpus was divided into two broad categories of writings: a set of earlier, popular works, addressed to a wide audience (the now-lost dialogues and perhaps some other writings) and the

more exacting, strictly philosophical works, addressed to the Lyceum's inner circle, which includes virtually all the works we now possess. And the names for these two categories of writings—according to these later, ancient thinkers and editors—were, respectively, “exoteric” and “acroamatic” or “acroatic” (literally, “designed for hearing only”). Still, there is a question whether this distinction involves issues of esoteric secrecy and concealment (as the name “acroamatic” would suggest) or just the more familiar and non-esoteric divide between works for beginners and those for advanced students, or between popular works and technical ones.

The first clear statement on this issue that has come down to us embraces the former interpretation. It is found in Plutarch (46–120 AD) and seconded, several decades later, by Aulus Gellius (c. 125–after 180 AD)—both of whom are relying, as the latter indicates, on Andronicus of Rhodes (c. 60 BC), a philosopher and the authoritative ancient editor of Aristotle's works.

Plutarch claims that the second, less popular category of Aristotle's writings concerns:  
the secret [*aporrata*, not to be spoken] and deeper things, which men call by the special term acroamatic and epoptic and do not expose for the many to share.  
– Plutarch, *Alexander* 7.3–5, in *Lives* (unpublished translation by Jenny Strauss Clay)

He continues that when Alexander the Great, Aristotle's former pupil, heard that his teacher had decided to publish some of the acroamatic discourses, he wrote to him in protest. Aristotle then replied in the following letter, which is featured in Andronicus' edition of his writings, and which Plutarch carefully describes and Gellius quotes in full:

Aristotle to King Alexander, prosperity. You have written me about the acroatic discourses, thinking that they should be guarded in secrecy. Know, then, that they have been both published and not published. For they are intelligible only to those who have heard us.

– Gellius, *Attic Nights* 20.5.12., translated by Lorraine Pangle in *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship*, 9.

While the authenticity of this letter is questionable, it may still present an informed account of the character of Aristotle's writings. What we do know is that a thinker and historian of the stature of Plutarch finds the *content* of the letter accurate in light of his own personal reading of Aristotle. For, as he goes on to explain:

To say the truth, his books on metaphysics are written in a style which makes them useless for ordinary teaching, and instructive only, in the way of memoranda, for those who have been already conversant in that sort of learning.

– Plutarch, *Alexander* 7.3–5 in *Lives*

These initial claims by Plutarch and Gellius are supported by many other ancient sources and disputed by none. Simplicius of Cilicia (c. 490–c. 560), who, though a Neoplatonist, is widely regarded as the most learned and reliable of the Greek commentators on Aristotle (after Alexander of Aphrodisias), remarks in his commentary on the *Physics* that in Aristotle's acroamatic works:

[H]e deliberately introduced obscurity, repelling by this means those who are too easy-going, so that it might seem to them that they had not even been written.

– Simplicius, *In Aristotelis Physicorum Libros Quattuor Priores Commentaria*, 9:8, quoted and translated by David Bolotin in *An Approach to Aristotle's Physics*, 6.

Similarly, Themistius (317–c. 390) states in his paraphrase of the *Posterior Analytics*: [M]any of the books of Aristotle appear to have been contrived with a view to concealment.

– Themistius, *Analyticorum Posteriorum Paraphrasis*, 5.1:1, quoted and translated by Bolotin in *Approach to Aristotle's Physics*, 5.

Elsewhere, Themistius gives an explanation of this observed fact:

It is characteristic of Aristotle to think that the same arguments are not beneficial for the many and for the philosophers, just as the same drugs and diet are not beneficial for those in the peak of health and those profoundly ill, but for some, those drugs and diet are beneficial that are truly healthful, and for others, those that are suited to the present [defective] condition of the body. As a result, he called the latter outsiders and composed for them undemanding arguments, but he closed off the other arguments and safely handed them on to the few.

–Themistius, *Oratio 26*, in *Themistii Orationes*, 385( 319 D) (unpublished translation by Jenny Strauss Clay)

Ammonius (c. 440–c. 520), in the first paragraph of his commentary on the *Categories*, lists ten questions that must be addressed before beginning the study of Aristotle's book. The eighth is: "Why has the Philosopher obviously made a point of being obscure." He gives his answer a few pages later:

Let us ask why on earth the philosopher is contented with obscure [*asaphes*] teaching. We reply that it is just as in the temples, where curtains are used for the purpose of preventing everyone, and especially the impure, from encountering things they are not worthy of meeting. So too Aristotle uses the obscurity of his philosophy as a veil, so that good people may for that reason stretch their minds even more, whereas empty minds that are lost through carelessness will be put to flight by the obscurity when they encounter sentences like these.

– Ammonius, *On Aristotle's Categories*, 9 (1.10), 15 (7.7)

Elias, a commentator of the sixth century AD, harking back, in agreement, to the Aristotle letter mentioned by Plutarch and Gellius as well as the Second Letter of Plato, asserts:

When Alexander [the Great] blamed [Aristotle] for publishing his writing, Aristotle said, "they are published and not published," hinting at their lack of clarity . . . [which is like] what Plato said [in the Second Letter, 312d8]: "if something should happen to the tablet [i.e., the writing] either on land or on sea, the reader because of its obscurity would not understand its contents." Thus [one should write] in order to hide; in order to test those fit and those unfit, so that the unfit should turn their backs on philosophy.

– Elias, *Aristotelis Categoriae Commentaria*, 18.1:125

Philoponus (490-570), a Christian and largely a critic of neo-Platonism, seems in essential agreement with all of the preceding commentators:

Now, [Aristotle] practiced obscurity on account of his readers, so as to make those who were naturally suited eager to hear the argument, but to turn those who were uninterested away right from the beginning. For the genuine listeners, to the degree that the arguments are obscure, by so much are they eager to struggle and to arrive at the depth.

– Philoponus, *Aristotelis Categoriae Commentarium*, 13.1:6.22–26  
(unpublished translation by Jenny Strauss Clay)

In the Islamic tradition as well, we hear Alfarabi claiming:

Whoever inquires into Aristotle's sciences, peruses his books, and takes pains with them will not miss the many modes of concealment, blinding and complicating in his approach, despite his apparent intention to explain and clarify.

– Alfarabi, *Harmonization* (unpublished translation by Miriam Galston, quoted by Bolotin in *Approach to Aristotle's Physics*, 6)

Remarkably, we even find Olympiodorus the Younger (c. 495–570) making the following argument:

Some people have condemned the first book [of Aristotle's *Meteorologica*] as spurious, in the first place because it goes beyond Aristotle himself and practices clarity [*sapheneia*]. Against them I shall maintain that there is a great deal of unclarity [*asapheia*] in the book.

– Olympiodorus in *Meteor* 4, 16–18, cited and translated by Richard Sorabji in *The Philosophy of the Commentators*, 46.

Like Lucian's auctioneer of philosophers four centuries earlier, Olympiodorus regards esoteric restraint as the true hallmark of the Aristotelian. If a writing is lacking in the proper degree and kind of obscurity, it is not likely to have been written by Aristotle.

The testimony to Aristotle's esotericism is not only voluminous, as should be clear by now, but also somewhat contentious in ways too involved to be indicated here. In a section of *Philosophy Between the Lines*, "Aristotle as 'Cuttlefish'" (pp. 30-46), I present a more detailed and probing analysis of the evidence, which the interested reader should consult.

**Anaxarchus** (c. 380-c. 320 BC):

Well and felicitously, therefore, does Anaxarchus write in his book respecting *Kingly Rule*: "Erudition benefits greatly, and hurts greatly him who possesses it; it helps him who is worthy, and injures him who utters readily every word, and before the whole people. It is necessary to know the measure of time. For this is the end of wisdom. And those who sing at the doors, even if they sing skillfully, are not reckoned wise, but have the reputation of folly.

– Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 373 (1.6)

## **Epicurus (341-270 BC):**

The famous motto of Epicurus and his followers: “live unseen.”

– Epicurus, *Extant remains*, 38 (frag. 86)

Epicurus does not really believe in the gods at all, and that he said what he did about the immortal gods only for the sake of deprecating popular odium.

– Cicero, *De natura deorum* 119 (1.123)

And, according to some, Epicurus in his popular exposition allows the existence of God, but in expounding the real nature of things he does not allow it.

– Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Physicists* 1.58

No doubt to manage popular prejudices, Epicurus admitted gods [into his universe], but indifferent to the actions of men, estranged from the order of the universe, and subject like other beings to the general laws of its mechanism, they were somehow a mere *hors d'œuvre* to his system.

– Nicolas de Condorcet, *Esquisse*, 139

But whosoever had the least sagacity in him could not but perceive, that this theology of Epicurus was but romantical, it being directly contrary to his avowed and professed principles, to admit of any other being, than what was concentered of atoms, and consequently corruptible; and that he did this upon a politic account, thereby to decline the common odium, and those dangers and inconveniences, which otherwise he might have incurred by a downright denial of a God, to which purpose it accordingly served his turn.

– Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System*, 1:104-06 (1.2.2)

It was not only the Pythagoreans and Plato, then, that concealed many things; but the Epicureans too say that they have things that may not be uttered, and do not allow all to peruse those writings.

– Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 255-56 (5.9)

Furthermore... he [Epicurus] extolled Idomeneus, Herodotus, and Timocrates, who had published his esoteric [kruphia] doctrines.

– Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, 2:533 (10.4)

## **Zeno of Citium (333-264 BC):**

The Stoics also say that by the first Zeno things were written which they do not readily allow disciples to read, without their first giving proof whether or not they are genuine philosophers.

– Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 255-56 (5.9)

**Chrysippus of Soli** (279-206 BC):

Plutarch quotes Chrysippus as saying: “Often indeed do the wise employ lies against the vulgar.”

– Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions* 1055e-56a, quoted and translated in Pangle and Ahrens Dorf, *Justice among Nations*, 275n7

If we may trust Plutarch and Quintillion the Stoics include among the endowments of the wise man the ability to lie in the proper place and manner.

– Hugo Grotius, *De jure belli*, 3.1.9.3

**Marcus Tullius Cicero** (106-43 BC):

Cicero is very clear about the need for philosophers to be cautious:

philosophy is content with few judges, and of set purpose on her side avoids the multitude and is in her turn an object of suspicion and dislike to them, with the result that if anyone should be disposed to revile all philosophy, he could count on popular support.

– Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 149 (2.5)

And he asserts that Epicurus, for one, was led by this concern to disguise his views:

Epicurus does not really believe in the gods at all, and that he said what he did about the immortal gods only for the sake of deprecating popular odium.

– Cicero, *De natura deorum* 119 (1.123)

In his *De Natura Deorum*, Cicero explicitly acknowledges his own unwillingness to state his philosophical opinions openly, although he offers here only pedagogical reasons for this:

Those who seek to learn my personal opinion on the various questions [of philosophy] show an unreasonable degree of curiosity. In discussion it is not so much weight of authority as force of argument that should be demanded. Indeed, the authority of those who profess to teach is often a positive hindrance to those who desire to learn; they cease to employ their own judgment, and take what they perceive to be the verdict of their chosen master as settling the question.

– Ibid., 13 (1.10)

Again, in his *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero states that, of the many warring philosophical sects:

I have chosen particularly to follow that one [the New Academy] which I think agreeable to the practice of Socrates, in trying to conceal my own private opinion [and] to relieve others from deception.

– Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 435 (5.4.11)

One finds a concrete demonstration of Cicero’s declared willingness to argue at length for views not his own in his dialogues *De finibus* and *The Laws*, where he assigns to himself the part of the Stoic and defends its tenets even though, as we know from other writings, he was actually an adherent of the New Academy—which rejected Stoicism.

St. Augustine states that Cicero was a non-believer and sought to convey that view:

That, however, he did not do in his own person, for he saw how odious and offensive such an opinion would be; and, therefore in his book on the nature of the gods, he makes Cotta dispute concerning this against the Stoics, and preferred to give his own opinion in favor of Lucilius Balbus, to whom he assigned the defense of the Stoical position, rather than in favor of Cotta, who maintained that no divinity exists.

– Augustine, *City of God*, 152

Diderot agrees in seeing Cicero as a particularly obvious esotericist:

[Cicero's] books *On Divination* are merely irreligious treatises. But what an impression must have been made on the people by certain pieces of oratory in which the gods were constantly invoked ...where the very existence of the pagan deities was presupposed by orators who had written a host of philosophical essays treating the gods and religion as mere fables!

– Denis Diderot, “Aius Locutius,” *Encyclopedia*

A similar view is expressed by Rousseau: The use of esotericism

may be seen in the works of Cicero, who along with his friends laughed at the immortal Gods to whom he so eloquently bore witness on the Rostrum.

– J. J. Rousseau, “Observations,” in *Collected Writings*, 2:45-46n

**Lucretius (99 BC-55 BC):**

Lucretius explicitly states—in fact, twice in virtually identical words—that he has covered his bitter philosophy in a sweet poetic garb both to draw in the initially-resistant philosophic reader and to forestall or calm the aversion of the multitude.

[O]n a dark theme I trace verses so full of light, touching all with the muses' charm.  
[And that too] not without good reason; for even as healers, when they essay to give loathsome wormwood to children, first touch the rim all round the cup with the sweet golden moisture of honey, so that the unwitting age of children may be beguiled as far as the lips, and meanwhile may drink the bitter draught of wormwood, and though charmed may not be harmed, but rather by such means may be restored and come to health; so now, since this philosophy full often seems too bitter to those who have not tasted it, and the multitude shrinks back away from it, I have desired to set forth to you my reasoning in the sweet-tongued song of the muses, and as though to touch it with the pleasant honey of poetry, if perchance I might avail by such means to keep your mind set upon my verses, while you take in the whole nature of things, and are conscious of your profit.

– Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, I:935ff, IV:10ff

**Virgil (70 BC-19 BC):**

The poet devised the Eclogue [i.e., pastoral poetry]... not of purpose to counterfeit or represent the rustical manner of loves and communication, but under the veil of homely persons and in rude speeches to insinuate and glance at great matters, and such as perchance had not been safe to have been disclosed in any other sort, which may be perceived by the Eclogues of Virgil, in which are treated by figure matters of greater importance than the loves of Tityrus and Corydon.

– George Puttenham (1529-1590), *The Art of English Poesy*, 127-28

**Didymus Chalcenterus (63 BC-10 AD):**

“For the use of symbolical speech is characteristic of the wise man,” appositely remarks the grammarian Didymus, “and the explanation of what is signified by it.

– Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 248 (5.8)

**Ovid (43-17 BC):**

Ovid’s famous dictum: “he has lived well who has remained well hidden”.

– Ovid, *Tristia* 3.4.25

**Seneca (4 BC-65 AD):**

St. Augustine states, drawing upon writings of Seneca and Varro that we no longer possess:

[W]ith respect to these sacred rites of the civil theology, Seneca preferred, as the best course to be followed by a wise man, to feign respect for them in act, but to have no real regard for them at heart... [Seneca] worshipped what he censured, did what he condemned, adored what he reproached, because, forsooth, philosophy had taught him something great—namely, not to be superstitious in the world, but, on account of the laws of cities and customs of men, to be an actor, not on the stage, but in the temples.

– Augustine, *City of God*, 203 (6.10)

**Jesus of Nazareth (6-4 BC- 30-33 AD):**

He did not speak to them [the people] without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.

– Mark 4:34

To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables.

– Mark 4:11

Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to [the people] in parables?" And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who

has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.”

– Matthew 13:10-12 (see Matt. 7:6, 19:11, 11:25; Col. 1:27; 1 Cor. 2:6-10; 1 John 2:20, 27; Prov. 23:9; Isa. 6:9-10)

Give not that which is holy to dogs; neither cast ye your pearls before swine.

– Matthew 7:6

[Jesus] strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ [i.e., the messiah].

– Matthew 16:20 (See 12:16; Mark 8:30; Luke 9:21)

Even with the disciples, Jesus was not completely open:

I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.

– John 16:12

**Dio Chrysostom** (40-120):

Should you be willing to read [Xenophon’s] work concerning the ascent [i.e., the *Anabasis*] very carefully you shall discover how.... to deceive one’s enemies to their harm and one’s friends to their advantage, and to speak the truth in a way that will not pain those who are needlessly disturbed by it.

– Dio Chrysostom, “On the Cultivation of Letters,” *Discourses* (18.16–17), quoted and translated by Bartlett, *Xenophon: The Shorter Socratic Writings*, 4

**Plutarch** (46-120):

Damon, it is not unlikely, being a sophist, out of policy sheltered himself under the profession of music to conceal from people in general his skill in other things.

– Plutarch, *Pericles*, in *Lives*, 184

See above under Aristotle how Plutarch particularly emphasizes the highly esoteric character of some of Aristotle’s writings. These works contain:

[T]he secret [*aporrata*, not to be spoken] and deeper things, which men call by the special term acroamatic and epoptic and do not expose for the many to share.

– Plutarch, *Alexander* 7.3–5, in *Lives* (unpublished translation by Jenny Strauss Clay)

Similarly, he points out the beneficial effects of Plato’s esotericism:

The first man to set down in writing the clearest and boldest argument of all about the shining and shadowing of the moon [i.e., lunar eclipses] was Anaxagoras. And neither was he ancient nor was the argument reputable, but it was still secret and proceeded among a few and with a certain caution or trust. For they [the many] did not abide the natural philosophers and the praters about the heavens [meteorolesches], as they were

called at that time, because they reduced the divine to unreasoning causes, improvident powers, and necessary properties. But even Protagoras went into exile, the imprisoned Anaxagoras was barely saved by Pericles, and Socrates, who did not concern himself with any of such things, nevertheless died on account of philosophy. But later the reputation of Plato shone forth, on account of the life of the man and because he placed the natural necessities under the divine and more authoritative principles, and took away the slander against these arguments and gave a path to these studies to all men.

– Plutarch, *Nicias* (23) in *Lives*, quoted and translated by Ahrensdoerf in *The Death of Socrates*, 12

Here is how Montesquieu read this all-important passage:

See in Plutarch, *Life of Nicias*, how the physicists who explained the eclipses of the moon by natural causes were suspect to the people. They called them meteorolesches, persuaded that they reduced all Divinity to natural and physical causes.... The doctrine of an intelligent [i.e., divine] being was found by Plato *only as a preservative and a defensive arm against the calumnies of zealous pagans*.

– Montesquieu, *Mes Pensees* 2097, in *Œuvres complètes*, 1:1546-47 (translation mine; emphasis added)

**Tacitus** (56-117):

Tacitus declared, in oft-quoted words:

Seldom are men blessed with times in which they may think what they like and say what they think.

– Tacitus, *The Histories* 1.1

While he claims to live, for the moment, in such times, we find that his style is, in fact, famous for brevity and obscurity. He is especially a master at curtailing his thought in such a way as to stimulate the thought of the attentive reader.

As Thomas Gordon, his eighteenth century English translator, puts it:

[Tacitus] is remarkable for a surpassing brevity....He starts the Idea and leaves the Imagination to pursue it. The sample he gives you is so fine, that you are presently curious to see the whole piece, and then you have your share in the merit of the discovery; a compliment which some able Writers have forgot to pay their readers.

– Thomas Gordon, *Discourses upon Tacitus*, 4:149-50

Sir Richard Baker (1568–1645), the English historian, makes a similar point about the pedagogical purpose and charm of Tacitus' reticence.

His very obscurity is pleasing to whosoever by laboring about it, findes out the true meaning; for then he counts it an issue of his owne braine, and taking occasion from these sentences to goe fruther than the thing he reads, and that without being deceived, he takes the like pleasure as men are wont to take from hearing metaphors, finding the meaning of him that useth them.

– Sir Richard Baker, translator's preface to Vergilio Malvezzi, *Discourses upon Cornelius Tacitus*, ix

**Lucian** (117–c. 180 AD):

See above under Aristotle, the excerpt from Lucian's comic Dialogue *The Sale of Lives*, in which he portrays Aristotle as a double man because:

Viewed from the outside, he seems to be one man, and from the inside, another; so if you buy him, be sure to call the one self "exoteric" and the other "esoteric."

**Aulus Gellius** (c. 125–after 180 AD):

See above under Aristotle how Gellius strongly supports the Plutarchian view of Aristotle as highly esoteric. Indeed, he repeats in greater detail than Plutarch the story that Aristotle asserted in a letter to Alexander the Great that his acroamatic writings have been both published and not published. For they are intelligible only to those who have heard us.

– Gellius, *Attic Nights* 20.5.12., translated by Lorraine Pangle in *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship*, 9.

**Diogenes Laertius** (3<sup>rd</sup> century AD):

From his *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*:

Plato has employed a variety of terms in order to make his system less intelligible to the ignorant.

– Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, 1:333 (3.63)

According to some, he [Heraclitus] deliberately made it [his writings] the more obscure in order that none but adepts should approach it, and lest familiarity should breed contempt.

– Ibid., 2:413 (9.6)

Quoting a letter from Lysis to Hippasus:

I am told by many that you discourse publicly, a thing which Pythagoras deemed unworthy.

