

Issue 7(2) Spring Conference 2014

(Print) ISSN 1748-9393
(Online) ISSN 2051-5379

*British
Journal of
Undergraduate
Philosophy*



Editor-in-chief: Daniel Bregman
Merton College, Oxford

Journal of the British Undergraduate Philosophy Society

British Journal of Undergraduate Philosophy

The Journal of the British Undergraduate Philosophy Society

Issue 7(2) Spring 2014

Editor-in-chief: Daniel Bregman

Manuscript editors: Christopher Cheung
Bede Hager-Suart
Sophie Osiecki

Commissioning editors: Julie Lee
Megan McCarthy

Assistant commissioning editor: Geoff Keeling

President of BUPS: Dan Treger

www.bups.org/bjup-online

(Print) ISSN 1748-9393 | (Online) ISSN 2051-5359

British Journal of Undergraduate Philosophy

www.bups.org/bjup-online

All rights reserved.

© 2014 British Undergraduate Philosophy Society, and the authors.

Cover image by Wikimedia Commons user 'Herbythyme' used under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License. Philosophy Bro image, and photographs of Miranda Fricker, Bob Hale, Angie Hobbs, Duncan Pritchard and Jennifer Saul used with permission.

No part of the *British Journal of Undergraduate Philosophy* may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means (graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, taping, recording or by any other information storage and retrieval system) without written permission from the British Undergraduate Philosophy Society, and the authors.

(Print) ISSN 1748-9393 | (Online) ISSN 2051-5359

Editorial

*cui dono lepidum novum libellum,
arida modo pumice expositum?*

—Gaius Valerius Catullus

Like the Jabberwock, with eyes of flame, this issue crept up on your editor-in-chief slowly before leaping out of nowhere in a flurry of reviewing, \LaTeX coding and frantic Facebook chat conversations. The time since our Manchester conference has been a time of change, with new hands not only at the helm of this journal but also of the society itself. We don't seem to have crashed either into a ditch yet, so things are looking good.

On the society side of things, we're working on bringing our lofty goal of being the venue for national undergraduate philosophical interaction to fruition. The more people get involved, the more attractive it is for others, so please do go back to your university and spread the good word. Join our Facebook group, follow our Twitter account, come to our conferences and drag your friends along too.

Philosophy would be a poor endeavour indeed if it consisted in throwing paper after paper into the void and getting nothing back; those who were at our Manchester conference in November will remember my calls for letters to the editor and book reviews. Well, nothing has come of that in time for this issue, but I am optimistic for the next! I am certain that every reader will find at least one claim in this collection they vehemently disagree with: put it in writing and send it to me.

One of the joys of this role is the opportunity to read papers on such a wide range of topics that, as a firmly analytical mathematician-philosopher, I would never otherwise encounter. This selection runs the gamut from antiquity to the modern day, and our contributors have not shied away from challenging the philosophical greats: we have papers arguing (if you'll forgive a little journalistic license) that everyone has been misreading Plato, that the classic Sorites Paradox is just a case of asking the wrong question, and that Nagel is mistaken to compare human beings' insight on the world to that of nine-year-olds. Nor do they aim low: you have before you attempts to defend Descartes, attack Ackerman, gain insight into the nature of humanity and society, and provide a whole new theory of humour in eleven pages.

Our interviews also give us an opportunity to reflect on philosophy's variety, and the value and consequences of its tendencies towards specialisation and technical language. The inimitable Philosophy Bro provides a defence of

both jargon and (some) pop philosophy, along with a dose of tough love for those struggling with Hegel. Jenny Saul describes her work crossing the border between ethics and the philosophy of language (so reading her interview counts twice towards doing your revision) and Miranda Fricker describes her role within the expanding field of social epistemology. Bob Hale confirms he is *not* the number 3, and provides a personal account of what a philosophical partnership is like to work within. Angie Hobbs gives us an insight into the motivations behind her upcoming translation of the *Symposium*, and why she feels the classical philosophers are uniquely enduring. Duncan Pritchard, whom we are honoured to welcome as keynote speaker to our Sheffield conference, describes how he came to become a philosopher, and discusses some of the challenges the field still faces in terms of gender, race and class inclusion, as well as some of the steps being taken to improve matters.

It was a troubling surprise to find that the *BJUP* had never interviewed a female philosopher prior to this issue, and I'm glad that's a record that has been broken. As students, philosophers, and human beings we are all in a position to make philosophy a more equitable field for everyone to thrive, and if you were to take only one lesson from this journal I would exhort you to take it from Jenny Saul's words on the topic.

On to some much-needed acknowledgements. I owe a deep debt to my immediate predecessor in this role, Dino Jakušić, in whose footprints I tread gratefully, and hopefully without embarrassing myself too often. I could not mention Dino without his partner in crime, Michael Lyons, the previous president of BUPS. Without the two of them there would be no BUPS or *BJUP*, and it was clear at our handover how much this institution has meant to both.

My next thanks are due to Dan Treger, those other pair of hands at the helm I mentioned above. Dan has proved a more than competent leader, calmer head and friend in the time leading up to this Spring Conference. Managing a committee of busy students dispersed physically across the country is bad enough, let alone also having to negotiate with a conference host and all the assorted mundanities that go towards accomodating, feeding and enlightening a crowd of budding philosophers. His only failing is in confusingly having the same first name as me, and he claims he is not responsible for that.

Anyone who has worked on any kind of committee with me will know that I have something of a tendency to micromanage. Chief victims of this tendency were my commissioning editors, responsible for handling submissions until approved by a reviewer. Because the process is anonymised and I have no access to it, the trio had to bear the brunt of my constant demands for status updates and 'helpful' comments on how exactly they should be doing things. We got

through it in the end, guys. The manuscript editors, some of them brand new to the job, worked admirably under stressful conditions to transform a ragtag assemblage of files into the elegant whole you see before you. Any errors should be laid at my feet, not theirs.

Our external reviewers get very little out of their work for *BJUP*; they tend to be people whose CVs do not still need boosting, with busy schedules and research of their own. Nevertheless they answered our call in droves and reviewed speedily and constructively, and I am immensely grateful to them all: Dr James Andow, Mihnea Chiujea, Anna Ciborowska, Jasmin Contos, Pete Faulconbridge, Noah Friedman-Biglin, Jonathan Head, Dr Daniel Hill, Verity James, Dr Elseijn Kingma, Kerry Langsdale, Alex Lloyd, Ryan Nefdt, Davis Olbrich, Anna Ortin, Edgar Phillips, Michael Plant, Jordan Rodger, Tom Schoonen, Rick Sendeleck, Shereen Shaw, Sam Spurrell, Jinyu Sun, James Wenban, Peter West, and Jake Wojtowicz. Thank you for seeing the value in this little publication of ours. We owe you one.

Last of all the personal thanks: to my friends Cathy Scott, Matt Booth and Ryan Gossiaux for keeping me sane this hectic term, to Merton College for not losing absolutely all faith in me yet, and to my parents Dana Bregman and Dr Ahron Bregman, in partial repayment of the book dedication I was mentioned in sixteen years ago.

I very much hope you enjoy this issue of the *British Journal of Undergraduate Philosophy*.

DB

Contents

iii. Editorial

1. **Subjective Certainty and the Cartesian Project**
Fergus Peace

14. **Is Bruce Ackerman’s Neutrality Principle Susceptible to Hegel’s Empty Formalism Objection?**
Carl-Otto Frietsch

20. **Have you Heard the one about the Gentle Norm-Breaker?**
Collis Tahzib

31. **What is the Relation between Conditional and Unconditional Hospitality?**
Joseph Palasz

43. **Critically Assess Nagel’s Defence of the Claim that “... the World is not our World, even Potentially”**
Madeleine Hyde

50. **‘City in Words’: Hermeneutic analysis of Plato’s *Republic***
Lukas Clark-Memler

67. **Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Vagueness, and the Sorites Paradox**
Jonathan P. Martindale
78. **Interview: Philosophy Bro**
86. **Interview: Miranda Fricker**
95. **Interview: Bob Hale**
102. **Interview: Angie Hobbs**
107. **Interview: Duncan Pritchard**
115. **Interview: Jennifer Saul**

Subjective Certainty and the Cartesian Project

Fergus Peace

Madgalen College, Oxford

1 The Cartesian Circle

This article proceeds in seven sections. This introductory section outlines the problem of the Cartesian Circle as it is traditionally seen to arise in Descartes's work. Part 2 examines and dismisses one attempt to evade the problem by referring it to the fidelity of memory. Part 3 offers a preliminary critique of the solution proposed by Anthony Kenny. In Part 4, I consider an externalist response to Descartes's problem and suggest it is a coherent solution; Part 5 then discusses the nature of the Cartesian project and argues that the externalist resolution of the Circle is not available within such a project. In Part 6, I use some of the features of Cartesian doubt identified in the preceding section to resuscitate the account criticised in Part 3 and suggest that this is the best response Descartes can make. Part 7 offers some brief concluding remarks.

The problem of the Cartesian Circle is, in its basic form, well known and straightforward to outline. René Descartes's epistemological project employs a 'method of doubt': he sets aside all those beliefs he has any reason to doubt, and attempts to rebuild from the firmest foundations a set of beliefs that he can rely on. Implicated in his doubt are all his beliefs about the external world he perceives by sense. He cannot validate these by direct introspection – as he does with his belief that he exists – but only by finding some principle which guarantees the reliability of his senses.

Descartes ultimately turns back his hyperbolic doubt about his senses and the external world by relying on the principle "that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive is of necessity true".¹ Descartes thinks that to clearly and distinctly perceive something is to "use ... correctly" the faculty of reason which was given to him by his God; because he is both benevolent and omnipotent, God would not have created him so that he could use his reason correctly and still be mistaken.² So the truth of his principle is established

¹Descartes [2] p. 48.

²Ibid. p. 102.

by appealing to the existence of a benevolent God. But how can Descartes be sure of this God's existence? The proof he offers in the Third Meditation seems itself to rely on the principle that clear and distinct perceptions are true. Descartes says that his idea of God "is utterly clear and distinct . . . hence there is no idea which is in itself truer or less liable to be suspected of falsehood".³ The clear-and-distinct principle, which seems to be justified *by* God's existence, also appears to serve as justification *for* it. This is the circle which Descartes seems to have trapped himself in. The problem is put into sharp relief at the beginning of the Third Meditation where Descartes writes that "if I do not know [that God exists and is no deceiver], it seems that I can never be quite certain about anything else".⁴ If he is not certain about *anything*, then he is not certain of the materials that he uses in his proof of God's existence; thus it seems that he cannot ever come to be certain that God really does exist.

If this circular reasoning is present in Descartes's argument, then the Cartesian project is stopped in its tracks. Investigating whether the circle really exists, and whether Descartes can escape it, is thus an important part of the study of Descartes's work.