– Ibid., 2:359 (8.42)

[T]he rest of the Pythagoreans used to say that not all his doctrines were for all men to hear.

– Ibid., 2:335 (8.15-16)

When Crates asked him [Stilpo] whether the gods take delight in prayers and adorations, he is said to have replied, “Don’t put such a question in the street, simpleton, but when we are alone!”

– Ibid., 1:245 (2.117)

Furthermore... he [Epicurus] extolled Idomeneus, Herodotus, and Timocrates, who had published his esoteric [kruphia] doctrines.

– Ibid., 2:533 (10.4)

According to Caeneus, [Speusippus] was the first to divulge what Isocrates called the secrets of his art.

– Ibid., 1:377 (4.2)

### **Clement of Alexandria (150-215):**

Concerning the esoteric character of his own writings, especially his book *Stromata* or *Miscellanies*, Clement very clearly states:

Some things I purposely omit, in the exercise of a wise selection, afraid to write what I guarded against speaking: not grudging—for that were wrong—but fearing for my readers, lest they should stumble by taking them in a wrong sense; and, as the proverb says, we should be found “reaching a sword to a child”.... Some things my treatise will hint; on some it will linger; some it will merely mention. It will try to speak imperceptibly, to exhibit secretly, and to demonstrate silently.

– Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 357 (1.1)

Thus, in a chapter entitled “The Meaning of the Name *Stromata*”:

Let these notes of ours... be of varied character—and as the name itself indicates, patched together—passing constantly from one thing to another, and in the series of discussions hinting at one thing and demonstrating another.

– Ibid., 140-41 (4.2)

As he continues in a later chapter, his book has:

here and there interspersed the dogmas which are the germs of true knowledge, so that the discovery of the sacred traditions may not be easy to any one of the uninitiated.

– Ibid., 489 (7.18)

Again:

The Miscellanies are not like parks laid out, planted in regular order for the delight of the eye, but rather like a shady and shaggy hill, planted with laurel, and ivy, and apples, and olives, and figs; the planting being purposely a mixture of fruit-bearing and fruitless trees, since the composition aims at concealment.

– Ibid., 489 (7.18)

Clement argues that many other philosophers have seen this same need for concealment:

It is not wished that all things should be exposed indiscriminately to all and sundry, or the benefits of wisdom communicated to those who have not even in a dream been purified in soul.... They say, then, that Hipparchus the Pythagorean, being guilty of writing the tenets of Pythagoras in plain language, was expelled from the school, and a pillar raised for him as if he had been dead.... It was not only the Pythagoreans and Plato, then, that concealed many things; but the Epicureans too say that they have things that may not be uttered, and do not allow all to peruse those writings. The Stoics also say that by the first Zeno things were written which they do not readily allow disciples to read, without their first giving proof whether or not they are genuine philosophers. And the disciples of Aristotle say that some of their treatises are esoteric, and others common and exoteric.

– Ibid., 255-56 (5.9)

The same concealment is also found in the Holy Scriptures:

For many reasons, then, the Scriptures hide the sense. First, that we may become inquisitive, and be ever on the watch for the discovery of the words of salvation. Then it was not suitable for all to understand, so that they might not receive harm in consequence of taking in another sense the things declared for salvation by the Holy Spirit. Wherefore the holy mysteries of the prophecies are veiled in the parables—preserved for chosen men.

– Ibid., 378 (6.15)

Concealment is also useful because:

all things that shine through a veil show the truth grander and more imposing; as fruits shining through water, and figures through veils.

– Ibid., 254-55 (5.9)

**Sextus Empiricus** (c. 160- 210 AD):

Like Plato and Aristotle, Sextus reads the genealogies of the gods in Homer, Hesiod and other early poets as a philosophical physics in allegorical form:

Those who ... seem to have classified most precisely the principles of the universe declare that some of these are efficient, others material—and it is claimed that the originators of their opinion was the poet Homer, who was followed by Anaxagoras.

– Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Physicists* 1.4

And, according to some, Epicurus in his popular exposition allows the existence of God, but in expounding the real nature of things he does not allow it.

– Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Physicists* 1.58

**Origen** (185-254):

The existence of certain doctrines, which were beyond those which are exoteric and do not reach the multitude, is not a peculiarity of Christian doctrine only, but is shared by the philosophers. For they had some doctrines which were exoteric and some esoteric. Some hearers of Pythagoras only learnt of the master's 'ipse dixit'; but others were taught in secret doctrines which could not deservedly reach the ears that were uninitiated and not yet purified.

– Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.7

St. Jerome writes about Origen's views on this matter, quoting at length from the latter's now lost *Miscellanies*:

Our friends take it amiss that I have spoken of the Origenists as confederated together by orgies of false oaths. I named the book in which I had found it written, that is, the sixth book of Origen's *Miscellanies*, in which he tries to adapt our Christian doctrine to the opinions of Plato. The words of Plato in the third book of the *Republic* are as follows: "Truth, said Socrates, is to be specially cultivated. If, however, as I was saying just now, falsehood is disgraceful and useless to God, to men it is sometimes useful, if only it is used as a stimulant or a medicine; for no one can doubt that some such latitude of statement must be allowed to physicians, though it must be taken out of the hands of those who are unskilled. That is quite true, it was replied; and if one admits that any person may do this, it must be the duty of the rulers of states at times to tell lies, either to baffle the enemy or to benefit their country and the citizens. On the other hand to those who do not know how to make a good use of falsehood, the practice should be altogether prohibited." Now take the words of Origen: "When we consider the precept 'Speak truth every man with his neighbor,' we need not ask, Who is my neighbor? but we should weigh well the cautious remarks of the philosopher. He says, that to God falsehood is shameful and useless, but to men it is occasionally useful. We must not suppose that God ever lies, even in the way of economy; only, if the good of the hearer requires it, he speaks in ambiguous language, and reveals what he wills in enigmas, taking care at once that the dignity of truth should be preserved and yet that what would be hurtful if produced nakedly before the crowd should be enveloped in a veil and thus disclosed. But a man on whom necessity imposes the responsibility of lying is bound to use very great care, and to use falsehood as he would a stimulant or a medicine, and strictly to preserve its measure, and not go beyond the bounds observed by Judith in her dealings with Holofernes, whom she overcame by the wisdom with which she dissembled her words. He should act like Esther who changed the purpose of Artaxerxes by having so long concealed the truth as to her race; and still more the patriarch Jacob who, as we read, obtained the blessing of his father by artifice and falsehood. From all this it is evident that if we speak falsely with any other object than that of obtaining by it some great good, we shall be judged as the enemies of him who said, I am the truth." This Origen wrote, and none of us can deny it. And he wrote it in the book which he addressed to the 'perfect,' his

own disciples. His teaching is that the master may lie, but the disciple must not. The inference from this is that the man who is a good liar, and without hesitation sets before his brethren any fabrication which rises into his mouth, shows himself to be an excellent teacher.

– St. Jerome, *Apology Against Rufinus* 1.18

**Sallustius** (4<sup>th</sup> century):

Sallustius, in discussing why the Greeks shrouded their religious teachings in myth, remarks:

There is this first benefit from myths, that we have to search and do not have our minds idle.... To wish to teach the whole truth about the Gods to all produces contempt in the foolish, because they cannot understand, and lack of zeal in the good; whereas to conceal the truth by myths prevents the contempt of the foolish, and compels the good to practice philosophy.

– Sallustius, *On the Gods*, in *Five Stages*, 242-43

**Themistius** (317- c. 390):

It is characteristic of Aristotle to think that the same arguments are not beneficial for the many and for the philosophers, just as the same drugs and diet are not beneficial for those in the peak of health and those profoundly ill, but for some, those drugs and diet are beneficial that are truly healthful, and for others, those that are suited to the present [defective] condition of the body. As a result, he called the latter outsiders and composed for them undemanding arguments, but he closed off the other arguments and safely handed them on to the few.

–Themistius, *Oratio* 26, in *Themistii Orationes*, 385( 319 D) (unpublished translation by Jenny Strauss Clay)

**Emperor Julian (Julian the Apostate)** (331-363):

For everything ought not to be told, nay more, even of those things that we are permitted to declare, some, it seems to me, we ought to refrain from uttering to the vulgar crowd.

– Emperor Julian, *To the Cynic Heracleios*, 2:161 (239a)

[O]ur ancestors in every case tried to trace the first causes of things, whether with the guidance of the gods or independently... [and] when they had discovered them they clothed them in paradoxical myths. This was in order that, by means of the paradox and the incongruity, the fiction might be detected and we might be induced to search out the truth. Now I think ordinary men derive benefit enough from the irrational myth which instructs them through symbols alone. But those who are more highly endowed with wisdom will find the truth about the gods helpful; though only on condition that such a man examine and discover and comprehend it under the leadership of the gods, and if by such riddles as these he is reminded that he must search out their meaning, and so attains to the goal and summit of his quest through his own researches; he must not be modest and put

faith in the opinions of others rather than in his own mental powers.

– Emperor Julian, *Hymn to the Mother of the gods*, 1:475-77 (170a-c) (I have slightly altered the translation)

The man who employs fable aims at moral exhortation and instruction, though he conceals his aim and takes care not to speak openly because he fears being hated by his hearers. Hesiod, for instance, seems to have written with this in view....Aesop of Samos ... was a slave by the accident of birth rather than by temperament, and he proved his sagacity by this very use of fable. For since the law did not allow him freedom of speech, he had no resource but to shadow forth his wise counsels and trick them out with charms and graces and so serve them up to his hearers.

– Emperor Julian, *To the Cynic Heracleios* 2:79-81 (207a-d) (I have slightly altered the translation)

**Eunapius** (c 347-c 420):

Some philosophers hide their esoteric teachings in obscurity, as poets conceal theirs in myths.

– Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists*, 357

**Augustine** (354-430):

Augustine's position on esotericism is particularly well-documented as well as particularly complex.

To begin with the case of Holy scripture, Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* argues that the rhetoric of the Bible is often characterized by great obscurity—and this is intentional:

Some of the expressions are so obscure as to shroud the meaning in the thickest darkness. And I do not doubt that all this was divinely arranged for the purpose of subduing pride by toil, and of preventing a feeling of satiety in the intellect, which generally holds in small esteem what is discovered without difficulty.

– Augustine, *On Christian doctrine*, 59 (2.6)

Again, the disciples have “expressed themselves with a useful and wholesome obscurity” with a view to:

exercise and train the minds of their readers, and to break in upon the satiety and stimulate the zeal of those who are willing to learn, and with a view also to throw a veil over the minds of the godless either that they may be converted to piety or shut out from a knowledge of the mysteries.

– Ibid., 169 (4.8)

And in his letters: “Lest the obvious should cause disgust, the hidden truths arouse longing; longing brings on certain renewal; renewal brings sweet inner knowledge.”

– Augustine, *Letters*, 3:34 (137)

This pedagogical use of obscurity in the scriptures, however, Augustine does not think should be imitated by the Bible’s human expositors, at least for the most part. The expositors, in their public sermons (as distinguished from private conversations and writings):

ought not to express themselves in the same way, as if putting forward their expositions as of the same authority; but they ought in all their deliverances to make it their first and chief aim to be understood, using as far as possible [great] clearness of speech.

But then he goes on to concede the legitimacy and necessity of concealment in certain cases: there are some passages which are not understood in their proper force, or are understood with great difficulty, at whatever length, however clearly, or with whatever eloquence the speaker may expound them; and these should never be brought before the people at all, or only on rare occasions when there is some urgent reason.

But, in the case of private communications, as distinguished from public sermons, the situation is somewhat different.

In private conversations, we must not shrink from the duty of bringing the truth which we ourselves have reached within the comprehension of others, however difficult it may be to understand it.

Yet, again, he concedes this duty must be qualified:

Only two conditions are to be insisted upon, that our hearer or companion should have an earnest desire to learn the truth, and should have capacity of mind to receive it in whatever form it may be communicated.

Finally, one must distinguish the case of written communication as opposed to oral. Here, as with private conversation, one must endeavor to convey even the most difficult truths. But this claim also carries a strong qualification. Such books must be:

written in such a style that, if understood, they, so to speak, draw their own readers, and if not understood, give no trouble to those who do not care to read them.

– Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 169-70 (4.8-9)

Turning from religious to philosophical writings, Augustine openly asserts that many of the greatest classical thinkers wrote esoterically. In the *City of God* (5.9), he tries to show, for example, that Cicero was a non-believer and sought to communicate that view; but in the latter’s dialogue *On the Nature of the Gods*, to avoid popular odium, Cicero put the atheistic argument in the mouth of another, while he himself pretended to side with the theistic Stoic position. (For the quotation, see above Cicero).

Similarly, he gives a complex, esoteric interpretation of Marcus Varro, the great Roman philosophical writer on religion (*City of God*, 138-40 [4.31-32] and 185-201 [6.2-9]). After developing his interpretation, he defends it as follows:

I should be thought to conjecture these things, unless [Varro] himself, in another passage, had not openly said, in speaking of religious rites, that many things are

true which it is not only not useful for the common people to know, but that it is expedient that the people should think otherwise, even though falsely, and therefore the Greeks have shut up the religious ceremonies and mysteries in silence, and within walls.

– Augustine, *City of God*, 138 (4.31)

Augustine gives a similarly skeptical account of Seneca:

[W]ith respect to these sacred rites of the civil theology, Seneca preferred, as the best course to be followed by a wise man, to feign respect for them in act, but to have no real regard for them at heart... [Seneca] worshipped what he censured, did what he condemned, adored what he reproached, because, forsooth, philosophy had taught him something great—namely, not to be superstitious in the world, but, on account of the laws of cities and customs of men, to be an actor, not on the stage, but in the temples.

– Ibid., 203 (6.10)

He also provides a brief esoteric reading of Appuleius, the second century AD Roman writer, author of *The Golden Ass*. Augustine argues that in his work *The God of Socrates*, Appuleius concealed his true view regarding “daemons” for fear of offending his readers, but that “he sufficiently indicated to discerning readers what opinion” he really held.

– Ibid., 288 (9.8)

By far the most important case, however, is Plato and, more generally, the Academic School with whom Augustine largely identifies himself.

Plato liked and constantly affected the well-known method of his master Socrates, namely, that of dissimulating his knowledge or his opinions, [thus] it is not easy to discover clearly what he himself thought on various matters, any more than it is to discover what were the real opinions of Socrates.

– Ibid., 248 (8.4)

This practice was continued by Plato’s successors who chose their concepts and terminology so as “both at once to conceal from the unintelligent and reveal to the more alert, their real opinion.”

– Augustine, *Against the academics*, 90 (1)

In fact, in Augustine’s view, this use of esotericism intensified in Plato’s later followers when, owing to the general decay in philosophical understanding and the rise of dogmatic materialism (in the rival forms of Epicureanism and Stoicism), the effort to propound the more transcendental aspects of Plato’s thought would only have functioned to discredit Platonism. Therefore, they chose to conceal that aspect of his thought—to save it for a better day—and to confine themselves to attacking the reigning materialist dogmatism through the posture of radical skepticism that we see in the middle and third Academies.

The Platonists are not able by their authority to lead the mob, blinded by the love of earthly things, to faith in the unseen.... Thus the true and saving doctrine would fall into disrepute through the contempt of untaught peoples—a most dangerous result for the human race.... [Therefore] they chose to conceal their own opinion

and to argue against those who boasted of having found the truth, which truth they located in the senses of the body.

– Augustine, *Letters*, 2:279-80 (118)

It is clear, moreover, that this esoteric course of action is one of which Augustine heartily approves.

If any untainted stream flows from the Platonic spring, it seems to me that in these times it is better for it to be guided through shady and thorny thickets, for the possession of the few, rather than allowed to wander through open spaces where cattle [i.e., the “common herd”] break through, and where it is impossible for it to be kept clear and pure.... Against men of this type, I think that that method or art of concealing the truth is a useful invention.”

– Augustine, *Letters*, 1:3 (1) (I have slightly altered the translation)

Nevertheless, Augustine does also believe that the coming of Christ and the continuing spread of Christian belief has, at length, in his own time, fundamentally changed the rhetorical situation for philosophy. For “faith in things invisible and eternal” has been “preached by visible miracles to men who could neither see nor think of anything beyond the body.” Thus

If Plato and the rest of them... were to come to life again and find the churches full and the temples empty, and that the human race was being called away from desire for temporal and transient goods to spiritual and intelligible goods and to the hope of eternal life, and was actually giving its attention to these things, they would perhaps say... That is what we did not dare preach to the people. We preferred to yield to popular custom rather than to bring the people over to our way of thinking and living.

– Augustine, *De vera religione*, 80 (3.5)

Still, it remained important, in Augustine’s view, that one endeavor to say to people only what they are able to understand. As he declares in the *Confessions*:

Of this I am certain, and I am not afraid to declare it from my heart, that if I had to write something to which the highest authority would be attributed, I would rather write it in such a way that my words would reinforce for each reader whatever truth he was able to grasp about these matters, provided there was no falsity to offend me.

– Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. 12, chap. 31, no. 42

**Synesius of Cyrene (373-414):**

Inasmuch as [the many] are uninstructed, they are obstinate and are determined champions of their absurd opinions, to such an extent that if anyone disturbs any point of their ancestral notions, he will before long drink the hemlock. What penalty do you think Homer would have suffered from the Greeks, if he had told the very truth itself concerning Zeus, and had said nothing of those portentous things with which children are terrified?

– Synesius, “A Eulogy of Baldness,” in *Essays and Hymns*, 2:255

Philosophic intelligence, though an observer of truth, acquiesces in the use of falsehood. Just consider this analogy: light is to the truth as the eye is to the intellect. Just as it would be harmful for the eye to feast on unlimited light and just as darkness is more helpful to diseased eyes, so, I assert, falsehood is of advantage to the demos and the truth would be harmful to those not strong enough to peer steadfastly on the clear revelation of that which truly is.... [Therefore, I must] love wisdom at home [and] embrace fables abroad.... For what do the many and philosophy have to do with one another? The truth must be left secret and unspoken, for the multitude are in need of another state of mind.

– Synesius, Epistle 105, quoted and translated by Rahe in *Republics Ancient and Modern*, 226

**Ammonius Hermiae** (c. 440- c. 520):

Let us ask why on earth the philosopher [Aristotle] is contented with obscure [*asaphes*] teaching. We reply that it is just as in the temples, where curtains are used for the purpose of preventing everyone, and especially the impure, from encountering things they are not worthy of meeting. So too Aristotle uses the obscurity of his philosophy as a veil, so that good people may for that reason stretch their minds even more, whereas empty minds that are lost through carelessness will be put to flight by the obscurity when they encounter sentences like these.

– Ammonius, *On Aristotle's Categories*, 9 (1.10), 15 (7.7)

**Macrobius** (Fourth century):

In treating of the other gods and the soul, as I have said, philosophers make use of fabulous narratives; not without a purpose, however, nor merely to entertain, but because they realize that a frank, open exposition of herself is distasteful to Nature, who just as she has withheld an understanding of herself from the uncouth senses of men by enveloping herself in variegated garments, has also desired to have her secrets handled by more prudent individuals through fabulous narratives.

– Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream*, 86 (1.2.17)

**Boethius** (480-524):

In the Proemium to *De Trinitate*, addressing his father-in-law, a distinguished Roman consul and Senator, Boethius states:

I purposely use brevity and wrap up the issues that I draw from the deep questionings of philosophy in new and unfamiliar words such as speak only to you and to myself.... The rest of the world I simply disregard since those who cannot understand them seem unworthy even to read them.

– Boethius, *De Trinitate*, 5

**Simplicius of Cilicia** (c. 490–c. 560):

[Aristotle] deliberately introduced obscurity, repelling by this means those who are too easy-going, so that it might seem to them that they had not even been written.

– Simplicius, *In Aristotelis Physicorum Libros Quattuor Priores Commentaria*, 9:8, quoted and translated by David Bolotin in *An Approach to Aristotle's Physics*, 6.

**John Philoponus** (490-570):

Now, [Aristotle] practiced obscurity on account of his readers, so as to make those who were naturally suited eager to hear the argument, but to turn those who were uninterested away right from the beginning. For the genuine listeners, to the degree that the arguments are obscure, by so much are they eager to struggle and to arrive at the depth.

– Philoponus, *Aristotelis Categorias Commentarium*, 13.1:6.22–26  
(unpublished translation by Jenny Strauss Clay)

**Marcellinus** (sixth century):

Thucydides was the zealous emulator of Homer in artistic arrangement, of Pindar in the grand and lofty character, but a man designedly obscure in speech, lest it be accessible to all, and lest it should appear cheap, if easily understood by everyone. He wished rather to meet the test of the exceedingly wise.

– Marcellinus, *Life of Thucydides*, 19

The teachers he had were, in philosophy, Anaxagoras—whence, as Antyllus attests, he was held in his day to be atheist, from the fact that he took his fill of his *theoria*.

– Ibid., 16

**Alfarabi** (872-950):

The wise Plato did not feel free to reveal and uncover the sciences for all men. Therefore, he followed the practice of using symbols, riddles, obscurity, and difficulty, so that science would not fall into the hands of those who do not deserve it and be deformed, or into the hands of one who does not know its worth or who uses it improperly. In this he was right.