2 Memory

A version of the Cartesian circle was identified by some of the objectors to the *Meditations*, and Descartes offers a response to them in the Second Replies:

when I said that we can know nothing for certain until we are aware that God exists, I expressly declared that I was speaking only of knowledge of those conclusions which can be recalled when we are no longer attending to the arguments by means of which we deduced them.⁵

This passage is at the heart of an interpretation of Descartes known as the 'memory thesis' or 'memory answer'. It says, essentially, that the clear-and-distinct rule is valid independently of God, who is needed only to guarantee that we act properly in applying the rule to *remembered* clear-and-distinct perceptions. This view seems to fit with Descartes's reflections on the rule in the Fifth Meditation, where he applies it to situations where a "memory of

³Ibid. p. 31.

⁴Ibid. p. 25.

⁵Ibid. p. 100.

a previously made judgement may come back, when I am no longer attending to the arguments which led me to make it”.⁶ In particular, according to the memory thesis, the proof of God is needed for the purpose of “providing grounds for trusting recollections of what has been clearly and distinctly perceived”.⁷ There is no question about the validity of the principle; “Descartes never doubts that what is clearly and distinctly perceived is true. His metaphysical doubt concerns simply the possibility that . . . [we] think we remember clearly and distinctly perceiving what we in fact never clearly and distinctly perceived at all”.⁸ The problem of circularity is solved in this way: the clear-and-distinct rule itself is straightforwardly valid, needing no guarantee from God, so the proof of God’s existence can go through and our memory of past clear and distinct perceptions can then be guaranteed.

But the memory thesis is not a satisfactory solution to the problem of the Cartesian Circle, for well-rehearsed philosophical and exegetical reasons which I will present only briefly here. One initial issue is that it seems to leave unanswered a question which is at the heart of the problem: what justifies the reliance on clear and distinct ideas? The problem at hand is that the most apparent answer to this question involves circular reasoning. But it hardly seems an adequate solution to simply discard this problematic justification of the clear-and-distinct rule and leave it with no justification at all.

We will return to this issue below, but there are two other pressing reasons to reject the memory thesis. The first is that it does not offer a compelling interpretation of Descartes’s writings, even at the points in the text which seem superficially to support it. In the Fifth Meditation, for instance (with emphasis added):

But as soon as I turn my mind’s eye away from the proof, then *in spite of still remembering that I perceived it very clearly*, I can easily fall into doubt about its truth, if I am unaware of God. For I can convince myself that I have a natural disposition *to go wrong from time to time in matters which I think I perceive as evidently as can be*.⁹

⁶Ibid. p. 48.

⁷Frankfurt [3] p. 216.

⁸Ibid. pp. 216–7.

⁹Descartes [2] p. 48.

The emphasised sentences show two things. The first shows that Descartes does not express doubt as to whether he perceived something clearly, but takes the recollection of that fact for granted: the reliability of memory is not being questioned. The second highlights the real subject of his doubt: whether clearly and distinctly perceiving something is enough to guarantee its truth. The Second Replies show the interpretative failure of the memory thesis even more starkly:

The question will now arise as to whether we possess the same firm and immutable conviction concerning these conclusions, *when we simply recollect that they were previously deduced from quite evident principles (our ability to call them ‘conclusions’ presupposes such a recollection)*. My reply is that the required certainty is indeed possessed by those whose knowledge of God enables them to understand that the intellectual faculty which he gave them cannot but tend towards the truth; but the required certainty is not possessed by others.¹⁰

Descartes explicitly presupposes that he is able to accurately recollect having clearly and distinctly perceived something, but raises doubt as to whether that recollection is enough to guarantee truth. This is not what the memory thesis says, and cannot be accounted for by it.

The second problem with the memory thesis is that it does not even solve the circularity problem. Suppose that I remember clearly and distinctly perceiving that *p*. According to the memory thesis, the only doubt I can still harbour is whether this memory is right: whether I really did clearly and distinctly perceive that *p*. This doubt is dispelled by the benevolent God. But how? I am unsure whether my memory is reliable; now I remember having proved the existence of God and so dismiss this lingering doubt. Evidently, however, I am not yet entitled to be sure that my memory of the proof of the existence of God is itself accurate; it is obviously “circular for [Descartes] to offer as a validation of memory the fact that he remembers having proved that God validates memory”.¹¹ So I cannot simply remember having proved the existence of God, or the Cartesian Circle will rear its head again – instead I must actually prove that God exists and does not deceive me, *without* using my memory at any stage in the proof.

¹⁰Ibid. p. 104, emphasis added.

¹¹Frankfurt [3] p. 219.

Perhaps this is possible; Descartes thinks that some arguments can be grasped in a single mental step, and the core of his argument for God is not especially complex. But what we are left with is the notion that I must, when working through some proof in which I would like to rely on my memory, “simultaneously not only attend to the current step in [the] proof and keep in mind what steps [I am] recalling; ... [but] also perceive clearly and distinctly all the steps in the demonstration that God exists and ... [that] validates the use of memory”.¹² This is not obviously possible; even if it were, it is certainly implausible to suppose that mental gymnastics of this kind are required for deductive arguments to be justified. So the memory thesis either does not avoid the problem of circularity at all, or does so only at the cost of total implausibility.

3 Individual Intuitions

Anthony Kenny proposes a different account of how Descartes can escape circular reasoning. Descartes conceives of a distinction between intuition and deduction. Propositions known by intuition are those “so simple that their truth can be seen in a single mental glance”;¹³ deduced truths are known by a chain of intuitions, not all of which can be executed in a single mental step. Using this distinction, Kenny says that Descartes does not use the clear-and-distinct rule at all in ascertaining the truth of some propositions, for example that he exists and that there is a God. Rather, “[w]hen he passes from the clear and distinct perception of something to the affirmation of its truth ... his affirmation is based directly on the intuition and not on a deduction derived from a general proposition about the truthfulness of intuitions”.¹⁴ He simply cannot doubt these propositions when considering them. It is only at other times that he can raise a “second-order” doubt about whether his clear and distinct perceptions (taken as a class) are really true. The clear-and-distinct rule is an answer to this doubt, which is dismissed by intuiting the proof of God and the reliability of clear and distinct perceptions in general. “The truth of particular intuitions is never called in question, only the universal trustworthiness of intuition, and *in vindicating this universal trustworthiness only individual intu-*

¹²Ibid. pp. 219–20.

¹³Kenny [4] p. 174.

¹⁴Ibid. p. 194.

itions are utilised".¹⁵ And these individual perceptions are trustworthy; "the simple intuition by itself provides both psychologically and logically the best grounds for accepting its truth. Thus, there is no circle."¹⁶

This reading is no solution to the problem either. It is a matter of elementary logic that a universal doubt about the reliability of clear and distinct perceptions in general entails specific doubts about the reliability of particular clear and distinct perceptions. It is not to the point to say that, when we narrow our attention to some particular such perception, we find ourselves unable to entertain any doubt; we cannot yet be sure, while the general doubt still lingers, that this incapacity is not a defect planted by a malicious demon. Half of Kenny's claim is right: it is certainly the case that we could not ask for *psychologically* superior grounds for accepting the truth of particular perceptions. But we still do not know that this indubitability implies truth, so the fact that the propositions in question are irresistibly compelling whilst we entertain them is, in a sense, neither here nor there; we do not yet have good *logical* grounds for asserting that our intuitions are true. Imagine that Descartes clearly and distinctly perceives the proof that clear and distinct perceptions are generally valid. Then we tell him to snap to it and explain to us how his epistemological project can succeed. All he can ask us to do is intuit the proof with him. We are likely to answer that this is just an unacceptable kind of solution, because intuition's trustworthiness is just what is at issue.

Kenny's suggestion is that this answer would be good enough. His solution is to remove the general doubt by appealing to particular clear and distinct perceptions (namely that God exists and is no deceiver.) These perceptions are indubitable in one sense – we cannot doubt them whilst we entertain them – but not in another – we can cast a general doubt over them – and they are certainly not *justified*. There is still a circle here: clear and distinct perceptions in general are validated by particular clear and distinct perceptions, which cannot properly be relied upon if we are still entertaining the possibility – even if not precisely simultaneously – that such perceptions can be misleading. Kenny's interpretation of Descartes does not escape the Cartesian Circle.

¹⁵Ibid. p. 194, emphasis added.

¹⁶Ibid. p. 194.

4 Externalism and the Circle

Kenny faces this problem: it is apparently impossible for Descartes to get off the ground without appealing to particular clear and distinct perceptions. But he does not have any justification for doing so – and seemingly *cannot* have one. This leads us to a more radical solution. Van Cleve interprets Descartes as a kind of externalist: some of the propositions he uses are justified (they count as certain knowledge) even though he himself does not know the basis of their justification. Van Cleve distinguishes two propositions:

(A) For all p , if I clearly and distinctly perceive that p , then I am certain that p .

...

(B) I am certain that (for all p , if I clearly and distinctly perceive that p , then p).¹⁷

(A) is not something Descartes needs to *know*. It is simply a fact about the world, one which needs to be *true* for knowledge to be possible but not one that needs to be *known*. So Descartes can have knowledge or certainty about propositions which fit within (A) without himself being able to explain their justification.¹⁸ Thus “(B) need not be true at the beginning of the Cartesian enterprise. I do not have to be certain that all clear and distinct perceptions are true before I prove that God exists”.¹⁹ It can still be the case, as Descartes wants it to be, that (A) is true because of God’s benevolence, and that this is the source of his knowledge. He simply won’t be able to offer an explanation of this until later in the project. We begin with particular clear and distinct perceptions, which constitute knowledge in virtue of *something-we-know-not-what*. By working from these basic premises, we are able to work out what this justifying *something* in fact is. “Descartes’s first premises are immediately justified, that is, they are justified simply in virtue of being clearly and distinctly perceived, not because they inherit justification from other propositions”.²⁰

This account also ties into what Descartes variously says about both memory and the prospect of atheistic knowledge. The references to memory which we saw above can be explained as follows. The recollection of clearly and

¹⁷Van Cleve [5] pp. 66–7.

¹⁸Ibid. p. 69.

¹⁹Ibid. p. 68.

²⁰Ibid. p. 73.

distinctly perceiving that p is not itself a clear and distinct perception that p . While only (A) is true, then, such a recollection is not sufficient for knowledge. Once I know that (A) – that is, once (B) is true – then I *know* that my previous perception implied the truth of p , so I can know p is true just in virtue of the recollection.²¹ This is the sense in which God’s guarantee relates to memory. But, since one can only know that (A) is true by intuiting and appreciating the proof of God’s existence and benevolence, an atheist can never know something just by recalling the perception of it. They can still, though, know something whilst clearly and distinctly perceiving it. And this seems to accord with what Descartes says on the issue in the Second Replies:

The fact that an atheist can be ‘clearly aware that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles’ is something I do not dispute. But I maintain that this awareness of his is not true knowledge, since no act of awareness that can be rendered doubtful seems fit to be called knowledge.²²

The atheist’s act of awareness can be rendered doubtful because, when they are not intuiting this truth, they can doubt whether that intuition provides for the proposition’s truth. The believer who knows (A) does not have that lingering doubt. So their knowledge is ‘true knowledge’, lasting and indubitable, because they *know* the justification of it – which the atheist does not, even if the very same justification is true of them while they clearly and distinctly perceive.