– Alfarabi, *Plato's Laws*, 84–85

[Plato] resorted to allegories and riddles. He intended thereby to put in writing his knowledge and wisdom according to an approach that would let them be known only to the deserving.

– Alfarabi, *Harmonization*, 131 (sec. 12)

Whoever inquires into Aristotle's sciences, peruses his books, and takes pains with them will not miss the many modes of concealment, blinding and complicating in his approach, despite his apparent intention to explain and clarify.

– Alfarabi, *Harmonization* (unpublished translation by Miriam Galston, quoted by Bolotin in *Approach to Aristotle's Physics*, 6)

Speaking in his own name, Alfarabi asserts that, outside the best regime, the philosopher “is a stranger in the present world and wretched in life.” And he holds this to also be the view of Plato who “stated that the perfect man, the man who investigates, and the virtuous man are in grave danger” from the multitude.

– Alfarabi, *Aphorisms of the Statesman*, 72; *The Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, 67

Therefore, the philosopher must strive to address the many “with arguments that are generally accepted among them, well known to them, and well received among them.” Through this means

the philosopher associates with the public and becomes well protected so that he is not found burdensome or engaged in an objectionable business; for the public is in the habit of finding what is strange to them burdensome and what is out of their reach objectionable.

– Alfarabi, *Paraphrase of Aristotle's Topics*, MS, Bratislava, No. 231, TE 40, fol. 203, cited and translated by Muhsin Mahdi in “Man and His Universe,” 113

#### **Avicenna (980-1037):**

In their writings the most famous philosophers of the Greeks and their prophets made use of parables and images in which they concealed their secrets, like Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato.

– Avicenna, “On the Parts of Science,” 85, quoted and translated by Leo Strauss in *Philosophy and Law*, 133n71

#### **John of Salisbury (1120-1180):**

He [Aristotle] is said to have been the first to divide his studies into two classes, esoteric [agroatica] and exoteric [exotherica]. His familiars and as it were members of his household would be admitted to the esoteric, the exoteric were open not merely to outsiders but even to foreigners and visitors.

– John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, 234 (7.6)

**Averroes (1126-1198):**

The chiefs' lying to the multitude will be appropriate for them in the respect in which a drug is appropriate for a disease....That is true because untrue stories are necessary for the teaching of the citizens. No bringer of a *nomos* [law] is to be found who does not make use of invented stories, for this is something necessary for the multitude to reach their happiness.

–Averroes, *Averroes on Plato's Republic*, 24

In this commentary on the *Republic*, Averroes repeats even more forcefully than Plato:

If it happens that a true philosopher grows up in these cities, he is in the position of a man who has come among perilous animals....Hence he turns to isolation and lives the life of a solitary.

– Ibid., 78

Averroes warns that if one reveals the deeper interpretation of a Koranic passage, one that goes beyond the apparent meaning, to someone who is "unfit to receive" it, one will lead him into unbelief.

The reason for this is that the interpretation comprises two things, rejection of the apparent meaning and affirmation of the [true] interpretation; so that if the apparent meaning is rejected in the mind of someone who can only grasp apparent meanings, without the [true] interpretation being affirmed in his mind, the result is unbelief.... Interpretations, then, ought not to be expressed to the multitude.

– Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*, 181

It is certain that [Averroes] admitted neither punishments nor rewards after this life; for in truth he taught the mortality of the human soul.

– Pierre Bayle, "Averroes," *Dictionnaire*, 1:387 (remark H)

**Maimonides (1135-1204):**

These matters [of theology] are only for a few solitary individuals of a very special sort, not for the multitude. For this reason, they should be hidden from the beginner, and he should be prevented from taking them up, just as a small baby is prevented from taking coarse foods and from lifting heavy weights.

– Maimonides, *Guide*, 79 (1.34)

Therefore, Maimonides states that in discussing such matters he will not offer anything beyond what he calls "the chapter headings." And, he continues:

Even those are not set down in order or arranged in coherent fashion in this Treatise, but rather are scattered and entangled with other subjects.... For my purpose is that the truths be glimpsed and then again be concealed.

– Ibid., 6-7 (1: Introduction)

In my opinion, an analogous case would be that of someone feeding a suckling with wheaten bread and meat and giving him wine to drink. He would

undoubtedly kill him, not because these aliments are bad or unnatural for a man, but because the child that receives them is too weak to digest them so as to derive a benefit from them. Similarly, these true opinions [of the divine science] were not hidden, enclosed in riddles, and treated by all men of knowledge with all sorts of artifice through which they could teach them without expounding them explicitly, because of something bad being hidden in them, or because they undermine the foundations of the Law, as is thought by ignorant people who deem that they have attained a rank suitable for speculation. Rather have they been hidden because at the outset the intellect is incapable of receiving them; only flashes of them are made to appear so that the perfect man should know them.

– Ibid., 71 (1.33)

### **Thomas Aquinas (1221-1274):**

Near the beginning of the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas asks “Whether Holy Scripture Should Use Metaphors.” He answers in the affirmative, and among his reasons are these: “Because thereby divine truths are the better hidden from the unworthy.” And also:

The very hiding of truth in figures is useful for the exercise of thoughtful minds, and as a defense against the ridicule of the impious.

– Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1:6-7 (pt. 1, ques. 1, art. 9)

In his commentary on the *De Trinitate* of Boethius, Thomas addresses the article “Should Divine Realities be Veiled by Obscure and Novel Words?” He responds in the affirmative:

Matthew 7:6 says: “Do not give dogs what is holy; and do not throw your pearls before swine.” The Gloss comments on this: “What is hidden is more eagerly sought after; what is concealed appears more worthy of reverence; what is searched for longer is more dearly prized.” Therefore, since the sacred teachings should be regarded with the utmost reverence, it seems that they ought not to be made accessible to the public, but taught in obscure language.

2. Dionysius says: “You should not commit to everyone all the holy doctrines of the sublime episcopal order, but only to the godlike teachers of sacred things of the same rank as yourself...”

3. Luke 8:10 is to the point. He says: “To you,” that is, to the perfect, “it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God,” that is, an understanding of the Scriptures, as is clear from the gloss, “but for others they are in parables.” So there are some things that should be hidden by obscure language.

*Reply:* A teacher should measure his words that they help rather than hinder his hearer. Now there are some things which can harm nobody when they are heard, for example, the truths that everyone is bound to know. There are other matters, however, that would be harmful to those hearing them if they were openly presented. This can happen in two ways. First, if the secrets of faith were revealed to unbelievers who detest the faith, for they would receive them with ridicule. Hence the Lord says in Matthew 7:6: “Do not give dogs what is holy,” and Dionysius states: “Concealing the holy truths, guard them from the profane crowd as something unchanging.” Second when abstruse doctrines are taught to the uneducated they take an occasion of error from what they do not fully

understand. Thus the Apostle says in 1 Corinthians 3:1-2: “But I, brethren, could not address you as spiritual men, but as men of the flesh, as babes in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food; for you were not ready for it.” Commenting on Exodus 21:33: “When someone leaves a pit open.” etc., Gregory says: “Anyone who now perceives the depths in the sacred words, should hide in silence their sublime meaning when in the presence of those who do not understand them, so that he will not hurt by interior scandal an immature believer or an unbeliever who might become a believer.” These matters, therefore, ought to be concealed from those to whom they might do harm.

In speaking [as distinguished from writing], however, it is possible to discriminate. Certain things can be explained to the wise in private which we should keep silent about in public. Thus Augustine says: “There are some passages which are not understood in their proper force or are understood with difficulty, no matter how great, how comprehensive, or how clear the eloquence with which they are handled by the speaker. These should be spoken to a public audience only rarely, if there is some urgent reason, or never at all.” In writing, however, this distinction does not hold because a written book can fall into the hands of anybody. Therefore, these matters should be concealed with obscure language, so that they will benefit the wise who understand them and be hidden from the uneducated who are unable to grasp them....

Reply to 3. The teaching of Christ should be publicly and openly preached, so that it is clear to everyone what is good for him to know, but not that what is not good for him to know be made public.

– Thomas Aquinas, *De Trinitate*, art. 4, in *Faith, Reason and Theology*, 53-54

As can be seen from this last paragraph, Thomas is certainly not claiming that Christianity is a mystery religion whose central tenets are arbitrarily confined to some select group of initiates. It is essential to Christ’s mission that He preached his doctrine to the crowds, to the multitude; and though he also had a select group of disciples, he called upon them to do the same. He sought, in principle, that all men should understand His teaching. But at the same time it is part of that teaching that most men, lost in sin, are unable or unwilling to do so. Therefore, they had to be addressed with caution and reserve—for their own good and that of His teaching.

Thus, in the *Summa Theologica*, when he takes up the question “Whether Christ Should Have Taught All Things Openly?” he holds that that is what Jesus did and should have done. Yet, this is still consistent, he argues, with a secretive manner of speaking.

Christ spoke certain things in secret to the crowds, by employing parables in teaching them spiritual mysteries which they were either unable or unworthy to grasp: and yet it was better for them to be instructed in the knowledge of spiritual things, albeit hidden under the garb of parables, than to be deprived of it altogether. Nevertheless our Lord expounded the open and unveiled truth of these parables to His disciples, so that they might hand it down to others worthy of it....

Reply Obj. 3. As stated above, Our Lord spoke to the multitudes in parables, because they were neither able nor worthy to receive the naked truth, which He revealed to His disciples.

– Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 4:2241-42 (pt. 3, ques. 42, art. 3)

Approaching the whole question of esotericism from a different point of view, one might ask whether it is ever permissible, in Thomas’ view, for a Christian to dissimulate regarding his most fundamental belief, his belief in God, or is it rather a duty for a Christian to publically confess and declare his faith. Thomas takes up this question in the *Summa* and replies:

There is nothing commendable in making a public confession of one’s faith, if it cause a disturbance among unbelievers, without any profit either to the faith or to the faithful.

– Ibid., 3:1183 (pt. 2-2, ques. 3, art. 2)

### **Dante Alighieri (1265-1321):**

In his famous letter dedicating the *Paradiso* to Lord Can Grande, Dante states that his work has more sense than one:

For me be able to present what I am going to say, you must know that the sense of this work is not simple, rather it may be called polysemantic, that is, of many senses; the first sense is that which comes from the letter, the second is that of that which is signified by the letter. And the first is called the literal, the second allegorical or moral or anagogical.

– Dante to Lord Can Grande, Epistle 13, section 7 (unpublished translation by James Marchand)

He also hints at this in the work itself:

O ye who have undistempred intellects,  
Observe the doctrine that conceals itself  
Beneath the veil of the mysterious verses!

– Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, 9.61-63, translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Here reader fix thine eyes well on the truth,  
For now indeed so subtle is the veil,  
Surely to penetrate within is easy.

– Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 8.18-20, translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

**Marsilius of Padua** (1275-c. 1342):

[T]he philosophers, including Hesiod, Pythagoras, and several others of the ancients, noted appropriately a quite different cause or purpose for the setting forth of divine laws or religions.... This was to ensure the goodness of human acts both individual and civil, on which depend almost completely the quiet or tranquility of communities and finally the sufficient life in the present world. For although some of the philosophers who founded such laws or religions did not accept or believe in human resurrection and that life which is called eternal, they nevertheless feigned and persuaded others that it exists and that in it pleasures and pains are in accordance with the qualities of human deeds in this mortal life, in order that they might thereby induce in men reverence and fear of God, and a desire to flee the vices and to cultivate the virtues.

– Marsilius of Padua, *Defender of Peace*, 19 (1.5-11)

**Giovanni Boccaccio** (1313-1375):

The Decameron of Boccaccio [is] full of passages that breathe this [new] freedom of thought, this contempt for all prejudices, [and] this disposition to make them the subject of a sly and secret derision.

– Nicolas de Condorcet, *Esquisse*, 168 (7) (translation mine)

In his *Life of Dante*, in the ninth and central chapter entitled “Digression On Poetry,” Boccaccio abruptly turns away from his biographical account of Dante to a discussion of “the duty and function of the poet,” the origin and abiding character of poetry as such.

In the earliest times, when kings first arose, they sought to bolster their power through the support of religion. They strove to deify their fathers, grandfathers, and ancestors, in order that they themselves might be more feared and revered by the masses. These things could not have been easily done without the collaboration of the poets, who, in order to extend their own fame, as well as to win the favor of the princes, delight their subjects, and persuade everyone to act virtuously (which actually ran contrary to their true intentions), made the people believe what the princes wanted.

But they continued, he argues, also to seek and convey the truth. Thus, poetic writing became essentially double in character, conveying two different messages. In the same narrative passage, it presents:

the text and the mystery that lies beneath it. Thus, it simultaneously challenges the intellect of the wise while it gives comfort to the minds of the simple. It possesses openly something to give children nourishment and yet reserves in secret something to hold with fascinated admiration the minds of the deepest meditators. Therefore, it is like a river, so to speak, both shallow and deep, in which the little lamb may wade with its feet and the great elephant may swim

freely.

In addition

Whatever has been gained by hard work has a certain pleasure over and above that which has been gained without toil.... Therefore, in order that [the truth] should be more appreciated by being gained through labor and for that reason better preserved, poets hid it under many details which seem contrary to it.

– Giovanni Boccaccio, *Life of Dante*, 38, 40 (9)

Similarly, in his *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*, Boccaccio explains that “surely it is not one of the poet’s various functions” to “lay bare the meaning which lies hidden in his inventions.” To the contrary,

where matters truly solemn and memorable are too much exposed, it is his office by every effort to protect as well as he can and remove them from the gaze of the irreverent, that they cheapen not by too common familiarity.

Again,

No one can believe that poets invidiously veil the truth with fiction, either to deprive the reader of the hidden sense, or to appear the more clever; but rather to make truths, which would otherwise cheapen by exposure, the object of strong intellectual effort and various interpretation, that in ultimate discovery they shall be more precious.

– Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*, 59-60 (14.12)

**Desiderius Erasmus** (1466-1536):

Allegory not infrequently results in enigma. Nor will that be unfortunate, if you are speaking to the learned, or if you are writing.... For things should not be so written that everyone perceives, but rather so that they are compelled to investigate certain things and learn.

– Desiderius Erasmus, *Opera Omnia*, 1.19, quoted and translated by Joel Altman in *The Tudor Play of Mind*, 206

While it can never be lawful to go against the truth, it may sometimes be expedient to conceal it in the circumstances.... Theologians are agreed on some things among themselves which it is not expedient to publish to the common herd.... I will not mention (what Plato seems to have perceived so clearly) that a mixed and uneducated multitude cannot be retained in its allegiance unless it is sometimes misled by artificial colouring and well-intentioned falsehood. But this requires a man not only of the highest character, but of exceptional wisdom.

– Desiderius Erasmus to Lorenzo Campeggi, December 6, 1520, in *Correspondence*, 8:113

I know that sometimes it is a good man's duty to conceal the truth, and not to publish it regardless of times and places, before every audience and by every method, and everywhere complete.

– Desiderius Erasmus to Luigi Marliano, March 25, 1521, in *Correspondence*, 8:173

As nothing is more foolish than wisdom out of place, so nothing is more imprudent than unseasonable prudence. And he is unseasonable who does not accommodate himself to things as they are, who is 'unwilling to follow the market'.

– Desiderius Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, 38

It is lawful to keep silence concerning the truth if there is no hope of its doing any good. In this way Christ kept silence before Herod.

– Desiderius Erasmus to William Blount, Lord Mountjoy, July 5, 1521, in *Correspondence*, 8:262

For seeing that truth of itself has a bitter taste for most people, and that it is of itself a subversive thing to uproot what has long been commonly accepted, it would have been wiser to soften a naturally painful subject by the courtesy of one's handling than to pile one cause of hatred on another....*A prudent steward will husband the truth*—bring it out, I mean, when the business requires it and bring it out so much as is requisite and bring out for every man what is appropriate for him—[but] Luther in this torrent of pamphlets has poured it all out at once, making everything public and giving even cobblers a share in what is normally handled by scholars as mysteries reserved for the initiated.

– Desiderius Erasmus to Justus Jonas, May 10, 1521, in *Correspondence*, 8:203

Everywhere the time, the manner and the recipients of [the truth's] publication are of great importance. Reliable physicians do not take refuge at the outset in their ultimate remedies; first they prepare the patient's body with less powerful drugs, and they adjust the dose to cure and not to overwhelm.... And furthermore, since every novelty causes an upheaval, even if it is a summons to better things, any proposal that diverges from what men are used to should be put forward in such a form as to make that divergence seem as small as possible.

– *Ibid.*, 8:205

Martin Luther, in his writings on Erasmus, argues that the latter's well-known esotericism ultimately serves a purpose well beyond prudent religious reform.

To what does this hateful double-tongued way of speaking tend? It only furnishes an opportunity of disseminating and fostering in safety the seeds of every heresy, under the cover of words and letters that have a shew of Christian faith. And thus, while religion is believed to be taught and defended, it is, in reality, utterly destroyed, and subverted from its foundation before it is understood... [Thus] I began to suspect him of being a plain Democritus or Epicurus, and a crafty derider of Christ: for he every where intimates to his fellow Epicureans, his hatred against Christ: though he does it in words so figurative and insidious, that he leaves himself a clue [i.e., a pretext] for raging most furiously against those Christians, who, being offended at his suspicious and double meaning

words, will not interpret them as standing in favour of their Christ.  
– “Martin Luther to Nicolas Armsdoff Concerning Erasmus of Rotterdam,”  
*Bondage of the Will*, 171

**Niccolo Machiavelli** (1469-1527):

Machiavelli is of course famous for describing and recommending the use of deceit in politics. For example:

And truly there was never any orderer of extraordinary laws for a people who did not have recourse to God, because otherwise they would not have been accepted. For a prudent individual knows many goods that do not have in themselves evident reasons with which one can persuade others. Thus wise men who wish to take away this difficulty have recourse to God. So did Lycurgus; so did Solon; so did many others who have had the same end as they.

– Niccolo Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 35 (1.11)

And since, by his own admission, Machiavelli aims to have an extraordinary political effect through his writings, it would not be surprising if he also engaged in some deceit. He does declare in a letter to Guicciardini:

For some time, I never say what I believe and I never believe what I say; and if it sometimes occurs to me that I say the truth, I conceal it among so many lies that it is hard to find it out.

– Niccolo Machiavelli to Guicciardini, May 17, 1521, quoted and translated by Strauss in *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 36

In Diderot’s *Encyclopedia* article “Machiavelism,” he argues that *The Prince*, that most famous handbook for monarchs and tyrants, was secretly an effort to discredit absolute monarchy under the pretence of recommending and explaining it.

It is as if he said to his fellow citizens, read well this work. If you ever accept a master, he will be such as I paint him: here is the ferocious beast to whom you will abandon yourselves.... Chancellor Bacon was not fooled [by *The Prince*] when he said: this man teaches nothing to tyrants; they know only too well what they have to do, but he instructs the peoples about what they have to fear.

– Denis Diderot, “Machiavelism,” *Encyclopédie*

This esoteric reading of Machiavelli is to be found not only in Diderot and Bacon but also Spinoza and Rousseau. The former speculates that, in *The Prince*, Machiavelli’s true intention was “to show how cautious a free multitude should be of entrusting its welfare absolutely to one man.”

– Baruch Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, 315 (5.7)

And in the *Social Contract*, Rousseau states:

[B]eing attached to the Medici household, [Machiavelli] was forced, during the oppression of his homeland, to disguise his love of freedom. The choice of his execrable hero [Cesare Borgia] is in itself enough to make manifest his hidden intention.

His “hidden intention” was this: “While pretending to give lessons to kings, he gave great ones to the people. Machiavelli’s *The Prince* is the book of republicans.” But Machiavelli’s target was not only the throne but also the altar. Rousseau continues: “The court of Rome has severely forbidden this book. I can well believe it; it is the court that he most clearly depicts.”

– J. J. Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 88, 88n

### **Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543):**

Copernicus was extremely reluctant to publish his work on heliocentrism and, despite the urgings of many people, waited several decades before finally resolving to do so. As he explains in the dedicatory epistle to that work:

[W]hen I considered this carefully, the contempt which I had to fear because of the novelty and apparent absurdity of my view, nearly induced me to abandon utterly the work I had begun.

[But various] very eminent and scholarly men made the same request, urging that I should no longer through fear refuse to give out my work for the common benefit of students of Mathematics.

[And therefore I decided] to publish and at last bring to the light the book which had lain in my study not nine years merely, but already going on four times nine.