5 The Cartesian Method

Van Cleve’s solution is a good and interesting one in its own terms. But it is not obvious that an externalist justification of knowledge can be reconciled with the Cartesian project. Descartes starts the *Meditations* by calling into question everything he possibly can. The hyperbolic doubt aims to eliminate every belief which is even slightly dubious, every belief which he cannot know is entirely justified. The doubt finally ends with the *cogito*, and the Cartesian project is then to build up our edifice of knowledge from this point. The externalist solution to the problem of the Cartesian circle suggests that this reconstruction depends on beliefs whose justifications are not accessible to Descartes until later in the project.

²¹ Assuming, of course, that circumstances have not changed.

²² Descartes [2] p. 101.

That might be a fine general epistemological solution, but it is not one that Descartes can avail himself of while staying consistent with his method of relying only on beliefs whose justifications he is certain of. Whether or not ‘knowing that one knows’ is a general condition on knowledge, it must be a condition on the kind of certainty sought by the Cartesian project.

Perhaps we can say: Descartes uses these propositions as premises in his arguments not because they are externally justified, which of course he cannot yet know, but because they are irresistible: he cannot doubt them. But there is no particular reason – or, if there is one, it is not one that Descartes can know – why the set of irresistible propositions should be coextensive with the set of propositions which are externally justified. The Cartesian project is, at heart, one of setting out and deducing the justification of knowledge. A solution which relies on an external justification which cannot be set out in this way until it is too late to be relevant is not a properly Cartesian one.

What is the lingering problem here? There is, in one sense, no circle at all: the clear-and-distinct rule is not true *because* Descartes clearly and distinctly perceives it to be so. From the outside, we can see and explain the rules of the Cartesian epistemological system without much trouble. The circularity is a subjective one, related to which propositions Descartes can access at which times. But this is revealing. When we are clear about the fact that we are dealing with subjective circularity, it seems reasonable to think that this circle can never be resolved: knowing one proposition seems almost always to require the knowledge of some prior one, with a few exceptions – the *cogito*, for instance – which appear not to provide much help toward more general knowledge.

Perhaps, then, we need to be looking for a different kind of justification – one peculiar to the circumstances of the inherently subjective Cartesian project. The nature of that project and the doubt it involves suggest a somewhat different approach to justification which can break open the Cartesian Circle.

6 Dispelling Doubts

Let us return now to the intuitionist thesis, presented by Kenny among others, which I criticised above. On this account, the proof that clear and distinct perceptions are reliable can be directly intuited; whilst someone performs this intuition, they cannot doubt its veracity, which thus needs no justification for itself.

Imagine that you are listening to someone telling a story. The details of the

tale are outrageous: that anyone actually performed such exploits is fantastically unlikely. But this raconteur is so persuasive, and their story-telling so absorbing, that whilst you listen you *cannot help* but believe the narrative is true. Afterwards, you reflect. The story as told is incredible; you have plenty of first-order doubts about the truth of its various parts. The only reason you had to dismiss those doubts was the psychologically irresistible story-telling. But that is not happening any more, and on reflection it seems that believing stories told to you in the pub is not a good way of discovering truth. The fact that you were incapable of doubting the story at the time it was told does not now give you any reason to take it as true, nor to think that believing such stories is a reliable route to truth.

My criticism in Part 3 would imply that the intuitionist response to the circularity problem is analogous to this imaginary situation. Now that we have inspected more closely the nature of the Cartesian doubt, I think we can identify some important reasons why this is not so.

Both cases involve the acceptance of an irresistible proposition, one which we cannot help but assent to at the time of first giving it consideration. But this broad sameness of category conceals the fundamental difference of the two approaches. Being spoken to by an extraordinarily persuasive story-teller is an exotic and unusual experience, one which bears little similarity to the ordinary course of our conscious existence. This is something which would become apparent almost immediately, when we notice how propositions which were entirely irresistible at the time are now distinctly dubious, even – especially, in fact – when we consider them closely. Speaking about it in the technical terms of irresistibility and ‘clear and distinctness’ makes the process of reasoning seem similarly exotic. But it isn’t: of course we have no perfect criterion for determining when we are actually having a clear and distinct perception (a separate problem for Descartes), but it is essentially something we are familiar with: the act of conceptualising and intuiting propositions, of moving from reasons to conclusions. This is not only an ordinary part of our normal psychological life, but perhaps the largest part of it. This is confirmed by our inability to return to considering clear and distinct perceptions without once again being compelled to assent to them: their irresistibility, and the faculty of reason which leads to it, is not an aberration but a consistent and central part of our mental experience.

Why should familiarity mean that a faculty which we cannot *justify* as reliable becomes seen as such? Denying it is so still seems to be an intellectual possibility at this point in the project, and if we are orienting ourselves towards doubt then it seems to be the most appropriate reaction. But in fact it is not: if the sceptic we are engaging with here is interested at all in rational discourse

and the making of judgements, then they are committed to the use of reason already. We cannot “complain to Descartes that concentration on irresistible propositions might be like sniffing some hallucinogenic gas, and Descartes’s procedure like that of someone who, when a doubt was raised in the absence of the gas, proposed to dispel the doubt by inviting one back to the gas. Reasoning, unlike the gas, is something which the rational sceptic is involved in even when complaining of the gas, and he reasons to conclusions”; “the use of propositions one is not at that instant intuiting is a minimal structural condition on getting on at all”.²³ In fact, the best method we have for *raising* doubts is close and scrupulous consideration of a proposition. This is what destroys our confidence in the compelling storyteller; but it is this same method which *dispels* doubt here. Reasoned reflection is not only not foreign to the sceptic, but is in fact one of their most important tools. In that light, there is nothing more than the subjective certainty of clear and distinct ideas that a sceptic can reasonably demand.

In the context of the Cartesian project and its hyperbolic doubt, the psychologically irresistible certainty of clear and distinct intuitions is the best available ground for – “psychologically and logically” – accepting a proposition as true. Clear and distinct perceptions are cognitively fundamental in two senses. The first is just the fact of their irresistibility – it is not really possible for a human thinker to avoid believing and relying on such compelling intuitions when they come to them. The second is that the refusal to rely on such intuitions would leave us with nothing else: setting aside the capacity to reflect, consider reasons for propositions and be compelled by certain ideas would leave us unable to get off the ground as thinkers at all. The second sense is important. A sceptic unwilling to engage in basic cognition should not be taken as a real impediment to the success of Descartes’s arguments; that level of scepticism is one we must just dismiss before beginning the project. That is, obviously, a significant precondition: a sceptic who refuses to even accept the process of thinking and reaching conclusions is outside the reach of Descartes’s attempt to refute scepticism. That deepest layer of scepticism remains untouched by the arguments he offers. But that is hardly surprising. And if that level is put aside, the Circle becomes tractable so long as we recognise that this is a first-person project which must recognise itself as such, and admit of peculiarly first-person solutions.

²³Williams [6] p. 192.

7 Conclusion

Writing on this question focuses our attention on a very particular part of the Cartesian project and questions its logical acceptability. The question is whether intuiting a proof of reason's reliability is a non-circular ground for thinking that reason is reliable. This is an interesting question. But, for it to be of much significance, it must be the case that there is a proof of that reliability which can be intuited.

The one offered by Descartes is inextricably bound up with the proof of God and his benevolence. This is why he thinks an atheist can never possess a body of justified knowledge. So the success of the Cartesian project critically hinges on not just the existence of God, but our ability to intuit it; there needs to be a proof of God which is irresistible to anyone who rationally considers it. This is not the place to discuss Descartes's proofs of God. But they certainly do not seem to possess this quality of irresistibility. Whether or not the Circle is broken, Descartes needs an evident and irresistible proof of the existence of God, and it is not at all clear that he has one.

There have been, however, Cartesian projects undertaken since Descartes which are not so essentially theistic, so examining whether any such project is doomed to circularity is a worthwhile task. I have suggested here that avoiding this circle can be done only with great difficulty, and probably only by, when faced with the deepest level of scepticism, simply refusing to entertain it. This, however, cannot be done through the philosophically and interpretively inadequate 'memory thesis', nor by turning the Cartesian project into an externalist one. Understanding the nature of the task at hand, and recognising that its subjective, first-person nature means we need to admit solutions which make sense only from a first-person perspective, is the key to breaking the Cartesian Circle.

References

- [1] Bennett, J. (2001) *Learning from Six Philosophers: Volume 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [2] Descartes, R. (1984) *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 2*. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, & D. Murdoch (trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- [3] Frankfurt, H. (2008) *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- [4] Kenny, A. (1997) *Descartes*. Bristol: Thoemmes Press.
- [5] Van Cleve, J. (1979) 'Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle', in *Philosophical Review*, 88(1): 55–91.
- [6] Williams, B. (2005) *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*. London: Routledge.

Is Bruce Ackerman's Neutrality Principle Susceptible to Hegel's Empty Formalism Objection?*

Carl-Otto Frietsch
University of Warwick

Introduction

The aim of this essay is to critically assess whether G.W.F. Hegel's Empty Formalism Objection to Immanuel Kant's ethics also applies to Bruce Ackerman's Neutrality Principle. I shall argue – firstly – that this objection reveals Ackerman's principle as collapsing into moral subjectivism due to its failure to constitute an objective standard of the good. I will argue – secondly – that the objection shows the principle to be empty because of its inability to guide the moral actions of citizens independently of the good that those citizens themselves presuppose it to embody. I conclude on this basis that Ackerman's Neutrality Principle is susceptible to Hegel's objection, and that it is unsuitable for grounding the liberal state in the way that Ackerman wants it to.

The first section shall outline Hegel's objection as it is put against Kant. The second section sets up Ackerman's Neutrality Principle, with the third section illustrating the ways in which the objection applies to it and further entails my conclusion.

1 The Empty Formalism Objection

The argument appears in the chapter of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* titled 'Morality', as part of its third section 'The Good and Conscience'. This section discusses the claim that the good provides an objective standard that must inform the will in its actions. The will identifies the good with obeying duty for duty's sake, which leads to the further question of what this concretely implies on behalf of the will's conduct.¹ Hegel says that this results in a problem, because it seems impossible to derive *specific* guidance about what one ought

*Delivered at the BUPS Spring Conference 2014 in April at the University of Sheffield.

¹Hegel [3] §134.

to do from the mere notion of acting dutifully for the sake of duty alone. This problem is raised with the ethics of Immanuel Kant in mind, which claims that dutiful actions of this sort are necessary for moral action. However, despite this connection, it is not obvious that the problem Hegel raises is a problem for Kant. After all, Kant's ethical theory employs the so-called Categorical Imperative to derive specific duties intended to guide one's actions. This 'supreme principle of morality' (in its first formulation) tests whether a given principle (maxim) can be made into a universal law without undermining one's ability to act in accordance with it, and uses it to determine the moral law of rational agents.² For example, the principle 'never return borrowed money' cannot become a universal law, since it makes the very act of borrowing money impossible. On the other hand, a principle like 'do not lie' generates no such contradiction when universalized and should as such be considered part of the moral law. Kant thus appears perfectly able to provide a set of principles that all rational agents are able to follow, so Hegel's worry seems misguided.