[A]lthough I know that the meditations of a philosopher are far removed from the judgment of the laity, because his endeavor is to seek out the truth in all things, so far as this is permitted by God to the human reason, I still believe that one must avoid theories altogether foreign to orthodoxy. Accordingly, when I considered in my own mind how absurd a performance it must seem to those who know that the judgment of many centuries has approved the view that the Earth remains fixed as center in the midst of the heavens, if I should, on the contrary, assert that the Earth moves; I was for a long time at a loss to know whether I should publish the commentaries which I have written in proof of its motion, or whether it were not better to follow the example of the Pythagoreans and of some others, who were accustomed to transmit the secrets of Philosophy not in writing but orally, and only to their relatives and friends, as the letter from Lysis to Hipparchus bears witness. They did this, it seems to me, not as some think, because of a certain selfish reluctance to give their views to the world, but in order that the noblest truths, worked out by the careful study of great men, should not be despised by those who are vexed at the idea of taking great pains with any forms of literature except such as would be profitable, or by those who, if they are driven to the study of Philosophy for its own sake by the admonitions and the example of others, nevertheless, on account of their stupidity, hold a place among philosophers similar to that of drones among bees.

– Nicolaus Copernicus, *Dedication of the Revolutions of the Heavenly Bodies*, 55-56

**Thomas More** (1478-1535):

Debating the proper role and character of philosophy, at the beginning of his *Utopia*, More confronts the claim of his interlocutor that philosophical truth is too lofty to be of use in political life—"there's no room at court for philosophy." More replies:

There is certainly no room for the academic variety which says what it thinks irrespective of circumstances. But there is a more civilized form of philosophy which knows the dramatic context, so to speak, tries to fit in with it, and plays an appropriate part in the current performance. That's the sort you should go in for.... You must go to work indirectly. You must handle everything as tactfully as you can.

– Thomas More, *Utopia*, 63-64

**Francois Rabelais** (1494-1553):

You must be wise, in order to sniff out and weigh these mighty books, and swift in the hunt and brave in the battle; then, by careful reading and frequent reflection, crack open the bone and suck out the substantific marrow.

– Francois Rabelais, Prologue to *Gargantua*, 7

**Girolamo Cardano** (1501-76):

Regarding immortality of the soul:

[A]ll wise men, even if they do not believe it themselves, agree publically with the vulgar.

– Girolamo Cardano, *Opera Omnia*, 1:550

**John Calvin** (1509-1564):

Christ declares that he intentionally spoke obscurely, in order that his discourse might be a riddle to many, and might only strike their ears with a confused and doubtful sound...Still it remains a fixed principle, that the word of God is not obscure, except so far as the world darkens it by its own blindness. And yet the Lord conceals its mysteries, so that the perception of them may not reach the reprobate.

– John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony*, vol. 2, sec. 11

**Michel de Montaigne** (1533-1592):

Montaigne tells us that he lives in a time "when we cannot talk about the world except with danger or falsely." Therefore, as he states elsewhere, they spoke falsely: "dissimulation is among the most notable qualities of this century."

– Michel de Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, 623 (3.3), 505 (2.18)

But in all times, he suggests, there exists a:

natural incompatibility...between the common herd and people of rare and excellent

judgment and knowledge, inasmuch as these two groups go entirely different ways.  
– Ibid., 97 (1.25)

Furthermore:

Aristo of Chios had reason to say long ago that philosophers harmed their listeners, inasmuch as most souls are not fit to profit by such instruction.  
– Ibid., 104 (1.25)

Consequently:

The wise man should withdraw his soul within, out of the crowd, and keep it in freedom and power to judge things freely; but as for externals, he should wholly follow the accepted fashions and forms.  
– Ibid., 86 (1.23)

It is not new for the sages to preach things as they serve, not as they are. Truth has its inconveniences, disadvantages, and incompatibilities.  
– Ibid., 769 (3.10)

Specifically:

In all the barracks of ancient philosophy you will find this, that the same workman publishes rules of temperance, and publishes at the same time amorous and licentious writings.... It is not that there is any miraculous conversion stirring them by fits and starts. Rather it is this: that Solon represents himself now as himself, now in the shape of a lawgiver; now he speaks for the crowd, now for himself....

For delicate stomachs we need strict and artificial diets. Good stomachs simply follow the prescriptions of their natural appetite. So do our doctors, who eat the melon and drink the new wine while they keep their patient tied down to syrups and slops.  
– Ibid., 757 (3.9)

By profession they [the philosophers] do not always present their opinion openly and apparently; they have hidden it now in the fabulous shades of poetry, now under some other mask. For our imperfection also provides this, that raw meat is not always fit for our stomach; it must be dried, altered, and corrupted. They do the same: they sometimes obscure their natural opinions and judgments and falsify them to accommodate themselves to public usage.  
– Ibid., 408 (2.12)

We must often be deceived that we may not deceive ourselves, and our eyes sealed, our understanding stunned, in order to redress and amend them. “For it is the ignorant who judge, and they must frequently be deceived, lest they err” [Quintilian]. When they [the sages] order us to love three, four, fifty degrees of things before ourselves, they imitate the technique of the archers who, to hit the mark, take aim a great distance above the target. To straighten a bent stick you bend it back the other way.

– Ibid., 769 (3.10)

Some things they [the ancient philosophers] wrote for the needs of society, like their religions; and on that account it was reasonable that they did not want to bare popular opinions to the skin, so as not to breed disorder in people’s obedience to the laws and customs of their country.

– Ibid., 379 (2.12)

And as for Montaigne himself:

I speak the truth, not my fill of it, but as much as I dare speak.

– Ibid., 611 (3.2)

In these memoirs, if you look around, you will find that I have said everything or suggested everything. What I cannot express, I point to with my finger.

But if you have a penetrating mind,

These little tracks will serve the rest to find [Lucretius].

– Ibid., 751 (3.9)

My ideas follow one another, but sometimes it is from a distance, and look at each other, but with a sidelong glance.... It is the inattentive reader who loses my subject, not I. Some word about it will always be found off in a corner, which will not fail to be sufficient, though it takes little room.

– Ibid., 761 (3.9)

And how many stories have I spread around which say nothing of themselves, but from which anyone who troubles to pluck them with a little ingenuity will produce numberless essays. Neither these stories nor my quotations serve always simply for example, authority, or ornament. I do not esteem them solely for the use I derive from them. They often bear, outside my subject, the seeds of a richer and bolder material, and sound obliquely a subtler note, both for myself, who do not wish to express anything more, and for those who get my drift.

– Ibid., 185 (1.40)

**Pierre Charron (1541-1603):**

In all external and common actions of life...one should agree and accommodate oneself to the common ways; for our rule does not extend to the outer and the action, but to the inner, the thought, and the secret, internal judgment.

– Pierre Charron, *De la sagesse*, 286 (2.2) (translation mine)

The wise man is typically constrained:

to act outwardly in one way, to judge inwardly in another, to play one role before the world, and another in his mind. The common saying *universus mundus exercet histrioniam* [all the world plays a role] should strictly and truly be understood of the wise man.... If he were on the outside what he is on the inside, people wouldn't know what to make of him, he would offend the world too much.

– Ibid., 289 (translation mine)

**Paolo Sarpi** (1552-1623):

In his private diaries, only recently published, Sarpi states:

Your innermost thoughts should be guided by reason, but you should act and speak only as others do.

– Paolo Sarpi, *Opere*, 92

My character is such that, like a chameleon, I imitate the behaviour of those amongst whom I find myself.... I am compelled to wear a mask. Perhaps there is nobody who can survive in Italy without one.

– Paolo Sarpi to Gillot, May 12, 1609, in *Lettere ai Gallicani*, 133

Never lightly let slip a word against common opinion, but keep "*verba in tua potestate*" [words in your power], to which end "*minimum cum aliis loqui, plurimum secum*" [speak as little as possible with others; as much as possible with oneself]; and if you can stay masked in this way with all, *do not let anyone see your face*.

– Paolo Sarpi, *Opere*, 92 (unpublished translation by Christopher Nadon and John Alcorn; emphasis added)

Having discovered and read Sarpi's private diaries in a Vatican archive a century before they became publically available, Lord Acton was driven to conclude:

Judaism and Christianity, Catholicism and Protestantism, are forms of speculation which [Sarpi] tries to explain by human causes... studying them as phenomena with less interest than Schelling or Comte—without passion, but without approbation or any degree of assent.... It is now certain he despised the doctrines which he taught, and scoffed at the mysteries which it was his office to celebrate. Therefore, his writings must have been composed in order to injure, not to improve, the religion he professed to serve.

– Lord Acton, *Essays on Church and State*, 255

**Francis Bacon** (1561-1626):

In an early writing *Redargutio Philosophiarum* (The Refutation of Philosophies), Bacon explains how the new philosophy he is developing will differ from the prevailing Scholastic philosophy.

I have no objection to your enjoying the fruits of your [old] philosophy.... [A]dorn your conversation with its jewels; profess it in public and increase your gravity thereby in the eyes of the masses. The new philosophy will bring you no such gains.... It does not

flatter the mind by fitting in with its preconceptions. It does not sink to the capacity of the vulgar except in so far as it benefits them by its works. Therefore keep your old philosophy. Use it when convenient. Keep one to deal with nature and the other to deal with the populace. Every man of superior understanding in contact with inferiors wears a mask.

– Francis Bacon, *The Refutation of Philosophies*, 108

In his essay “Of Simulation and Dissimulation,” Bacon praises the man who has that penetration of judgment as he can discern what things are to be laid open, and what to be secreted, and what to be shewed at half lights, and to whom and when, (which indeed are arts of state and arts of life, as Tacitus well calleth them).

– Francis Bacon, “Of Simulation and Dissimulation,” *Essays*, in *Works*, 6:387

In the *Advancement of Learning*, for example, he states:

Concerning Government, it is a part of knowledge secret and retired, in both these respects in which things are deemed secret; for some things are secret because they are hard to know, and some because they are not fit to utter....Unto the general rules and discourses of policy and government there is due a reverent and reserved handling.

– Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, in *Works*, 3:473-74

Even in his political utopia, the *New Atlantis*, it is explained that within Solomon’s House, the philosophic and scientific academy that rules the island, the members decide which of the inventions and experiences which we have discovered shall be published, and which not: and take all an oath of secrecy, for the concealing of those which we think fit to keep secret.

– Francis Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 80

Thus, it comes as no surprise that in *Valerius Terminus*, for example, we see Bacon himself in the process of elaborating and illustrating an argument when suddenly he stops, saying:

To ascend further by scale I do forbear, partly because it would draw on the example to an over-great length, but chiefly because it would open that which in this work I determine to reserve.

– Francis Bacon, *Valerius Terminus*, in *Works*, 3:236-37

There are two methods of writing, he explains in the *Advancement of Learning*, one “enigmatical” or “acroatic,” the other “disclosed” or “exoteric.”

A diversity of method ...used in some cases by the discretion of the ancients, but disgraced since by the impostures of many vain persons, who have made it as a false light for their counterfeit merchandises; and that is, Enigmatical and Disclosed. The pretense [of the Enigmatical] is to remove the vulgar capacities from being admitted to the secrets of knowledges, and to reserve them to selected auditors, or wits of such sharpness as can pierce the veil.

– Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, in *Works*, 3:404-05

Elsewhere, Bacon makes it explicit that he approves of the enigmatical method.

That the discretion anciently observed...of publishing in a manner whereby it shall not be

to the capacity nor taste of all, but shall as it were single and adopt his reader, is *not to be laid aside*, both for the avoiding of abuse in the excluded, and the strengthening of affection in the admitted.

– Francis Bacon, *Valerius Terminus*, in *Works*, 3:248 (emphasis added)

Similarly, in the *Advancement of Learning*, Bacon divides all poetry into three kinds: narrative, representative, and allusive or parabolical. Concerning the two purposes of the last form, he states, after describing the first purpose:

But there remaineth yet another use of Poesy Parabolical, opposite to that which we last mentioned: for that [last use] tendeth to demonstrate and illustrate that which is taught or delivered, and this other to retire and obscure it: that is when the secrets and mysteries of religion, policy, or philosophy are involved in fables or parables.

– Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, in *Works*, 3:344

Finally, there is the striking testimony of Antoine de la Salle, Bacon's eighteenth century French translator. Imagining what Bacon himself would have said to explain the true character and purpose of his writings if, for one moment, he had been free to speak openly, he writes:

Speaking to a king who is a bigoted theologian, before tyrannical and suspicious priests, I will not be able to display my opinions fully; they would shock dominant prejudices too much. Often obliged to envelop myself in general, vague, and even obscure expressions, I will not be understood at first, but I will take care to pose the principles of truths that will, I dare say, have long term consequences, and sooner or later the consequences will be drawn.... Thus without directly attacking throne and altar, which today support one another, both resting on the triple base of long-standing ignorance, terror, and habit and appearing unshakeable to me, all the while respecting them verbally, I will undermine both by my principles.

– Antoine de la Salle, *Preface générale*, in *Œuvres de Francis Bacon*, 1:xlii-xliv

### **Galileo Galilei (1564-1642):**

Regarding the state of rest or motion of the sun and earth, experience plainly proves that in order to accommodate the common people it was necessary to assert of these things precisely what the words of the Bible convey. Even in our own age, people far less primitive continue to maintain the same opinion for reasons which will be found extremely trivial if well weighed and examined, and upon the basis of experiences that are wholly false or altogether beside the point. Nor is it worthwhile to try to change their opinion, they being unable to understand the arguments on the opposite side, for these depend upon observations too precise and demonstrations too subtle, grounded on abstractions which require too strong an imagination to be comprehended by them. Hence even if the stability of heaven and the motion of the earth should be more than certain in the minds of the wise, it would still be necessary to assert the contrary for the preservation of belief among the all-too-numerous vulgar.... It is sufficiently obvious that to attribute motion to the sun and rest to the earth was therefore necessary lest the shallow minds of the common people should become confused, obstinate, and contumacious in

yielding assent to the principal articles that are absolutely matters of faith. And if this was necessary, there is no wonder at all that it was carried out with great prudence in the holy Bible. I shall say further that not only respect for the incapacity of the vulgar, but also current opinion in those times, made the sacred authors accommodate themselves (in matters unnecessary to salvation) more to accepted usage than to the true essence of things.

– Galileo Galilei, *Discoveries and Opinions*, 201

**Hugo Grotius** (1583-1645):

Concerning Jesus' use of parables, Grotius states:

He spoke to the people through the indirectness of parables, that those who heard Him might not understand, unless, that is, they should bring thereto such earnestness of mind and readiness to be taught as were required.

– Hugo Grotius, *De jure belli ac pacis*, 612 (3.1.10.2)

More generally:

Since you are not required to reveal to others all that you know or desire, it follows that it is right to dissimulate, that is to conceal and hide some things from some persons.

– Ibid., 607 (3.1.7)

Thus,

If we may trust Plutarch and Quintillion the Stoics include among the endowments of the wise man the ability to lie in the proper place and manner.

– Ibid., 610 (3.1.9.3)

**Sir Robert Filmer** (1588-1653):

In John Locke's *First Treatise of Government*, which is an analysis of Filmer's *Patriarcha*, Locke attributes esotericism to him. Filmer, he explains, feared to put off his readers by too precise and complete an account of his harsh doctrine of authority, so "clear distinct speaking not serving everywhere to his purpose, you must not expect it in him." Instead, Filmer intentionally "scattered" his teaching "in the several parts of his writings" or "up and down in his writings."

Filmer acted

... like a wary physician, when he would have his patient swallow some harsh or corrosive liquor, he mingles it with a large quantity of that which may dilute it that the scattered parts may go down with less feeling and cause less aversion.

– John Locke, *First Treatise*, in *Two Treatises of Government*, secs. 23, 8, 9, 7

**Thomas Hobbes** (1588-1679):

In Hobbes's private debate with Bishop Bramhall concerning freedom of the will—a debate requested by the Marquess of Newcastle and not originally intended by any of the parties to be published—Hobbes states:

His Lordship's third argument consists in other inconveniences which he says will follow [from the denial of freedom], namely, impiety and negligence of religious duties, as repentance and zeal to God's service. To which I answer, as to the rest, that they follow not. I must confess, if we consider the greatest part of mankind not as they should be but as they are...that the dispute of this question will rather hurt than help their piety. And therefore if his Lordship had not desired this answer, I should not have written it, nor do I write it but in hopes your Lordship and his will keep it private.

– Thomas Hobbes, *Hobbes and Bramhall on Liberty and Necessity*, 27 (para. 15)

[I]n the moral philosophy now commonly received, there are many things no less dangerous than those [sc., the teaching that unjust commands may be disobeyed], which it matters not now to recite. I suppose those ancients foresaw this, who rather chose to have the science of justice wrapped up in fables, than openly exposed to disputations."

– Thomas Hobbes, Preface to *De Cive*, in *Hobbes: Man and Citizen*, 103

In the Introduction to his translation of Thucydides, Hobbes reports:

Marcellinus saith, he was obscure on purpose; that the common people might not understand him. And not unlikely: for a wise man should so write, (though in words understood by all men), that wise men only should be able to commend him.

– Thomas Hobbes, *The English Works*, 8:xxix

At the end of a discussion of Aristotle's doctrine of separated essences, Hobbes remarks:

And this shall suffice for an example of the errors which are brought into the Church from the *entities* and *essences* of Aristotle (which it may be he knew to be false philosophy, but writ it as a thing consonant to, and corroborative of, their Religion—and fearing the fate of Socrates)."

– Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 460 (46.18)

Samuel Clark, in the very subtitle of his principle work, accuses Hobbes of being an atheist:

*A discourse concerning the being and attributes of God, the obligations of natural religion, and the truth and certainty of the Christian revelation. In answer to Mr. Hobbs, Spinoza, the author of The oracles of reason, and other deniers of natural and revealed religion.*

It could be objected that Hobbes is so obviously bold and outspoken as a writer, that he could not have been exercising any esoteric restraint. But consider this well-known passage from Aubrey's life of Hobbes:

When Spinoza's Tractatus Theologico-Politicus first came out, Mr. Edmund Waller sent it to my lord of Devonshire and desired him to send him word what Mr. Hobbes said of it. Mr. H. told his lordship: Ne judicate ne judicemini ["Judge not that ye be not judged" Mattheew 7:11]. He told me he had outthrowne him a bar's length, for he durst not write so boldly.

– John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, 1:357

**René Descartes (1596-1650):**

Upon hearing of Galileo's arrest for his pro-Copernican theories, Descartes suppressed the publication of his just-completed exposition of his own mechanistic and pro-Copernican physics, *The World*. Instead, eight years later, he published his *Meditations*, a work ostensibly confined entirely to metaphysics and theology. But in a letter to Mersenne, he reveals:

...there are many other things in them; and I tell you, between ourselves, that these six Meditations contain all the foundations of my physics. But that must not be spread abroad, if you please; for those who follow Aristotle will find it more difficult to approve them. I hope that [my readers] will accustom themselves insensibly to my principles, and will come to recognize their truth, before perceiving that they destroy those of Aristotle.

– René Descartes to Mersenne, January 28, 1641, *Œuvres de Descartes*, 3:297–98, quoted and translated by Hiram Caton in *The Origin of Subjectivity*, 17

In a similar vein, Descartes writes to one of his more imprudent disciples:

Do not propose new opinions as new, but retain all the old terminology for supporting new reasons; that way no one can find fault with you, and those who grasp your reasons will by themselves conclude to what they ought to understand. Why is it necessary for you to reject so openly the [Aristotelian doctrine of] substantial forms? Do you not recall that in the *Treatise on Meteors* I expressly denied that I rejected or denied them, but declared only that they were not necessary for the explication of my reasons?

– René Descartes to Regius, January, 1642, *Œuvres de Descartes*, 3:491-92, quoted and translated by Hiram Caton in “The Problem of Descartes’ Sincerity,” 363

From the first paragraph of Descartes’ early, unpublished “Private Thoughts”:

I go forward wearing a mask [larvatus prode].

– René Descartes, “Cogitationes Privatae,” in *Œuvres de Descartes*, 10:213

Descartes took care not to speak so plainly [as Hobbes] but he could not help revealing his opinions in passing, with such address that he would not be understood save by those who examine profoundly these kinds of subjects.

– G. W. Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, 2.1:506, quoted and translated by Richard Kennington in *On Modern Origins*, 197

For example, here is Leibniz, reacting to Descartes' seeming embrace of the view that all necessary truths, like the principle of non-contradiction, are the product of God's free and arbitrary will:

I cannot even imagine that M. Descartes can have been quite seriously of this opinion... He only made pretence to go [there]. It was apparently one of his tricks, one of his philosophic feints: he prepared for himself some loophole, as when for instance he discovered a trick for denying the movement of the earth, while he was a Copernican in the strictest sense.

– G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 244 (2.186)

Whatever he recounts about the distinction between the two substances [mind and body], it is obvious that it was only a trick, a cunning device to make the theologians swallow the poison hidden behind an analogy that strikes everyone and that they alone cannot see.

– Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Machine Man*, 35

After corresponding with Descartes concerning the issue of whether animals were mere machines, Henry More concluded that Descartes was “an abundantly cunning and abstruse genius” who insinuated that mind as an incorporeal substance is a “useless figment and chimera.”

– Henry More, *Philosophical Writings*, 184, 197-98

Thus one is right to accuse Descartes of atheism, seeing that he very energetically destroyed the weak proofs of the existence of God that he gave.

– Baron d'Holbach, *Système de la nature*, 2:150, quoted and translated by Hiram Caton in “The Problem of Descartes' Sincerity,” 355

### **Baltasar Gracian (1601-1658):**

Think with the few and speak with the many. He who would go counter to public opinion is as unlikely to establish truth as he is likely to fall into danger.

– Baltasar Gracian, *The Science of Success*, 13 (aph. 43)

### **Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688):**

But whosoever had the least sagacity in him could not but perceive, that this theology of Epicurus was but romantical, it being directly contrary to his avowed and professed principles, to admit of any other being, than what was concentered of atoms, and consequently corruptible; and that he did this upon a politic account, thereby to decline the common odium, and those dangers and inconveniences, which otherwise he might have incurred by a downright denial of a God, to which purpose it accordingly served his turn. Thus Posidonius rightly pronounced: “Nullo ease deos Epicure videri; quteque is de diis immorta libus dixerit invidite detestandro gratia dixisse.” Though he was partly jocular in it also it making no small sport to him in this manner to delude and mock the credulous vulgar.... And as Epicurus, so other Atheists in like manner have commonly had their vizards and disguises; atheism for the most part prudently choosing to walk abroad in masquerade. And though some over-credulous persons have been so far

imposed upon hereby, as to conclude, that there was hardly any such thing as an Atheist any where in the world, yet they, that are sagacious, may easily look through these thin veils and disguises, and perceive these Atheists oftentimes insinuating their atheism even then, when they most of all profess themselves Theists, by affirming, that it is impossible to have any idea or conception at all of God; and that as he is not finite, so he cannot be infinite, and that no knowledge or understanding is to be attributed to him; which is in effect to say, that there is no such thing.

– Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System*, 1:104-06 (1. 2. 2)

Now it is certain that the Egyptians besides their vulgar and fabulous theology... had another... arcane and recondite theology that was concealed from the vulgar and communicated only to the kings and such priests and others as were thought capable thereof; these two theologies of theirs differing as Aristotle's Exoterics and Acroamatics.

– Ibid., 1:531 (1.4.18)

It hath been already observed out of Origen, that not only the Egyptians but also the Syrians, Persians, Indians, and other barbarian Pagans had, beside their vulgar theology, another more arcane and recondite one amongst their priests and learned men; and that the same was true concerning the Greeks and Latins also, is unquestionably evident from that account that hath been given by us of their philosophic theology. Where, by the vulgar theology of the Pagans, we understand not only their mythical or fabulous, but also their political or civil theology, it being truly affirmed by St Austin concerning both these: *Et civilis et fabulosa ambsa fabulosa sunt ambreque civiles*. “That both the fabulous theology of the Pagans was in part their civil and their civil was fabulous.” And by their more arcane or recondite theology, is doubtless meant that which they conceived to be the natural and true theology. Which distinction of the natural and true theology, from the civil and political, as it was acknowledged by all the ancient Greek philosophers but most expressly by Antisthenes, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics; so was it owned and much insisted upon both by Scaevola, that famous Roman Pontifex, and by Varro, that most learned antiquary.... Wherefore it was acknowledged, that the vulgar theology of Pagans, that is not only their fabulous, but even their civil was oftentimes very discrepant from the natural and true though the wise men amongst them, in all ages, endeavored as much as they could, to dissemble and disguise this difference.

– Ibid., 2:197-98 (1.4.32)

### **Blaise Pascal (1623-1662):**

We must keep our thoughts secret, and judge everything by it, while talking like the people.

– Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées*, 94 (aph. 336)

Pascal spoke of Plato and Aristotle as follows:

[W]hen they diverted themselves with writing their *Laws* and *Politics*, they did it as an amusement; it was the least philosophic and least serious part of their lives.... If they wrote on politics, it was as if to bring order into a lunatic asylum; and if they presented the appearance of speaking of a grand thing, it is because

they knew that the madmen to whom they spoke believed themselves kings and emperors. They entered into the latter's principles in order to make their madness as little harmful as possible.

– Ibid., 93 (aph. 331) (I have slightly altered the translation)

In his memoirs, Edward Gibbon writes that it was through reading Pascal's *Provincial Letters* that "I learned to manage the weapon of grave and temperate irony even on subjects of Ecclesiastical solemnity."

– Edward Gibbon, *Memoirs*, 99

### **Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677):**

Spinoza speaks a great deal of God, and in the Romantic period he was often seen as the "God intoxicated philosopher." But closer to his own time, he was commonly regarded as a not-so-secret atheist.

Spinoza [is] the great leader of our modern infidels, in whom are to be found many schemes and notions much admired and followed of late years:—such as undermining religion under the pretence of vindicating and explaining it.

– George Berkeley, *Alciphron*, 155-56

Spinoza (Benedictus de) Jewish by birth and afterwards a deserter from Judaism and lastly an atheist, was from Amsterdam. He was a systematic atheist and with a wholly new method.

– Pierre Bayle, "Spinoza," *Dictionnaire*, 4:253

Spinoza was not only an atheist but taught atheism.

– Voltaire, "Atheist, Atheism," in *Philosophical Dictionary*, 102

that famous atheist

– David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, 229 (1.4.5)

The atheist Spinoza

– J. J. Rousseau, *Letter to Beaumont*, in *Collected Writings*, 9:24

Concerning the true meaning of the theological theses developed in Spinoza's *Ethics*:

This is to retain in word but to deny in fact, providence and immortality.

– G. W. Leibniz to Henry Justel, April 14, 1678, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 195n6

Spinoza clearly thought that Machiavelli wrote esoterically. He argues that *The Prince*, that most famous handbook for monarchs and tyrants, was secretly an effort to discredit absolute monarchy under the pretense of recommending and explaining it. His true intention was "to show how cautious a free multitude should be of entrusting its welfare absolutely to one man."

– Baruch Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, 315 (5.7)

**John Locke (1632-1704):**

In most of his writings, Locke displays a lively interest in questions of rhetoric and communication. As part of this, he speaks explicitly and approvingly of the esoteric behavior of various earlier writers and speakers. In whatever manner he himself may have written, Locke certainly *read* esoterically.

For example, Locke recognizes Jesus as an esoteric speaker who engaged in a “wise and necessarily cautious management of himself”—a fact he discusses at considerable length in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. He emphasizes the political motive for this, claiming that Jesus intentionally “perplex[ed]” his meaning to avoid being arrested before he could complete his mission:

For how well the chiefs of the Jews were disposed towards him, St. Luke tells us, chap 11:54, “Laying wait for him, and seeking to catch something out of his mouth, that they might accuse him,” which may be a reason to satisfy us of the seemingly doubtful and obscure way of speaking, used by our Savior in other places—his circumstances being such, that without such a prudent carriage and reservedness, he could not have gone through the work which he came to do.

– John Locke, *Reasonableness*, 98 (para. 139), 70 (para. 108)

Again, Locke states that Socrates:

opposed and laughed at [the Athenians’] polytheisms and wrong opinions of the Deity, and we see how they rewarded him for it. Whatsoever Plato, and the soberest of the philosophers [Aristotle] thought of the nature and being of the one God, they were fain, in their outward professions and worship, to go with the herd and keep to the religion established by law.

– Ibid., 166 (para. 238)

He also endorses the widely held view, stemming from the reports of Jesuit missionaries beginning in the mid-seventeenth century, that the Chinese intellectuals were all secret atheists:

[T]he missionaries of China, even the Jesuits themselves, the great encomiasts of the Chinese, do all to a man agree and will convince us that the sect of the literati, or learned, keeping to the old religion of China, and the ruling party there, are all of them atheists.

– John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1:97-98 (1.3.8)

Again, in Locke's *First Treatise of Government* devoted to the writings of Sir Robert Filmer, he attributes esotericism to the latter. Filmer, he explains, feared to put off his readers by too precise and complete an account of his harsh doctrine of authority, so "clear distinct speaking not serving everywhere to his purpose, you must not expect it in him." Instead, Filmer intentionally "scattered" his teaching "in the several parts of his writings" or "up and down in his writings." Filmer acted

... like a wary physician, when he would have his patient swallow some harsh or corrosive liquor, he mingles it with a large quantity of that which may dilute it that the scattered parts may go down with less feeling and cause less aversion.

– John Locke, *First Treatise*, in *Two Treatises of Government*, secs. 23, 8, 9, 7

As to whether Locke himself engaged in the practice of esotericism that he recognizes in others, we have only a few suggestive remarks of his concerning the serious disadvantages of stating one's views and intentions too openly. In an early entry in his Journal (1678), he copies a sentence from a French treatise he was reading, "The popular mind takes offense at everything that conflicts with its prejudices," and then annotates:

One ought to take care therefore in all discourses, whether narrative of matter of fact, instructive to teach any doctrine, or persuasive, to take care of shocking the received opinions of those one has to do with, whether true or false.

– Lord Peter King, *Life of John Locke*, 1:227-28

Similarly, an entry in his common-place book states:

Tell not your business or design to one that you are not sure will help it forward. All that are not for you count against you, for so they generally prove, either through folly, envy, malice, or interest.

– Ibid., 2:81-82

Although Locke presents himself as flatly hostile to Hobbes, whom he rarely mentions, and close to the teachings of Richard Hooker, the Anglican theologian, and of the Bible, both of which he quotes with some frequency, many of his readers, starting in his own lifetime and continuing to this day, have seen this as a cautious ruse that reverses—in one degree or another—the true state of things. Thus, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, who was Locke's longstanding tutee and knew him intimately, wrote in a letter five years after the latter's death:

In general truly it has happened that all those they call free writers now-a-days have espoused those principles which Mr. Hobbes set a-foot in this last age. Mr. Locke, as much as I admire him on account of other writings... did, however go in the self-same tract, and is followed by the Tindals, and all the other ingenious free authors of our time.

– Third Earl of Shaftesbury to "a student at the university," June 3, 1709, *Characteristics* (1790 ed.), 1:344

The plausibility of this claim rests in part on whether Locke would have been willing to make artful and distorting use of the writings of others in order to fashion a sort of shield for himself. In this connection consider that, early in his career, Locke translated and intended to publish three moral essays by Pierre Nicole, the respected French Jansenist. In the end, he decided against publication, presenting the essays instead to the Countess of Shaftesbury. In a note

contained in the Lovelace Collection, he openly reveals:

In para. 41 of the second treatise [of Nicole] I confess I have ...turned the author's argument directly against himself, which will plainly appear if you compare those which are the author's words with what I have made him speak in the translation.

– Cited by Cranston, *John Locke: A Biography*, 175-76

**Thomas Burnet** (1635-1715):

It is well known, that the ancient wise Men and Philosophers, very seldom set forth the naked and open Truth; but exhibited it veiled or painted after various manners; by Symbols, Hieroglyphicks, Allegories, Types, Fables, Parables, popular Discourses, and other Images. This I pass by in general as sufficiently known.

– Thomas Burnet, *Archæologia philosophicæ*, 67

It is past Doubt, that it was a Custom among the ancient wise Men, to teach one Thing in Private, and another in Publick. And this was done, that they might not, according to the proverbial Saying, *cast their Pearls before Swine*.... It is the Part of a good Master, or Interpreter of Mysteries, not suddenly and promiscuously to heap up all Sorts of Doctrine, but gradually to pour Instruction into their Minds, according as Opportunity and the Capacities of their Scholars will permit.

– Ibid., 70-71 (emphasis in the original)

We have often taken Notice of this double Method of Teaching in the preceding Books, agreeable to that Saying of *Parmenides*, *There is a two-fold Manner of Philosophizing; One according to Truth, and the Other agreeable to the common Opinion*. But the Ancients had various Ways of concealing the Truth; sometimes by a figurative or symbolical Speech, and sometimes by a low and popular Representation; at other Times by explaining Things not according to the Laws of Nature, but by having Recourse to a divine Power, or Providence.

– Ibid., 53 (emphasis in the original)

What just or pious Man ever scrupled to deceive Children or Lunaticks, when thereby they contributed to their Safety and Welfare? And why should not the rude and untractable Multitude be dealt with after the same Manner? Especially when the Subject requires it, and there is a greater Opportunity of doing Good thereby. It is a Crime to use Dissimulation to the Prejudice of another: But we innocently deceive, and are deceived, for the public Good, and the supporting of the Weak. There is something more sacred and inviolable in the Nature of Goodness, than in that of Truth, and when it is impossible to join them together, the Latter must give Place to the Former.... Truth that can produce no Fruit is unprofitable, and that which cannot be told without great Damage is noxious.

– Ibid., 53-54

**Pierre Bayle (1647-1706):**

Those who write with a view to publishing their thoughts accommodate themselves to the times and betray on a thousand occasions the judgment they form of things.

– Pierre Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, 8

Describing a philosophical conversation conducted in private, Bayle writes:

We reasoned on all this with that liberty... that is taken when one is not troubled either by the presence of the people or by that of bigoted doctors, two sorts of persons one must handle carefully: the first, for fear of shaking their faith, the others for fear of becoming the object of their ardent persecutions.

– Ibid., 248 (sec. 200)

I agree that it is necessary to conduct oneself with great discretion and with great care when one attacks the old errors of religion.

– Ibid., 116 (sec. 91)

If all those who have embraced the philosophy of Monsieur Descartes had had this wise reserve, which makes one stop when one reaches a certain point; if they had known how to discern what must be said and what must not be said, they would not have caused such an outcry against the sect in general. The method of the ancient masters was founded on good reasons. They had dogmas for the general public and dogmas for the disciples initiated into the mysteries. At any rate, the application that one has tried to make of the principles of Monsieur Descartes to the dogmas of religion has brought great prejudice against his sect and has arrested its progress.

– Pierre Bayle, “Aristote,” *Dictionnaire*, 1:328-29 (remark X)

Bayle also attributes esotericism—a secret atheism—to certain wise men of China. The name of that sect is Foe Kiao” (what was later known as Buddhism). Their doctrine is divided into “two parts, one exterior, which is the one that is publicly preached and taught to the people, the other interior, which is carefully hidden from the common people and made known only to the initiates.” The latter doctrine sheds the theism of the former and teaches that “there is nothing to search for, nor anything on which to put one’s hope except the nothing and the vacuum that is the principle of all things.”

– Ibid., “Spinoza,” 4:254-55 (remark B)

Some items from Bayle’s Dictionary:

Spinoza (Benedictus de) Jewish by birth and afterwards a deserter from Judaism and lastly an atheist, was from Amsterdam. He was a systematic atheist and with a wholly new method.

– Ibid., 253

It is certain that [Averroes] admitted neither punishments nor rewards after this life; for in truth he taught the mortality of the human soul.

– Ibid., “Averroes,” 1:387 (remark H)

What is certain is that most of the Beaux-Esprits and learned humanists who shone in Italy when Belles-Lettres began to be revived, after the capture of Constantinople, had hardly any religion.

– Ibid., “Takiddin,” 4:315 (remark A)

Voltaire describes Bayle’s rhetoric and effect as follows:

His greatest enemies are forced to swear that not one single line in his works is clearly blasphemous against the Christian religion; but his greatest defenders swear ... that there is not one single page [of his writing] that does not lead the reader to doubt and often to incredulity. One could not convict him of being impious; but he made [people into] disbelievers by stating the objections against our [religious] dogmas so bright as day that an unsteady believer could not but be shaken.

– Voltaire, *Œuvres complètes*, 26:502, quoted and translated by Kenneth Weinstein in *Atheism and Enlightenment*, 52

**Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz** (1646-1716):

The ancients distinguished the ‘exoteric’ or popular mode of exposition from the ‘esoteric’ one which is suitable for those who are seriously concerned to discover the truth.

– G. W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, 260

Leibniz seems to agree with the ancients about the need to make such distinctions among one’s readers, especially about theological matters:

[E]veryone need not enter into theological discussions; and persons whose condition allows not of exact researches should be content with instruction on faith, without being disturbed by the objections; and if some exceeding great difficulty should happen to strike them, it is permitted to them to avert the mind from it.... As there are many people whose faith is rather small and shallow to withstand such dangerous tests, I think one must not present them with that which might be poisonous for them; or, if one cannot hide from them what is only too public, the antidote must be added to it.

– G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 97

Descartes took care not to speak so plainly [as Hobbes] but he could not help revealing his opinions in passing, with such address that he would not be understood save by those who examine profoundly these kinds of subjects.

– G. W. Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, quoted and translated by Richard Kennington in *On Modern Origins*, 197

For example, here is Leibniz on Descartes' seeming embrace of the view that all necessary truths, like the principle of non-contradiction, are the product of God's free and arbitrary will:

I cannot even imagine that M. Descartes can have been quite seriously of this opinion.... He only made pretence to go [there]. It was apparently one of his tricks, one of his philosophic feints: he prepared for himself some loophole, as when for instance he discovered a trick for denying the movement of the earth, while he was a Copernican in the strictest sense.

– G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 244

**Charles Blount** (1654-1693):

[the philosophers] are too wise to hazard their own ruin for the instruction of foolish men.... Therefore, the wisest amongst the Heathens followed this rule in their Converse, *Loquendum cum vulgo, sentiendum cum sapientibus; & si mundus vult decipi, decipiatur* [Speak with the vulgar, think with the wise; and if the world wants to be deceived, let it be deceived].”

– Charles Blount, *Great Is Diana of the Ephesians*, 22

**Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle** (1657-1757):

As recorded and discussed by many writers of his time, Fontenelle was famous for having declared in a Parisian salon that if his hand were full of truths, he would not open it to release them to the public, because it is not worth the effort or risk.

– See, for example, Voltaire to Helvétius, June 26, 1765, and September 15, 1763, and Voltaire to d'Argental, June 22, 1766, *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 110

In his *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds*, Fontenelle depicts a philosopher who has convinced a Marquise of his theory that there are infinite other habitable worlds. Later, she complains to him that on explaining this theory to others, she was met with derision. He replies that it is foolish to try to reason with most people.

Let us content ourselves with being a small, chosen group that knows of them and let us not divulge our mysteries to the people.

– Fontenelle, *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes*, 2:186-87 (translation mine)

In his work *New Dialogues of the Dead*, Fontenelle has Homer speak as follows to Aesop:

You imagine that the human mind seeks only truth; disabuse yourself. The human mind and falsehood have a wondrous sympathy. If you have a truth to tell, *you will do well to envelope it in fables*, it will please far more.... Thus, the true has need to borrow the shape of the false to be pleasantly received in the human mind.”

– Fontenelle, *Nouveau dialogues*, 143-4 (translation mine; emphasis added)

Fontenelle's friend and biographer, the abbé Trublet, explains that Fontenelle wrote with great concision, suppressing much, but that “what he says expresses what he omits for those who know how to understand.”

– Nicolas Trublet, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire*, 15 (translation mine)

**Giambattista Vico (1668-1744):**

Notwithstanding the great originality of Vico's new science of ancient wisdom, he continues to accept the crucial and widespread role played by secrecy.

[I]n all the ancient nations the priestly orders kept all religious things secret from the plebs of the cities in which they lived. Hence, they continued to be called 'sacred things', that is to say, things kept secret from the profane. The Greek philosophers themselves also long hid their wisdom from the vulgar of their own nation, so that only after many years did Pythagoras admit even his own disciples to his secret audience.

– Giambattista Vico, *The First New Science*, 29

Vico also remains aware of the crucial role played by persecution in the rise of the fable and other indirect modes of speech. He quotes approvingly the verses of Gaius Julius Phaedrus (c. 15 BC-c. 50 AD), the Roman fabulist, who explains why Aesop, and he after him, writes fables:

Attend me briefly while I now disclose  
How art of fable telling first arose.  
Unhappy slaves, in servitude confined,  
Dared not to their harsh masters show their mind,  
But under veiling of the fable's dress  
Contrived their thoughts and feelings to express  
Escaping still their lord's affronted wrath.  
So Aesop did; I widen out his path.

– Phaedrus, *Fables*, quoted and translated in Vico, *The New Science Third Edition*, 136 (2.9.425)

As for Vico's own writing, he seems to drop a strong hint in the very last lines of his autobiography (in which he speaks of himself in the third person). He emphasizes the abiding hostility he has faced from many of those around him, who were suspicious of him and abused him with the charge of being "obscure or eccentric."

He however blessed all these adversaries as so many occasions for withdrawing to his desk... to meditate and to write further works which he was wont to call "so many noble acts of vengeance against his detractors." These finally led him to his discovery of his *New Science*. And when he had written this work, enjoying life, liberty and honor, he held himself more fortunate than Socrates, on whom Phaedrus has these fine lines:

I would not shun his death to win his fame;  
I'd yield to odium if absolved when dust.

– Giambattista Vico, *Autobiography*, 200

Vico's *New Science* wears the appearance of an abstract, historical work—"obscure and eccentric"—a new science of ancient poetry and fables, far removed from contemporary events, and hardly an "act of vengeance" against the prevailing culture and religion. But in fact, he seems to suggest here, in the closing words of his "life," it was precisely such an act of vengeance, which was made all the sweeter by being carried out in secret, because, through this

means he became “more fortunate than Socrates,” achieving his victory without hazarding his life.

**John Toland** (1670-1722):

Esotericism “was the common practice of all the ancient philosophers.”

– John Toland, *Clidophorus*, 69

But:

[It is] practiced not by the Ancients alone; for to declare the Truth, it is *more* in Use among the Moderns, although they profess it is less allowed.