Unfortunately for Kant, this is not all there is to Hegel's criticism. Indeed, Hegel's point is that *not even the kind of rational willing* that the Categorical Imperative tests for suffices to determine whether a given principle is a genuine duty. As Hegel³ brings to attention elsewhere, this problem becomes apparent when certain controversial principles pass the test and other seemingly harmless ones do not. Consider a principle such as 'purchase only second-hand clothes'. Most would agree that this principle does not constitute a moral error, but the Categorical Imperative forbids it because its universalized form makes the act of buying clothes impossible; I cannot purchase second-hand clothes unless somebody already bought them when they were new. Conversely, the principle 'on Monday, 1st of December 2013, do not return any borrowed money to the person Atticus Gatsby' does not undermine the act of returning borrowed money as a universalized maxim, since it is restricted to a particular person at a particular time. This result is bizarre, given that the act of not returning borrowed money is clearly impermissible if the principle is formulated differently. With this in mind, one is able to appreciate the full force of Hegel's objection. Kant's way of determining specific duties stems from a mere *absence of contradiction and formal self-correspondence* within the formulation of a given principle, where its *moral content* – such as whether one ought or ought not to return borrowed money – is simply presupposed and

²Kant [5] p. 80.

³Hegel [4] p. 80.

brought in ‘from outside’ by the agent herself. Hegel⁴ therefore accuses Kant’s Categorical Imperative of being an *empty formalism* that is unable to specify the determined instances of the good that are meant to follow from obeying duty for duty’s sake, and that Kant thus fails to supply the objective standard that Hegel says is necessary for derivation of such content.

Hegel⁵ goes on to claim that the absence of this objective standard entails *moral subjectivism* about how the good is to be acted upon. This means that people are left to the guidance of mere moral feeling when they formulate their principles, which makes them unable to collectively reconcile their views about what the good demands of them. I might feel that not returning borrowed money is wrong and therefore posit a formulation that requires me to always do so, but somebody else may feel differently and thus posit a formulation that permits her not to return borrowed money. Given that these formulations are both endorsed by the Categorical Imperative, its inadequacy as an objective standard for determining how one ought to act upon the good is clear. This aspect of Hegel’s criticism is of central importance to the question raised by this paper, as will shortly become evident.

2 The Neutrality Principle

In a book called *Social Justice In The Liberal State*, Bruce Ackerman⁶ seeks to justify liberal political theory through a principle that he claims is neutral in the sense that it presupposes no specific conception of the good. The ‘Neutrality Principle’ holds that:

No reason that attempts to justify some social arrangement *X* is a good reason if it requires the power holder to assert (a) that his conception of the good is better than that asserted by any of his fellows, or (b) that, regardless of his conception of the good, he is intrinsically superior to one or more of his fellow citizens.

A reason is therefore *not* neutral if it invokes the intrinsic superiority of the agent offering the reason, or if it employs the alleged superiority of that person’s understanding of the good over the conception promoted by others. Ack-

⁴Hegel [3] §135.

⁵Hegel [3] §137.

⁶Ackerman [1] p. 11.

erman⁷ sets out to organize a hypothetical liberal state around a ‘neutral dialogue’ that constructs its political views on the basis of this principle. For example, through the dialogue it is concluded that, even if there is no agreement as to what the good is, “... each of us is prepared to say that our own sense of self-fulfillment has *some value*”.⁸ Ackerman goes on to say that if this were not the case, one would be willing to starve and let others grab all the resources for themselves. It is thus claimed that even if the universe is completely devoid of moral meaning, human beings are able – through ‘neutral’ conversation – to overcome their unconstructive struggles by giving that struggle ‘meaningful form’ through a shared affirmation of each individual’s capacity to bring their own conceptions of the good into the world.⁹

This account is very reminiscent of that given by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*, in the sense that the moral significance of primary goods (e.g. basic rights and liberties, income and wealth, etc.) is dependent upon the agreement of the participants of the original position (i.e. where the selection of principles that determine the basic structure of society takes place) that they all require primary goods in order to pursue their individual ends in life. As Rawls says, while “... the persons in the original position do not know their conception of the good, they do know ... that they prefer more rather than less primary goods”.¹⁰ Ackerman and Rawls therefore seem to agree that there are some basic goods that are valuable in one’s life, even though they both deny that this involves any specific conception of the good. This entails the conclusion that, at least in Ackerman’s case, the Neutrality Principle is able to avoid moral subjectivism through neutral dialogue, whilst providing clear information about how one ought to act in relation to one’s fellow citizens. The Categorical Imperative plays a very similar role in Kant’s ethics, so the project of this paper is to assess whether Ackerman’s principle further falls prey to Hegel’s objection to Kant.

⁷Ibid. pp. 54, 55–7.

⁸Ibid. p. 57.

⁹Ibid. pp. 368–9.

¹⁰Rawls [6] p. 93.