– John Toland, *Pantheisticon*, 99 (emphasis added)

[D]aily experience sufficiently evinces that there is no discovering, at least no declaring the truth in most places, but at the hazard of a man’s reputation, employment, or life. These circumstances *cannot fail* to beget the woeful effects of insincerity [and] dissimulation.... Men are become...reserved in opening their minds about most things, ambiguous in their expressions, supple in their conduct....To what sneaking equivocations, to what wretched shifts and subterfuges, are men of excellent endowments forced to have recourse...merely to escape disgrace or starving?

– John Toland, *Clidophorus*, 67-68 (emphasis added)

Plato wisely providing for his own safety, after the poisonous draught was administered to Socrates... wrote rather poetically than philosophically... by epically transforming the nature of things, the elements, and the celestial globes... into Gods, Goddesses, Geniuses, and Demons.

– John Toland, *Clidophorus*, 75

Nor are we to wonder any longer, that the same [philosophers] do not always seem to say the same things on the same subjects, which problem can only be solv’d by the distinction of the External and Internal Doctrine.

– John Toland, *Clidophorus*, 77, 85

**Shaftesbury** (1671-1713):

The natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned and controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint....If men are forbid to speak their minds seriously on certain subjects, they will do it ironically. If they are forbid to speak at all upon such subjects, or if they find it really dangerous to do so, they will then redouble their disguise, involving themselves in mysteriousness, and talk so as hardly to be understood, or at least not plainly interpreted, by those who are disposed to do them a mischief.

– Lord Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 50

There is indeed a kind of defensive raillery (if I may so call it) which I am willing enough to allow in affairs of whatever kind; when the spirit of curiosity would

force a discovery of more truth than can conveniently be told. For we can never do more injury to truth than by discovering too much of it on some occasions. 'Tis the same with Understandings as with Eyes: To such a certain Size and Make just so much light is necessary, and no more. Whatever is beyond, brings Darkness and Confusion. 'Tis real Humanity and Kindness to hide strong truths from tender eyes.... It may be necessary as well now as heretofore for wise men to speak in parables and with a double meaning that the enemy may be amused and they only who have ears to hear may hear. But tis certainly a mean impotent and dull sort of wit which amuses all alike and leaves the most sensible man and even a friend equally in doubt and at a loss to understand what one's real mind is upon any subject.

– Ibid., 45

**Lord Bolingbroke (1678-1751):**

Henry Fielding, in his “Fragment of a Comment on Lord Bolingbroke’s Essays,” argues that Bolingbroke made use of a “duplicity of assertion” whereby he is frequently “pleased to assert both sides of a contradiction.” But Bolingbroke also left “hints, by which, we trust, he will always assist a careful and accurate examiner, in rescuing the esoteric purity of his doctrines from that less amiable appearance in which their exoteric garb represents them.” Again, Bolingbroke employs

a certain dark, cautious, and loose manner of expressing his sentiments, which must arise either from a writer’s desire of not being very easily explained, or from an incapacity of making himself very clearly understood. The difficulties arising to the commentator of these fragments, will appear to be assignable only the former cause.

– Henry Fielding, *Journal of a Voyage*, 174, 176, 183

**George Berkeley (1685-1753):**

Spinoza [is] the great leader of our modern infidels, in whom are to be found many schemes and notions much admired and followed of late years:—such as undermining religion under the pretence of vindicating and explaining it.

– George Berkeley, *Alciphron*, 155-56

**Alexander Pope (1688-1744):**

According to a well-known saying, “a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.” That simple fact constitutes the premise of many forms of esotericism. For, it gives the reason why, if there is some knowledge that a person cannot fully understand, one should make a serious effort to hide it from him.

The original of this common saying derives from Pope:

A little learning is a dangerous thing;  
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring;

There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,  
And drinking largely sobers us again.  
– Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*, lines 215-218

In the same writing, Pope also makes reference to the common esoteric technique of using intentional blunders or errors to hint at some unstated thought.

A prudent chief not always must display  
His pow'rs in equal ranks, and fair array  
But with th'occasion and the place comply  
Conceal his force, nay seem sometimes to fly,  
*Those oft are stratagems which errors seem,*  
Nor is it Homer nods, but we that dream.  
– Ibid., lines 175-80

In the Introduction to his translation of the *Iliad* (vii), Pope shows that he reads that work as an esoteric text (as did Plato), conveying philosophical theses in allegorical form:

If we reflect upon those innumerable knowledges, those secrets of nature and physical philosophy, which Homer is generally supposed to have wrapped up in his allegories, what a new and ample scene of wonder may this consideration afford us! How fertile will that imagination appear, which was able to clothe all the properties of elements, the qualifications of the mind, the virtues and vices, in forms and persons; and to introduce them into actions agreeable to the nature of the things they shadowed! .... For when the mode of learning changed in following ages, and science was delivered in a plainer manner, it then became as reasonable in the more modern poets to lay it aside, as it was in Homer to make use of it.  
– Alexander Pope, *The Iliad of Homer*, xxviii

**Montesquieu** (1689-1755):

Anyone who has read Montesquieu has been struck by the obscurity and seeming lack of order in his works. But he actually explained this difficulty, before it was ever raised, in the front matter to the *Lettres Persanes*. It is intentional: His seemingly rambling, epistolary novel, he claimed, is in fact bound together “by a chain that is secret and, in some manner, unknown.”  
– Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes*, 4

He makes essentially the same claim, while being a bit more coy about his secrecy, in the Preface to the *Spirit of the Laws*. (xliv):

Many of the truths will make themselves felt here only when one sees the chain connecting them with others. The more one reflects on the details, the more one will feel the certainty of the principles. As for the details, I have not given them all, for who could say everything without being tedious?  
– Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, xliv

It is only in a private letter defending this work against the charge of obscurity that Montesquieu

states more openly that the way the book is written makes it very difficult to find this all-important “chain”:

That which renders certain articles of the book in question obscure and ambiguous is that they are often at a distance from the others which explain them and that the links of the chain which you have noted are very often at a distance the ones from the others.

– Montesquieu to Pierre-Jean Grosley, April 8, 1750, quoted and translated by Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty*, 87

Jean d’Alembert, in his admiring analysis of the book, gives a similar but fuller explanation of “the pretended lack of method of which some readers have accused Montesquieu.” It is necessary, he claims, to “distinguish apparent disorder from real disorder.”

The disorder is merely apparent when the author puts in their proper places the ideas he uses and leaves to the readers to supply the connecting ideas: and it is thus that Montesquieu thought he could and should proceed in a book destined for men who think, whose genius ought to supply the voluntary and reasoned omissions.

– Jean d’Alembert, *Œuvres complètes*, 3:450-51, quoted and translated by Pangle in *Montesquieu’s Philosophy*, 11-12

As for Montesquieu’s motive for such intentional obscurity, consider first Thomas Paine:

Montesquieu, president of the Parliament of Bourdeaux [sic], went as far as a writer under a despotic government could well proceed: and being obliged to divide himself between principle and prudence, his mind often appears under a veil, and we ought to give him credit for more than he has expressed.

– Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, 490

In a letter of Lord Chesterfield, one finds the same thought, more grudgingly expressed:

It is a shame that Monsieur Montesquieu, held back, no doubt, by fear of the ministry, did not have the courage to say everything. One senses in general what he thinks on certain subjects; but he does not express himself clearly and strongly enough.

– Lord Chesterfield, quoted by Helvétius in *De l’esprit*, 518 (4.4)

But d’Alembert states the explanation in a broader and more generous manner:

Montesquieu, having to present sometimes important truths whose absolute and direct enunciation might wound without bearing any fruit, has had the prudence to envelope them, and by this innocent artifice, has veiled them from those to whom they would be harmful, without letting them be lost for the wise.

– Jean d’Alembert, *Œuvres complètes*, 3:450-51, quoted and translated by Pangle in *Montesquieu’s Philosophy*, 12

Montesquieu himself also hints at a further motive:

One must not always so exhaust a subject that one leaves nothing for the reader to do. It is not a question of making him read but of making him think.

– Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, 186 (11.20)

Hippolyte Taine's account of the *Spirit of the Laws* elaborates on this idea:

[Montesquieu] seems to be always addressing a select circle of people with acute minds, and in such a way as to render them at every moment conscious of their acuteness. No flattery could be more delicate; we feel grateful to him for making us satisfied with our intelligence. We must possess some intelligence to be able to read him, for he deliberately curtails developments and omits transitions; we are required to supply these and to comprehend his hidden meanings. He is rigorously systematic but the system is concealed, his concise completed sentences succeeding each other separately, like so many precious coffers.... He thinks in summaries; ... the summary itself often bears the air of an enigma, of which the charm is twofold; we have the pleasure of comprehension accompanying the satisfaction of divining.

– Hippolyte Taine, *The Ancient Regime*, 260 (4.1.4)

Consider, finally, that Montesquieu, following Plutarch, attributes esotericism to Plato in the latter's claim that the order of the cosmos derives from a god:

See in Plutarch, *Life of Nicias*, how the physicists who explained the eclipses of the moon by natural causes were suspect to the people. They called them meteorolesches, persuaded that they reduced all Divinity to natural and physical causes.... The doctrine of an intelligent [i.e., divine] being was found by Plato *only as a preservative and a defensive arm against the calumnies of zealous pagans*.

– Montesquieu, *Mes Pensees* 2097, in *Œuvres complètes*, 1:1546-47 (translation mine; emphasis added)

**Voltaire** (1694-1778):

Our miserable species is so constructed, that those who walk in the beaten path always throw stones at those who teach a new path...every philosopher is treated as the prophets were among the Jews.

– Voltaire, “Letters, Men of Letters, or Literati,” *Philosophical Dictionary*, 349

There are truths which are not for all men, nor for all times.

– Voltaire to Cardinal de Bernis, April 23, 1761

The [ancient] Chaldeans... placed the sun in the center of our planetary world...they had the earth and all the planets revolve around that star: this is what Aristarchus of Samos teaches us. This is the true system of the world which Copernicus has since revived; but the philosophers kept the secret to themselves, in order to be more highly respected by kings and people—or rather, not to be persecuted.... The ancient [peoples]... had vague, uncertain, contradictory notions about everything connected with natural science.... We must always except a small number of sages, but they came late; few of them explained their thoughts, and when they did so the charlatans of this world sent them to heaven by the shortest route.

– Voltaire, “The Heaven of the Ancients,” *Philosophical Dictionary*, 200-01

In almost all the nations that are called idolatrous there was sacred theology and popular error, secret worship and public ceremonies, the religion of the sages and that of the multitude... There are a thousand testimonies to the fact that the sages abhorred not only idolatry but even polytheism.

– Voltaire, “Idol, Idolater, Idolatry,” *Philosophical Dictionary*, 323

Those works are most useful in which the readers do half the work themselves; they develop the thought whose germ has been presented to them.

– Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, 56 (Preface)

**Bishop William Warburton (1698-1779):**

The ancient Sages did actually say one Thing when they thought another. This appears from that general Practice in the Greek Philosophy, of a two-fold Doctrine; the External and the Internal; a vulgar and a secret.

– Bishop Warburton, *The Divine Legislation*, 2:14

[this] may likewise help to explain and reconcile an infinite number of discordances in their works... which are commonly, though I think falsely, ascribed to their inconstancy.

– Ibid., 27

[They held the principle] that it was lawful and expedient to deceive for the public good. This all the ancient philosophers embraced: and Tully [Cicero], on the authority of Plato, thinks it so clear, that he calls the doing otherwise Nefas, a horrid wickedness.

– Ibid., 13

**Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790):**

In his *Autobiography*, Franklin remarks on his discovery of the Socratic method and its utility:

[S]oon after I procur'd Xenophon's *Memorable Things of Socrates*, wherein there are many instances of the same [Socratic] method. I was charm'd with it, adopted it ... and put on the humble inquirer and doubter. And being then, from reading Shaftesbury and Collins, become a real doubter in many points of our religious doctrine, I found this method safest for myself.”

– Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*, 17

**Henry Fielding (1707-1754):**

See his discussion above of Bolingbroke's esotericism.

**Georges Louis Leclerc Comte de Buffon (1707-1788):**

Diderot regards Buffon, the Eighteenth century French naturalist, as an obviously esoteric writer: Here Buffon embraces all the principles of materialists; elsewhere he advances entirely

opposite propositions.

– Denis Diderot to Hemsterhuis, summer 1773, in *Correspondance*, 13:25-27

The same view is argued for at great length by Samuel Butler (1835-1902), the author of *The Way of All Flesh*, in a book he wrote on the history of the theory of evolution. Butler tries to show that Buffon, in his famous *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière*, adheres to the biblical view on the surface, but embraces an evolutionary theory between the lines.

I am inclined to think that a vein of irony pervades the whole, or much the greater part of Buffon's work, and that he intended to convey, one meaning to one set of readers, and another to another; indeed, it is often impossible to believe that he is not writing between his lines for the discerning, what the undiscerning were not intended to see. It must be remembered that his 'Natural History' has two sides—a scientific and popular one. May we not imagine that Buffon would be unwilling to debar himself from speaking to those who could understand him, and yet would wish like Handel and Shakespeare to address the many, as well as the few? But the only manner in which these seemingly irreconcilable ends could be attained, would be by the use of language which should be self-adjusting to the capacity of the reader.... He would help those who could see to see still further, but he would not dazzle eyes that were yet imperfect with a light brighter than they could stand.

– Samuel Butler, *Evolution Old and New*, 81-82

**Julien Offray de La Mettrie** (1709-1751):

Whatever may be my speculation in the quiet of my study, my practice in society is quite different.... In the one place, as a philosopher, I prefer the truth, while in the other, as a citizen, I prefer error. Error is more within everyone's grasp; it is the general food of minds of all ages and in all places. What indeed is more worthy of enlightening and leading the vile herd of mindless mortals. In society I never talk about all those lofty philosophical truths which were not made for the masses.

– Julien Offray de La Mettrie, "Preliminary Discourse," in *Machine Man and Other Writings*, 162

See above, his esoteric reading of Descartes.

**Samuel Johnson** (1709-1784):

ESOTERICK adj. [Lat. esotericus, inward] Secret; mysterious. A term applied to the double doctrine of the ancient philosophers; the publick, or exoterick; the secret, or esoteric. The first was that which they openly professed and taught to the world; the latter was confined to a small number of chosen disciples.

– Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language (revised edition, 1818)*

**David Hume** (1711-1776):

[T]hough the philosophical truth of any proposition, by no means depends on its tendency to promote the interests of society, yet a man has but a bad grace, who delivers a theory, however true, which he must confess leads to a practice dangerous and pernicious. Why rake into those corners of nature which spread a nuisance all around? Why dig up the pestilence from the pit in which it is buried? The ingenuity of your researches may be admired but your systems will be detested, and mankind will agree, if they cannot refute them, to sink them at least in eternal silence and oblivion. Truths which are *pernicious* to society, if any such there be, will yield to errors which are salutary and *advantageous*.

– David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 257-58 (9.2)

(emphasis in the original)

A young clergyman and man of letters, communicating through a common friend, confesses to Hume his disbelief and asks him whether he should continue in his profession. Hume writes back:

[He should] adhere to the ecclesiastical profession, in which he may have so good a patron, for civil employments for men of letters can scarcely be found. It is putting too great a respect on the vulgar, and on their superstitions, to pique oneself on sincerity with regard to them. Did ever any one make it a point of honour to speak the truth to children or madmen? If the thing were worthy being treated gravely, I should tell him, that the Pythian oracle, with the approbation of Xenophon, advised everyone to worship the gods [of his own city]. I wish it were still in my power to be a hypocrite in this particular. The common duties of society usually require it ; and the ecclesiastical profession only adds a little more to an innocent dissimulation, or rather simulation, without which it is impossible to pass through the world. Am I a liar, because I order my servant to say, I am not at home, when I do not desire to see company?

– David Hume to Col. James Edmonstoune, April, 1764, *New Letters*, 82-84

James Boswell relates a conversation he had with the dying Hume:

I know not how I contrived to get the subject of immortality introduced. He said he never had entertained any belief in religion since he began to read Locke and Clarke.... He then said flatly that the morality of every religion was bad, and, I really thought, was not jocular when he said that when he heard a man was religious, he concluded he was a rascal, though he had known some instances of very good men being religious.

– James Boswell, *In Extremes*, 11

**Jean-Jacques Rousseau** (1712-1778):

What shall we say about the distinction between the two doctrines so eagerly received by all the Philosophers, and by which they professed in secret sentiments contrary to those they taught publicly. Pythagoras was the first to make use of the esoteric doctrine. He did not reveal it to his disciples until after lengthy tests and with the greatest mystery. He gave them lessons in Atheism in secret and solemnly offered Hecatombs [sacrifices] to Jupiter. The philosophers were so comfortable with this method that it spread rapidly in Greece and from there to Rome, as may be seen in the works of Cicero, who along with

his friends laughed at the immortal Gods to whom he so eloquently bore witness on the Rostrum. The esoteric doctrine was not carried from Europe to China, but it was born there too with Philosophy.

– Rousseau, “Observations,” in *Collected Writings*, 2:45-46n

Speaking of his own *First Discourse*, Rousseau states:

Having so many interests to contest, so many prejudices to conquer, and so many harsh things to state, in the very interest of my readers, I believed I ought to be careful of their pusillanimity in some way and let them perceive only gradually what I had to say to them.... Some precautions were thus at first necessary for me, and it is in order to be able to make everything understood that I did not wish to say everything. It was only *gradually* and always *for few readers* that I developed my ideas. It is not myself that I treated carefully, but the truth, so as to get it across more surely and make it more useful. I have often taken great pains to try to put into a sentence, a line, a word tossed off as if by chance the result of a long sequence of reflections. Often, most of my readers must have found my discourses badly connected and almost entirely rambling, for lack of perceiving the trunk of which I showed them only the branches. But that was enough for those who know how to understand, and I have never wanted to speak to the others.

– J. J. Rousseau, “Preface to Second Letter to Bordes,” in *Collected Writings*, 2:184-85 (emphasis added)

Conversely, in that same *First Discourse*, Rousseau condemns the philosophic popularizers of the Enlightenment because they have lacked the esoteric restraint that he employs and therefore have:

removed the difficulties that blocked access to the Temple of the Muses and that nature put there as a test of strength for those who might be tempted to learn.... [They] have indiscreetly broken down the door of the sciences and let into their sanctuary a populace unworthy of approaching it.

– J. J. Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, in *Collected Writings*, 2:21

If you have to be told everything, do not read me.

– J. J. Rousseau, *Emile*, 137

Rousseau also speaks approvingly of the great Legislator or founder of a nation, whose “sublime reason... rises above the grasp of common men,” and who must therefore place his wise commandments “in the mouth of the immortals in order to convince by divine authority those who cannot be moved by human prudence.”

– J. J. Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 69-70 (2.7)

**Denis Diderot (1713-1784):**

In a letter to Francois Hemsterhuis, a minor Dutch author and apparently a somewhat clumsy esotericist, Diderot writes:

You are one example among many others where intolerance has constrained the truth and dressed philosophy in a clown suit, so that posterity, struck by their contradictions, of which they don't know the cause, will not know how to discern their true sentiments.

The Eumolpides [Athenian high-priests] caused Aristotle to alternately admit and reject final causes.

Here Buffon [the Eighteenth century French naturalist] embraces all the principles of materialists; elsewhere he advances entirely opposite propositions.

And what must one say of Voltaire, who says with Locke that matter can think, with Toland that the world is eternal, with Tindal that freedom is a chimera [i.e., three materialist theses], but who acknowledges a punishing and rewarding God? Was he inconsistent? Or did he fear the doctor of the Sorbonne [the Church]?

Me, I saved myself by the most agile irony that I could find, by generalities, by terseness, and by obscurity.

I know only one modern author who spoke clearly and without detours; but he is hardly known.

– Denis Diderot to Hemsterhuis, summer 1773, in *Correspondance*, 13:25-27 (translation mine; emphasis added)

Diderot explains in a letter to Sophie Volland regarding his work *D'Alembert's Dream*:

It is of the greatest extravagance and at the same time, the most profound philosophy; there is some cleverness in having put my ideas in the mouth of a man who is dreaming: it is often necessary to give to wisdom the appearance of folly to obtain admission for it.

– Denis Diderot, quoted and translated by Crocker in *Diderot: The Embattled Philosopher*, 311

In the *Encyclopedia*, Diderot has an article entitled “mensonge officieux”—unofficial or salutary lie—which promotes the “wise maxim that the lie that procures good is worth more than the truth that causes harm.”

– Denis Diderot, “mensonge Officieux,” in *Encyclopedia*

From his article “Divination”:

But if the universality of a prejudice [i.e., the practice of divination in the ancient world] can prevent the timid philosopher from defying it, it cannot prevent him from finding it ridiculous; and if he were courageous enough to sacrifice his repose and expose his life in order to disabuse his fellow citizens regarding a system of errors which makes them miserable and wicked, he would only be the more estimable, at least in the eyes of posterity which judges the opinions of past times without partiality. Does it not today consider the books that Cicero wrote on the nature of the gods and on divination as his best writings, even though they

must naturally have brought down upon him, from the pagan priests, the injurious titles of impiety, and from those moderate men who hold that one must respect popular prejudices, the epithets of “dangerous and turbulent spirit”? From which it follows that in whatever time and among whatever people it may be, virtue and truth alone merit our respect. Is there not today, in the middle of the eighteenth century, in Paris, still a great deal of courage and merit to casting underfoot the extravagances of paganism? It was under Nero that it was beautiful to denounce Jupiter and that is what the first heroes of Christianity dared to do, and what they would not have done if they had been among these cramped geniuses and these pusillanimous souls that keep truth captive whenever there is some danger in declaring it.

– Denis Diderot, “Divination,” in *Encyclopedia*

See below, Diderot’s reading of Helvétius, and see the passage from Diderot’s article “Encyclopedia” below, under *Encyclopedia*, which openly states that Diderot and d’Alembert constructed that work in an esoteric manner.

### **Helvétius (1715-1771):**

Diderot, in his late essay *Refutation of the work of Helvétius entitled Of Man*, describes Helvétius’ esoteric caution. While Diderot is certainly in favor of such restraint, he finds Helvetius’ caution excessive and cowardly.

Everywhere where the author speaks of religion he substitutes the word popery [*papisme*] for Christianity. Thanks to this pusillanimous circumspection, posterity, not knowing what his true sentiments were, will say: “What? This man who was so cruelly persecuted for his freedom of thought, believed in the trinity, Adam’s sin, and the incarnation!” For these dogmas are in all Christian sects.... It is thus that the fear one has of priests has ruined, ruins, and will ruin all works of philosophy... and has introduced into modern works a mixture of unbelief and superstition that disgusts.

– Denis Diderot, *Refutation d’Helvétius*, in *Œuvres complètes*, 2:398

### **Jean d’Alembert (1717-1783):**

In a letter to Frederick the Great about Fontenelle’s famous remark—that if his hand were full of truths, he would not open it to release them to the public, because it is not worth the effort or risk—d’Alembert makes the following reply:

It seems to me that one should not, like Fontenelle, keep one’s hand closed when one is sure of having the truth in it; it is only necessary to open *with wisdom and caution* the fingers of the hand one after another, and little by little the hand is opened entirely.... Philosophers who open the hand too abruptly are fools.

– Jean d’Alembert, *Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand*, 24:470-76 (translation mine; emphasis added)

In his admiring analysis of Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws*, d’Alembert gives a fuller and more nuanced account of how a philosopher should write. He is responding to “the pretended lack of

method of which some readers have accused Montesquieu.”

An assiduous and meditative reading can alone make the merit of this book felt.... One must distinguish apparent disorder from real disorder.... The disorder is merely apparent when the author puts in their proper places the ideas he uses and leaves to the readers to supply the connecting ideas: and it is thus that Montesquieu thought he could and should proceed in a book destined for men who think, whose genius ought to supply the voluntary and reasoned omissions. The order which makes itself seen in the grand divisions of *The Spirit of the Laws* reigns no less in the details: we believe that the more one penetrates the work, the more one will be convinced of this.... We will say of the obscurity that can be permitted in such a work, the same thing we said about the lack of order; what would be obscure for vulgar readers is not for those whom the author had in view. Moreover, voluntary obscurity is not obscurity: Montesquieu, having to present sometimes important truths whose absolute and direct enunciation might wound without bearing any fruit, has had the prudence to envelope them, and by this innocent artifice, has veiled them from those to whom they would be harmful, without letting them be lost for the wise.

– Jean d’Alembert, *Œuvres complètes*, 3:450-51, quoted and translated by Pangle in *Montesquieu’s Philosophy*, 11-12

That d’Alembert himself engaged in such esoteric management of the truth see below his and Diderot’s statements about the *Encyclopedia*, which they jointly edited.

### **Encyclopedia of Diderot and d’Alembert (1751-1772):**

EXOTERIC and ESOTERIC, adj. (History of Philosophy): The first of these words signifies *exterior*, the second, *interior*. The ancient philosophers had a double doctrine; the one external, public or *exoteric*; the other internal, secret or *esoteric*.

– “Exoteric and Esoteric,” *Encyclopedia* (translation mine)

[T]he condition of the sage is very dangerous: there is hardly a nation that is not soiled with the blood of several of those who have professed it. What should one do then? Must one be senseless among the senseless? No; but one must *be wise in secret*.

– Denis Diderot, “Pythagorism or Philosophy of Pythagoras,” *Encyclopedia*

The *Encyclopedia* not only frequently speaks of esotericism—and approvingly—but it also practices it, as becomes clear from a letter of d’Alembert to Voltaire. The latter had been complaining to d’Alembert about the timidity of some of the articles. He replies:

No doubt we have some bad articles in theology and metaphysics, but with theologians as censors... I defy you to make them better. There are other articles, less open to the light, where all is repaired. Time will enable people to distinguish *what we have thought from what we have said*.

– Jean d’Alembert to Denis Diderot, July 21, 1757, *Œuvres et correspondances*, 5:51 (translation mine; emphasis added)

Just what this means, Diderot makes clear in his article titled “Encyclopedia.” He is speaking about the use of cross-references in the articles. This can be useful, he explains, to link articles

on common subjects enabling their ideas to reinforce and build upon one another.

When it is necessary, [the cross-references] will also produce a completely opposite effect: they will counter notions; they will bring principles into contrast; they will *secretly attack, unsettle, overturn certain ridiculous opinions which one would not dare to insult openly*....There would be a great art and an infinite advantage in these latter cross-references. The entire work would receive from them an internal force and a secret utility, the silent effects of which would necessarily be perceptible over time. Every time, for example, that a national prejudice would merit some respect, its particular article ought to set it forth respectfully, and with its whole retinue of plausibility and charm; but it also ought to overturn this edifice of muck, disperse a vain pile of dust, by cross-referencing articles in which solid principles serve as the basis for the contrary truths. This means of undeceiving men operates very promptly on good minds, and it operates infallibly and without any detrimental consequence—secretly and without scandal—on all minds. It is the art of deducing tacitly the boldest consequences. If these confirming and refuting cross-references are planned well in advance, and prepared skillfully, they will give an encyclopedia the character which a good dictionary ought to possess: this character is that of changing the common manner of thinking.

– Denis Diderot, “Encyclopedia,” *Encyclopedia*

Some mention of esotericism is also made in the articles: “Aius-Locutius, god of speech,” “Ame,” “Aristotelisme,” “Asiatiques,” “Augures,” “cabale,” “Casuiste,” “Celts,” “Divination,” “Egyptians,” “Eléatiques,” “Encyclopédie,” “Grecs,” “Hébraïque,” “Idole, idoloatere, idolatrie,” “Indiens,” “Ioniques,” “Japonais,” “Juifs,” “Lettrés,” “Philosophy,” “Platonisme,” “Pythagorism,” “Samanéen,” and “Xenxus.”

**Baron d’Holbach** (1723-1789):

How many subterfuges and mental gymnastics all the ancient and modern thinkers have employed, in order to avoid falling out with the ministers of the Gods, who in all ages were the true tyrants of thought! How Descartes, Malebranche, Leibnitz, and many others have been compelled to invent hypotheses and evasions in order to reconcile their discoveries with the reveries and the blunders which religion had rendered sacred! With what precautions have not the greatest philosophers guarded themselves even at the risk of being absurd, inconsistent, and unintelligible whenever their ideas did not correspond with the principles of theology! ... In all ages one could not, without imminent danger, lay aside the prejudices which opinion had rendered sacred. No one was permitted to make discoveries of any kind; all that the most enlightened men could do was to speak with hidden meaning.

– Baron d’Holbach, *Le bon sens*, 240-42 (translation mine)

**Adam Smith** (1723-1790):

In an early, unpublished essay on ancient metaphysics, Smith angrily denounces the Neoplatonist claim that Plato’s true, esoteric teaching concerning the Ideas was that they are not self-

subsistent beings after all but rather thoughts in the Divine Mind. And in this context he goes on to criticize

that strange fancy that, in his [Plato's] writings, there was a double doctrine; and that they were intended to seem to mean one thing, while at bottom they meant a very different, which the writings of no man in his senses ever were, or ever could be intended to do.

– Adam Smith, *History of the Ancient Logics*, in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, 122n

It is difficult to say whether this early statement involves a rejection of all esotericism—of every kind and degree—or only the more extreme forms found in the neo-Platonists and their followers. But in a later work he claims that both Hobbes and Lord Shaftsbury were “against every scheme of revealed religion” and indeed in their writings “sought to overturn the old systems of religion.”

– Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, 37, 38

### **Immanuel Kant** (1724-1804):

In a brief essay “On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy,” Kant argues (against the claims of Benjamin Constant) that there is no such right.

Truthfulness in statements that one cannot avoid is a human being's duty to everyone, however great the disadvantage to him or to another that may result from it.

– Immanuel Kant, “On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy,” in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, 612

There is in human nature a certain disingenuousness ... a tendency to conceal one's own true sentiments, and to give expression to adopted opinions which are supposed to be good and creditable. There is no doubt that this tendency to conceal oneself and to assume a favourable appearance has helped towards the progress of civilization, nay, to a certain extent, of morality, because others, who could not see through the varnish of respectability, honesty, and correctness, were led to improve themselves by seeing everywhere these examples of goodness which they believed to be genuine. This tendency, however, to show oneself better than one really is, and to utter sentiments which one does not really share, can only serve provisionally to rescue men from a rude state, and to teach them to assume at least the appearance of what they know to be good. Afterwards, when genuine principles have once been developed and become part of our nature, that disingenuousness must be gradually conquered, because it will otherwise deprave the heart and not allow the good seeds of honest conviction to grow up among the tares of fair appearances.

I am sorry to observe the same disingenuousness, concealment, and hypocrisy even in the utterances of speculative thought, though there are here fewer hindrances in uttering our convictions openly and freely as we ought, and no advantage whatever in our not doing so. For what can be more mischievous to the advancement of knowledge than to communicate even our thoughts in a falsified form, to conceal doubts which we feel in our own assertions, and to impart an appearance of conclusiveness to arguments which we know ourselves to be inconclusive? ... But where the public has once persuaded itself that certain subtle speculators aim at nothing less than to shake the very foundations of

the common welfare of the people, it is supposed to be not only prudent, but even advisable and honourable, to come to the succour of what is called the good cause, by sophistries, rather than to allow to our supposed antagonists the satisfaction of having lowered our tone to that of a purely practical conviction, and having forced us to confess the absence of all speculative and apodictic certainty. I cannot believe this, nor can I admit that the intention of serving a good cause can ever be combined with trickery, misrepresentation, and fraud.

– Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 600-01(A 748-750)

But while Kant demands that nothing one say be contrary to the truth, he does not quite demand that one say all that one knows.

I can admit, though it is much to be deplored, that candor (in speaking the *whole* truth which one knows) is not to be found in human nature. But we must be able to demand *sincerity* (that *all that one says* be said with truthfulness).

– Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, 178n (4.2.4)

In an unpublished note, he takes this a little further:

[W]hile all that one says must be true, this does not mean that it is one's duty to speak out the whole truth in public.

– Immanuel Kant, *Akademieausgabe*, 12:406, quoted and translated by Hans Reiss, *Kant's Political Writings*, 2.

Thus, in a letter to Moses Mendelsohn:

Although I am absolutely convinced of many things that I shall never have the courage to say, I shall never say anything I do not believe.

– Kant to Moses Mendelsohn, April 8, 1766 in *Correspondence*, 90

At the same time, Kant maintains that, as a matter of principle, he has always honored the demands of the state censors:

Everyone knows how conscientiously I have kept my writings within the limits of the law.

– Kant to Tieftrunk, April 5, 1798 in Immanuel Kant, *Correspondence*, 544

The question is whether, given the times in which he lived, he could honor these limits without occasionally having to endorse views which he did not sincerely believe. According to K. Pölitz, Kant's student and editor of his *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, Kant's published views on religion were modified to fit the changing policies of the Prussian court but that "those who understand the sage of Königsberg according to the spirit of his system will not be in doubt about which views are more in that spirit."

– Pölitz, Introduction to *Lectures on Philosophical Theology* in *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, XXVII 2.2, 1514-16, quoted and translated by Richard Velkley in *Freedom and the End of Reason*, 182n60

**Abbé Galiani (1728-1787):**

In a letter to a friend concerning his principal work *Dialogues on the Grain Trade*, Galiani writes:

You tell me first, that after the reading of my book, you are hardly any further along concerning the heart of the question. How by the devil! You who are of Diderot's sect and mine, do you not read the white [spaces] of works? Certainly, those who only read the black of a writing will not have seen anything decisive in my book; but you, read the white, read what I did not write and what is there nonetheless; and then you will find it.

– L'Abbé Galiani, *Correspondance*, 1:245 (translation mine)

In a letter to Madame d'Épinay—which was extensively and favorably quoted a month later in Grimm's cultural newsletter *Correspondance Littéraire*—Galiani declares:

May God preserve you from the liberty of the press established by edict. Nothing does more to render a nation crude, to destroy all taste, to bastardize eloquence and all forms of wit. Do you know my definition of sublime oratory? It is the art of saying everything, without being sent to the Bastille, in a country where it is forbidden to say anything. The constraint of decency and the constraint of the press have been the causes of the perfection of wit, taste, and form among the French.

– L'Abbé Galiani to Madame d'Épinay, September 24, 1774,  
*Correspondance inédite*, 2:131-32 (translation mine)

**Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781):**

In an essay on Leibniz concerning the widely-debated puzzle as to why he forcefully defended certain extreme tenets of Christianity, such as eternal punishment in the afterlife, which he seemed very unlikely to actually believe, Lessing writes:

Leibniz, in his search for truth, never deferred to prevailing opinions. But—from the firm conviction that no opinion could be embraced unless it were, from some perspective and in some sense, true—he would often have the courtesy to twist and turn an opinion until he succeeded in disclosing this perspective and making this sense intelligible.... He did no more and no less than did all the ancient philosophers in their exoteric disquisitions: He had regard for the kind of caution for which our most recent philosophers have become much too wise. He willingly put his own system aside and tried to lead any individual to the truth via the path on which he found him.

– Gotthold Lessing, “Leibniz von den ewigen strafen,” in *Werke*, 7:180-81, quoted and translated by Chaninah Maschler in “Lessing's Ernst and Falk,” 8

In an early comedy, Lessing has one of his characters state:

We are meant to live happily in the world. . . . Whenever the truth is a hindrance to this great final purpose, one is bound to set it aside, for only a few spirits can find their happiness in the truth itself.

– Gotthold Lessing, *The Freethinker*, in *Lessing's Theological Writing*, 42–43, quoted by Blumenberg, *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 421

In his *Ernst and Falk, Dialogues for Freemasons*, which argues that the freemason in the truest sense of the word is the sage or philosopher, Lessing comes close to claiming that the essence or the surest sign of philosophy is awareness of the need for esotericism:

Falk: Do you realize, friend, that you are already a demi-Freemason?

Ernst: Who? Me?

Falk: Yes, since you admit there are truths better not spoken.

Ernst: Yes, but they *could* be spoken.

Falk: The sage is *unable* to say things he had better leave unsaid.

– Gotthold Lessing, *Ernst and Falk*, 21

**Edward Gibbon** (1737-1794):

In the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Gibbon describes dissimulation concerning religion as the standard practice of the ancient philosophers.

The various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful.

For:

How, indeed, was it possible that a philosopher should accept, as divine truths, the idle tales of the poets, and the incoherent traditions of antiquity; or, that he should adore as gods, those imperfect beings whom he must have despised as men?

But:

Viewing, with a smile of pity and indulgence, the various errors of the vulgar, they diligently practiced the ceremonies of their fathers, devoutly frequented the temples of the gods; and sometimes condescending to act a part on the theatre of superstition, they concealed the sentiments of an Atheist under the sacerdotal robes.... It was indifferent to them what shape the folly of the multitude might choose to assume; and they approached, with the same inward contempt, and the same external reverence, the altars of the Lybian, the Olympian, or the Capitoline Jupiter.

– Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall*, 1:36, 38, 39

**Louis-Sébastien Mercier** (1740-1814):

L.-S. Mercier, reacting against the excesses of the Enlightenment and the revolutionary period in France, expresses a longing for a more ancient and concealing esotericism:

It might perhaps have been desirable if the idea of the double doctrine, which the ancient philosophers taught according to whether they believed they should reveal

or not reveal their true ideas, fell into the heads of the first writers of the nation. They would not have exposed philosophy to the furious and offensive rantings of the fools, the ignorant, and the wicked; they would not have incurred the hatred and vengeance of the priests and sovereigns.... The public good, or what represents it, the public repose, sometimes demands that one hide certain truths. When they fall without preparation in the midst of a people, they cause an explosion that does not redound to the profit of the truth, and only irritates the numerous enemies of all enlightenment.

– Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 204-05

### Nicolas de Condorcet (1743-1794):

In his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, a brief but comprehensive history of western philosophy and culture, Condorcet makes repeated mention of esotericism.

[In ancient Greece,] the philosophers thought to escape persecution by adopting, from the example of the priests themselves, the use of a double doctrine, by which they confided only to tried and trusted disciples opinions that would too openly offend popular prejudices.

– Nicolas de Condorcet, *Esquisse*, 121 (translation mine)

No doubt to manage popular prejudices, Epicurus admitted gods [into his universe], but indifferent to the actions of men, estranged from the order of the universe, and subject like other beings to the general laws of its mechanism, they were somehow a mere *hors d'œuvre* to his system.

– Ibid., 139 (translation mine)

For a long time there had existed in Europe and especially in Italy a class of men who rejected all superstitions, were indifferent to all forms of worship, submitted to reason alone, regarding all religions as human inventions, which one could mock in secret but which prudence and practical politics demanded that one respect in public. Later, boldness was carried further.... [But] the fear of torture soon put an end to such imprudent frankness.... Reason had to be covered with a veil which, hiding it from the gaze of tyrants, let it be seen by that of philosophy. One was obliged to retire into the timid reserve of that secret doctrine which had never ceased to have a great number of adherents.

– Ibid., 186-87 (translation mine)

Still later:

In England, Collins and Bolingbroke; in France Bayle, Fontenelle, Voltaire, Montesquieu and the schools formed by these celebrated men, fought on the side of reason, employing by turns all the arms that erudition, philosophy, wit, and literary talent can furnish to reason; using every tone, employing every form from humor to pathos, from the most learned and vast compilation to the novel or pamphlet of the day; *covering the truth with a veil to spare eyes too weak, and leaving others the pleasure of divining it*; sometimes

skillfully caressing prejudices, the more effectively to attack them; almost never threatening them, and then never several at one time, nor ever one in its entirety; sometimes consoling the enemies of reason in seeming not to want more than a semi-tolerance in religion and a semi-liberty in politics; sparing despotism when it combated the absurdities of religion and religion when it rose against tyranny; attacking these two scourges in their principles, even when they seemed merely to oppose their more revolting or ridiculous abuses, and striking these deadly trees at their roots, when they seemed to limit themselves to pruning away a few stray branches; sometimes teaching the friends of liberty that superstition, which covers despotism with an impenetrable shield, is the first victim that they must burn, the first chain that they must break; sometimes, to the contrary, denouncing religion to the despots as the true enemy of their power, and frightening them with a picture of its hypocritical plots and its sanguinary furies; but always united in order to vindicate the independence of reason and the freedom of the press as the right and the salvation of the human race; rising up with indefatigable energy against all the crimes of fanaticism and of tyranny.”

– Ibid., 216-17 (translation mine; emphasis added)

### **Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803):**

In his *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, Herder writes:

There is a difference between the culture of the learned and the culture of the people.... Today, with useless and detrimental results, we have entangled the sphere of culture of the learned and of the people and almost expanded the scope of each to that of the other. The ancient political founders...thought more wisely in these matters. They immersed the culture of the people in good morals and useful arts; as for grand theories, even in practical philosophy and religion, they held the people to be unqualified, and thus such theories to be useless to them. Hence the ancient manner of teaching in allegories and fables, which even today the Brahmans [of India] use to instruct the unlearned casts. Hence in China the difference in common concepts, almost according to every class of the people, that was established by the government and is not unwisely retained.

– Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte*, in Herder, *Werke*, 6:459-60 (unpublished translation by Damon Linker)

### **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)**

I have always considered it an evil, indeed a disaster which, in the second half of the previous century, gained more and more ground that one no longer drew a distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric.

– Goethe to Passow, October 20, 1811, in *Goethes Briefe*, 3:168 (unpublished translation by Werner J. Dannhauser)

The best of what you know may not, after all, be told to boys.

– Goethe, *Faust*, 1.1841-42

Wed., Feb. 23.—To-day Goethe showed me two very remarkable poems, both highly moral in their tendency, but in their several motives so unreservedly natural and true, that they are of the kind which the world styles immoral. On this account, he keeps them to himself, and does not intend to publish them. "Could intellect and high cultivation," said he, "become the property of all, the poet would have fair play; he could be always thoroughly true, and would not be compelled to fear uttering his best thoughts. But, as it is, he must always keep on a certain level; must remember that his works will fall into the hands of a mixed society; and must, therefore, take care lest by over-great openness he may give offense to the majority of good men."

– Goethe, *Conversations with Eckermann*, 58.

The sagacious reader who is capable of reading between these lines what does not stand written in them, but is nevertheless implied, will be able to form some conception.

– Goethe, *Autobiography*, 283

The few who understood something of the world and of men's heart and mind, who were foolish enough not to restrain their full heart [i.e., not to practice esotericism] but to reveal their feeling and their vision to the vulgar, have ever been crucified and burned.

– *Faust* I:588-93

We talk a good deal about this humorous irony, the Goethean school of art praises it as a special excellence of their master, and it now plays a large role in German literature. But it is only a sign of our lack of political freedom, and as Cervantes had to take refuge in humorous irony at the time of the Inquisition in order to intimate his ideas without leaving a weak spot exposed for the serfs of the Holy Office to seize upon, so Goethe also used to say in a tone of humorous irony what he, as minister of state and courtier, did not dare to say outright. Goethe never suppressed the truth; when he could not show it naked, he clothed it in humor and irony. Especially writers who languish under censorship and all kinds of restrictions on freedom of thought and yet can never disavow their heartfelt opinion have to resort to the ironic and humorous manner. It is the only solution left for honesty, and in this disguise such honesty is revealed most movingly.

– Heinrich Heine, *The Romantic School*, in *Selected Works*, 204

**Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834):**

In his *Dialogues*, Plato sought to “bring the still ignorant reader nearer to a state of knowledge”; but he also clearly recognized the very great necessity “of being cautious with regard to him not to give rise to an empty and conceited notion of his own knowledge in his mind.”

[Therefore, it] must have been the philosopher’s chief object to conduct every investigation in such a manner from the beginning onwards, as that he might reckon upon the reader’s either being driven to an inward and self-originated creation of the thought in view, or submitting to surrender himself most decisively to the feeling of not having discovered or understood anything. To this end, then, it is requisite that the final object of the investigation be not directly enunciated and laid down in words, a process which might very easily serve to entangle many persons who are glad to rest content, provided only they are in possession of the final result, but that the mind be reduced to the necessity of seeking, and put into the way by which it may find it. The first is done by the mind’s being brought to so distinct a consciousness of its own state of ignorance, that it is impossible it should willingly continue therein. The other is effected either by an enigma being woven out of contradictions, to which the only possible solution is to be found in the thought in view, and often several hints thrown out in a way apparently utterly foreign and accidental which can only be found and understood by one who does really investigate with an activity of his own. Or the real investigation is overdrawn with another, not like a veil, but, as it were, an adhesive skin, which conceals from the inattentive reader, and from him alone, the matter which is to be properly considered or discovered, while it only sharpens and clears the mind of an attentive one to perceive the inward connection.

– Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Introductions*, 17-18

**Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831):**

In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel discusses three main difficulties we seem to face in our efforts to understand Plato.

A second difficulty is said to lie in the distinction drawn between exoteric and esoteric philosophy. [Wilhelm Gottlieb] Tennemann (Vol. II. p. 220) says: "Plato exercised the right, which is conceded to every thinker, of communicating only so much of his discoveries as he thought good, and of so doing only to those whom he credited with capacity to receive it. Aristotle, too, had an esoteric and an exoteric philosophy, but with this difference, that in his case the distinction was merely formal, while with Plato it was also material." How nonsensical! This would appear as if the philosopher kept possession of his thoughts in the same way as of his external goods: the philosophic Idea is, however, something utterly different, and instead of being possessed by, it possesses a man. When philosophers discourse on philosophic subjects, they follow of necessity the course of their ideas; they cannot keep them in their pockets; and when one man speaks to another, if his words have any meaning at all, they must contain the idea present to him. It is easy enough to hand over an external possession, but the communication of

ideas requires a certain skill; there is always something esoteric in this, something more than the merely exoteric. This difficulty is therefore trifling.

– G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 2:11-12

**Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834):**

Whoever is acquainted with the history of philosophy during the two or three last centuries, cannot but admit that there appears to have existed a sort of secret and tacit compact among the learned, not to pass beyond a certain limit in speculative science. The privilege of free thought, so highly extolled, has at no time been held valid in actual practice, except within this limit; and not a single stride beyond it has ever been ventured without bringing obloquy on the transgressor. The few men of genius among the learned class, who actually did overstep this boundary, anxiously avoided the appearance of having so done.

– Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 67-68

**Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854):**

Since ancient times it has been a custom to have the sacred fire of philosophy preserved by pure hands. During the glorious empires of the ancient world the first founders, i.e., the first sages of that world, sought to shelter truth from profane spirits, that is, from spirits undeserving of truth, by hiding it in mysteries. With the gradual advancement of culture, and with individual minds pushing beyond the barriers of these original institutions, philosophical schools were founded not for the purpose of committing philosophy to memory but to educate the youths. Moreover, these schools continued to hold on to the distinction between an esoteric and an exoteric philosophy long afterward.

– Friedrich Schelling, “Treatise Explicatory,” 114

**Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837):**

In a letter discussing the difficulty of writing about Nikolay Karamzin, the Russian writer, poet, and historian, who had just died, Pushkin remarks:

However to say everything; for this you must occasionally use that eloquence, which Galiani defines in his letter on censorship.

– Alexander Pushkin to P. Viazemskii, July 10, 1826, *Pushkin on Literature*, 176

The “letter on censorship” to which he refers is a letter by the Abbe Galiani to Madame d’Epinay, made famous through publication in Grimm’s cultural newsletter *La Correspondance Litteraire*. And the “eloquence” he speaks of is indeed esoteric writing:

Do you know my definition of sublime oratory? It is the art of saying everything, without being sent to the Bastille, in a country where it is forbidden to say anything.

For a fuller excerpt, see above under Galiani.

**Lord Macaulay (1800-1859):**

Macaulay's description of the famous settlement of 1689 in England through which a host of rival parties were brought to agree to the proposition that James II had legally forfeited his crown. Strictly speaking, the agreed-upon resolution was both ambiguous and contradictory. In its defense Macaulay explains:

Such words are to be considered, not as words, but as deeds. If they effect that which they are intended to effect, they are rational, though they may be contradictory. If they fail of attaining their end, they are absurd, though they carry demonstration with them. Logic admits of no compromise. The essence of politics is compromise. It is therefore not strange that some of the most important and most useful political instruments in the world should be among the most illogical compositions that ever were penned...[The framers of the settlement] cared little whether their major [premise] agreed with their conclusion, if the major secured two hundred votes, and the conclusion two hundred more. In fact the one beauty of the resolution is its inconsistency. There was a phrase for every subdivision of the majority.

– Lord Macaulay, *History of England*, 674

Continuing, elsewhere, with this theme of the incompatibility between strict logic and reason and the requirements of political practice:

Every political sect has its esoteric and its exoteric school, its abstract doctrines for the initiated, its visible symbols, its imposing forms, its mythological fables for the vulgar. It assists the devotion of those who are unable to raise themselves to the contemplation of pure truth by all the devices of Pagan or Papal superstition. It has its altars and its deified heroes, its relics and pilgrimages, its canonized martyrs and confessors, its festivals and its legendary miracles.

– Lord Macaulay, “Hallam's Constitutional History,” in *Critical and Historical Essays*, 1:116

**Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859):**

The books that have made men reflect the most and have had the most influence on their opinions and actions are not those in which the author has sought to tell them dogmatically what is suitable to think, but those in which he has set their minds on the road leading to truths and has made them find these truths for themselves.

– Tocqueville to Corcelle, September 17, 1853 in *Memoir, Letters and Remains*. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1862, 229.

**Alexander Herzen (1812-1870):**

[C]ensorship is highly conducive to progress in the mastery of style and in the ability to restrain one's words.... In allegorical discourse there is perceptible excitement and struggle: this discourse is more impassioned than any straight exposition. The word implied has greater force beneath its veil and is always transparent to those who care to

understand. A thought which is checked has greater meaning concentrated in it—it has a sharper edge; to speak in such a way that the thought is plain yet remains to be put into words by the reader himself is the best persuasion. Implication increases the power of language.

– Alexander Herzen, quoted by Loseff in *On the Beneficence*, 11

Two or three months later, Ogarev passed through Novgorod. He brought me Feuerbach's *Essence Of Christianity* [an openly atheist and secularizing work]; after reading the first pages I leapt up with joy. Down with the trappings of masquerade; away with the stammering allegory! We are free men and not the slaves of Xanthos [Aesop's master]; there is no need for us to wrap the truth in myth.

– Alexander Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, 2:407

### **Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855):**

In *The Point of View for my Work as an Author*, an autobiographical essay devoted to explaining his technique of writing, Kierkegaard states:

One can deceive a person for the truth's sake, and (to recall old Socrates) one can deceive a person into the truth. Indeed it is only by this means, i.e., by deceiving him, that it is possible to bring into the truth one who is in an illusion. Whoever rejects this opinion betrays the fact that he is not over-well versed in dialectics, and that is precisely what is especially needed when operating in this field.... Direct communication presupposes that the receiver's ability to receive is undisturbed. But here such is not the case; an illusion stands in the way.... What then does it mean 'to deceive?' It means that one does not begin directly with the matter one wants to communicate, but begins by accepting the other man's illusion as good money.

– Soren Kierkegaard, *Point of View*, 39-40

This is necessary because:

[I]f real success is to attend the effort to bring a man to a definite position, one must first of all take pains to find him where he is and begin there. This is the secret of the art of helping others.

– Ibid., 27

No, an illusion can never be destroyed directly, and only by indirect means can it be radically removed.... A direct attack only strengthens a person in his illusion, and at the same time embitters him. There is nothing that requires such gentle handling as an illusion, if one wishes to dispel it. If anything prompts the prospective captive to set his will in opposition, all is lost. And this is what a direct attack achieves, and it implies moreover the presumption of requiring a man to make to another person, or in his presence, an admission which he can make most profitably to himself in private. This is what is achieved by the indirect method, which, loving and serving the truth, arranges everything dialectically for the prospective captive, and then shyly withdraws (for love is always shy), so as not to witness the admission which he makes to himself alone before God—that he has lived hitherto in an illusion.

– Ibid., 24–26

**Arthur Gobineau (1816-1832):**

In his book *The Religions and Philosophies of Central Asia* (465-67), Gobineau gives a detailed description of philosophical esotericism or what he calls “the great and splendid expedient of *Ketman*,” in Arabic: concealment, discretion. He tells the story of Mullah Sadra Shirazi, a disciple of the philosopher Avicenna, who attempted a restoration of philosophy in seventeenth-century Iran:

He [Sadra] too was afraid of the mullahs. To incite their distrust was inevitable, but to provide a solid basis, furnish proof for their accusations, that would have been to expose himself to endless persecutions, and to compromise at the same time the future of the philosophical restoration he meditated. Therefore he conformed to the demands of his times and resorted to the great and splendid expedient of *Ketman*. When he arrived in a city he was careful to present himself humbly to all the moudjteheds or doctors of the region. He sat in a corner of their salons, their talars, remained silent usually, spoke modestly, approved each word that escaped their venerable lips. He was questioned about his knowledge; he expressed only ideas borrowed from the strictest Shiite theology and in no way indicated that he concerned himself with philosophy. After several days, seeing him so meek, the moudjteheds themselves engaged him to give public lessons. He set to work immediately, took as his text the doctrine of ablution or some similar point, and split hairs over the prescriptions and inner doubts of the subtlest theoreticians. This behavior delighted the mullahs. They lauded him to the skies; they forgot to keep an eye on him. They themselves wanted to see him lead their imaginations through less placid questions. He did not refuse. From the doctrine of ablution he passed to that of prayer; from the doctrine of prayer, to that of revelation; from revelation, to divine unity and there, with marvels of ingenuity, reticence, confidences to the most advanced pupils, self-contradiction, ambiguous propositions, fallacious syllogisms out of which only the initiated could see their way, the whole heavily seasoned with unimpeachable professions of faith, he succeeded in spreading Avicennism throughout the entire lettered class; and when at last he believed he could reveal himself completely, he drew aside the veils, repudiated Islam, and showed himself the logician, the metaphysician that he

really was.

It was above all necessary that the care he used to disguise his speech he also use to disguise his books; that is what he did, and to read them one forms the most imperfect idea of his teaching. I mean to read them without a master who possesses the tradition. Otherwise, one penetrates them without difficulty. From generation to generation, the students of Mullah Sadra have been the heirs of his true teaching and they have the key to the terms of which he makes use, not to express, but to indicate to them his thought. It is with this oral corrective that the numerous treatises of the master are today held in such great esteem and that, since his times, they have formed the delight of a society drunk on dialectic, eager for religious opposition, enamored of secret boldness, enraptured by artful imposture.

In reality, Mullah Sadra is not an inventor, nor a creator, he is only a restorer, but a restorer of the great asiatic philosophy, and his originality consists in having *clothed it* in such a way that it was acceptable and accepted in the time in which he lived.

– Arthur Gobineau, *The Religions and Philosophies of Central Asia*, 465-67, quoted and translated by Czeslaw Milosz in *Captive Mind*, 59-60 (emphasis added)

**Herman Melville (1819-1891):**

Through the mouths of the dark characters of Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago, [Shakespeare] craftily says, or sometimes insinuates the things, which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them.... [I]f I magnify Shakespeare, it is not so much for what he did do, as for what he did not do, or refrained from doing. For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth,—even though it be covertly, and by snatches.

– Herman Melville, “Hawthorne and his Mosses,” 126

**Hippolyte Taine** (1828-1893):

Taine's reading of Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*:

He seems to be always addressing a select circle of people with acute minds, and in such a way as to render them at every moment conscious of their acuteness. No flattery could be more delicate; we feel grateful to him for making us satisfied with our intelligence. We must possess some intelligence to be able to read him, for he deliberately curtails developments and omits transitions; we are required to supply these and to comprehend his hidden meanings. He is rigorously systematic but the system is concealed, his concise completed sentences succeeding each other separately, like so many precious coffers.... He thinks in summaries; ... the summary itself often bears the air of an enigma, of which the charm is twofold; we have the pleasure of comprehension accompanying the satisfaction of divining.

– Hippolyte Taine, *The Ancient Regime*, 260 (4.1.4)

**Samuel Butler** (1835-1902):

See Buffon for Butler's eloquent account of the former's esotericism.

**Henry Sidgwick** (1838-1900):

[A] Utilitarian may reasonably desire, on Utilitarian principles, that some of his conclusions should be rejected by mankind generally; or even that the vulgar should keep aloof from his system as a whole, in so far as the inevitable indefiniteness and complexity of its calculations render it likely to lead to bad results in their hands.

– Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 490

**Charles Sanders Peirce** (1839-1914):

[Forbidden ideas] are different in different countries and in different ages; but wherever you are, let it be known that you seriously hold a tabooed belief, and you may be perfectly sure of being treated with a cruelty less brutal but more refined than hunting you like a wolf. Thus the greatest intellectual benefactors of mankind have never dared, and dare not now [in America, circa 1877], to utter the whole of their thought.

– Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," *Philosophical Writings*, 20

**Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844-1900):

Plato has given us a splendid description of how the philosophical thinker must within every existing society count as the paragon of all wickedness: for as critic of all customs he is the antithesis of the moral man, and if he does not succeed in becoming the lawgiver of new customs he remains in the memory of men as 'the evil principle.'

– Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 202 (aph. 496)

Our highest insights must—and should—sound like follies and sometimes like crimes when

they are heard without permission by those who are not predisposed and predestined for them. The difference between the exoteric and the esoteric, formerly known to philosophers—among the Indians as among the Greeks, Persians, and Muslims, in short, wherever one believed in an order of rank and not in equality and equal rights —.... [consists in this:] the exoteric approach sees things from below, the esoteric looks *down from above*.... What serves the higher type of men as nourishment or delectation must almost be poison for a very different and inferior type.... There are books that have opposite values for soul and health, depending on whether the lower soul, the lower vitality, or the higher and more vigorous ones turn to them; in the former case, these books are dangerous and lead to crumbling and disintegration; in the latter, [they are] heralds' cries that call the bravest to *their* courage. Books for all the world are always foul-smelling books.

– Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 42 (aph 30)

Whatever is profound loves masks. . . . There are occurrences of such a delicate nature that one does well to cover them up with some rudeness to conceal them.... Such a concealed man who instinctively needs speech for silence and for burial in silence and who is inexhaustible in his evasion of communication, *wants* and sees to it that a mask of him roams in his place through the hearts and heads of his friends.

– Ibid., 50 (aph. 40)

*On the question of being understandable*—One does not only wish to be understood when one writes; one wishes just as surely *not* to be understood. It is not by any means necessarily an objection to a book when anyone finds it impossible to understand: perhaps that was part of the author's intention—he did not want to be understood by just “anybody.” All the nobler spirits and tastes select their audiences when they wish to communicate; and choosing that, one at the same time erects barriers against “the others.” All the more subtle laws of any style have their origin at this point: they at the same time keep away, create a distance, forbid “entrance,” understanding, as said above—while they open the ears of those whose ears are related to ours.

– Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 343 (aph. 381)

[M]y brevity has yet another value: given such questions as concern me, I must say many things briefly.... For being an immoralist, one has to take steps against corrupting innocents—I mean, asses and old maids of both sexes whom life offers nothing but their innocence. Even more, my writings should inspire, elevate, and encourage them to be virtuous.

– Ibid., 345 (aph. 381)

*The effectiveness of the incomplete.*— Just as figures in relief produce so strong an impression on the imagination because they are as it were on the point of stepping out of the wall but have suddenly been brought to a halt, so the relief-like, incomplete presentation of an idea, of a whole philosophy, is sometimes more effective than its exhaustive realization: more is left for the beholder to do, he is impelled to continue working on that which appears before him so strongly etched in light and shadow, to think it through to the end.

– Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, 92 (1.4.178)

The misfortune suffered by clear-minded and easily understood writers is that they are taken for shallow and thus little effort is expended on reading them: and the good fortune that attends the obscure is that the reader toils at them and ascribes to them the pleasure he has in fact gained from his own zeal.

– Ibid., 92 (1.4.181)

### **Sigmund Freud (1856-1939):**

In his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), Freud argues that our dreams have been composed with dissimulation and coded messages as a means of evading the internal censor. In order to render this controversial suggestion more plausible, he seeks an external analog, “a social parallel to this internal event in the mind”:

Where can we find a similar distortion of a psychological act in social life? Only where two persons are concerned, one of whom possesses a certain degree of power which the second is obliged to take into account. In such a case the second person will distort his psychological acts or, as we might put it, will dissimulate.

Freud goes on to give an example from his own writing: “When I interpret my dreams for my readers I am obliged to adopt similar distortions. The poet [Goethe] complains of the need for these distortions in the words: ‘After all the best of what you know may not be told to boys.’”

Then he offers a broader example:

A similar difficulty confronts the political writer who has disagreeable truths to tell to those in authority. . . . A writer must beware of censorship, and on its account he must soften and distort the expression of his opinion. According to the strength and sensitiveness of the censorship, he finds himself compelled either merely to refrain from certain forms of attack, or to speak in allusions in place of direct references, or he must conceal his objectionable pronouncement beneath some apparently innocent disguise. . . . The stricter the censorship, the more far reaching will be the disguise and the more ingenious too may be the means employed for putting the reader on the scent of the true meaning.

– Sigmund Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 223–24

### **Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870-1924):**

After the revolution, looking back on the highly repressive conditions in Czarist Russia, Lenin speaks resentfully of the necessity they were under to practice Aesopian language (the common Russian term for esoteric writing). He refers to the “accursed days of Aesopian talk, literary bondage, slavish language, ideological serfdom!”

– Vladimir Lenin, “The Party Organization and Party Literature,” in *Collected Works*, 10:44

On the other hand, he also marvels at what was accomplished through this use of esotericism: In a country ruled by an autocracy, with a completely enslaved press, in a period of desperate political reaction in which even the tiniest outgrowth of political discontent and protest is persecuted, the theory of revolutionary Marxism suddenly forces its way into

the *censored* literature and, though expounded in Aesopian language, is understood by all the “interested.”

– Lenin, *What is to be Done?*, 17 (emphasis in the original)

**Ludwig Wittgenstein** (1889-1951):

In an early, unused draft of a foreword to his book *Philosophical Remarks*, Wittgenstein describes the “honorable” way to construct a book of this kind:

The danger in a long foreword is that the spirit of a book has to be evident in the book itself and cannot be described. For if a book has been written for just a few readers that will be clear just from the fact that only a few people understand it. The book must automatically separate those who understand it from those who do not. Even the foreword is written just for those who understand the book.

Telling someone something he does not understand is pointless, even if you add that he will not be able to understand it. (That so often happens with someone you love.)

If you have a room which you do not want certain people to get into, put a lock on it for which they do not have the key. But there is no point in talking to them about it, unless of course you want them to admire the room from outside!

The honorable thing to do is to put a lock on the door which will be noticed only by those who can open it, not by the rest.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 7-8

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