3 Is the Neutrality Principle empty?

The best way to test whether Ackerman's Neutrality Principle is able to respond to Hegel's objection is to break down the challenge into two parts. The question thus becomes whether Ackerman's principle is able to – firstly – provide an objective standard that – secondly – serves to guide one's moral actions. As regards the first point about objective standards, it is for present purposes unnecessary to interpret Hegel as requesting any more than a principle that does not collapse into moral subjectivism. It is evident that Ackerman thinks that he is able to avoid this problem through the restrictions imposed upon agents by his principle. That is, the requirements of the agent not to (a) consider her conception of the good to be superior to that of others, as well as not to (b) regard herself as intrinsically superior to others regardless of what her conception of the good is. Ackerman believes that compliance with these tenets ultimately produces a kind of baseline collective agreement between citizens that is consequently able to serve as the cornerstone of the liberal state. This final step is crucial, because on Hegel's view a principle results in moral subjectivism if it does not specify any determined conception of the good, but rather leaves it to the agent to supply it on her own. Indeed, the reason why Kant's Categorical Imperative leads to moral subjectivism is that it has to rely on the agent herself to provide moral content in order to be of any use at all.

One might, therefore, suspect that Ackerman's conclusion does not follow from his principle. Consider a case in which agent *A* tells agent *B* that his (*A*'s) way of life – his conception of the good – requires a society in which *B* lives in the same way as *A* does. Unless agent *B* has access to a principle that claims knowledge of the good, nothing she says is able to override the claim of agent *A*. Agent *B* evidently cannot appeal to the Neutrality Principle, since it claims to favour no particular conception of the good. This scenario is an example of the kind of 'unconstructive struggle' that Ackerman mentions, but there is an unexplained gap between it and the stage at which this struggle acquires the 'meaningful form' he says is necessary for grounding the liberal state. This entails the conclusion that Ackerman's principle fails the first part of Hegel's challenge to supply an objective standard upon which morality and society is to be based, since its complete endorsement of neutrality cannot reach beyond moral subjectivism.

The second part of Hegel's challenge to Ackerman – i.e. whether the Neutrality Principle is able to guide moral actions or not – must also be given a negative response. Just as in the case of Kant, the principle is able to guide actions only if some substantive conception of the good is presupposed and thus

brought in implicitly by the agent. Ackerman¹¹ does this at crucial points in his dialogue, such as when he concludes that the self-fulfillment of every individual is valuable, as well as when he explains the transition into ‘meaningful struggle’ through an agreement between the citizens that their capacities to bring their own conceptions of the good into the world is a value they share collectively.¹² Without this substantive and unifying conception of the good Ackerman’s principle is empty because it says nothing about how the citizens ought to act, which is why it is unable to guide their moral actions.

Conclusively, I hope to have shown that Hegel’s Empty Formalism Objection extends to Ackerman’s Neutrality Principle. The insight I have attempted to elucidate is that a principle that claims to be ‘neutral’ with regards to the good cannot be used to found the liberal state since it – firstly – cannot be used to create collective agreements between citizens, and – secondly – because it is empty independently of the conception of the good that those citizens themselves presuppose it to be constitutive of.

References

- [1] Ackerman, B. (1980) *Social Justice In The Liberal State*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- [2] Galston, W. (1982) ‘Defending Liberalism’, in *The American Political Science Review*, 76: 621–629.
- [3] Hegel, G.W.F. (1991) *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, H.B. Nisbet (trans.), A.W. Wood. (ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Hegel, G.W.F. (1975) *Natural Law*, T.M. Knox (trans.), H.B. Acton (ed.). Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- [5] Kant, I. (2002) *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, A.W. Wood (trans.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- [6] Rawls, J. (2005) *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

¹¹Ackerman [1] p. 57.

¹²Ibid. pp. 368–9.

Have you Heard the one about the Gentle Norm-Breaker?*

Collis Tahzib

Lincoln College, Oxford

Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses. He doesn't seem to be breathing and his eyes are glazed. The other guy whips out his phone and calls the emergency services. He gasps, "My friend is dead! What can I do?" The operator says, "Calm down, I can help. First, let's make sure he's dead." There is a silence, then a shot is heard. Back on the phone, the guy says, "Okay, now what?"¹

This, according to one study, is the "world's funniest joke".² Clearly it is funny and amusing. But – and this is much less clear – what makes this and other jokes funny? Why is one thing funny and another unfunny?

In this essay I seek to answer these questions. I do so not by trying to identify, joke-by-joke, what makes any particular joke funny. Rather we are looking for what Smuts calls the "Holy Grail of humour studies":³ a general theory of humour that specifies the necessary and sufficient conditions of humour, i.e. those conditions present in all and only humorous things. First, I will review two standard theories of humour: the superiority theory and the incongruity theory. Neither, I argue, is necessary and sufficient for humour. Second, I will articulate an account of humour as gentle norm-breaking (be these norms of language, of rationality, of propriety, and so on). Such an account has three advantages. First, the account has high explanatory power: it can explain a large array of humorous things. Second, it can also be used to explain what makes the unfunny unfunny (either because it is gentle but not norm-breaking, like the unfunny act of going shopping; or else because it is norm-breaking but not gentle, like the unfunny predicament of being mugged). And third, it points towards the social or evolutionary purpose of humour: by gently

*Delivered at the BUPS Spring Conference 2014 in April at the University of Sheffield.

¹The British Association for the Advancement of Science [12] p. 183.

²Ibid.

³Smuts [11].

flirting with normative boundaries, humour serves to bring social norms into sharper and crisper resolution. In other words, humour is a mechanism by which society can mark and stake out its norms.

1 Theories of humour

1.1 ‘Sudden glory’: the superiority theory

The superiority theory holds that laughter and comic amusement express the pleasure of feeling superior to other people. This is the oldest account of humour, and was advocated by Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes, who famously claimed that

the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly.⁴

Hobbes, then, claims that since we are naturally competitive, when we see weakness in others or in our former selves, we are overcome by self-congratulation and ‘sudden glory’ which are expressed in laughter.

Certainly this account can explain a wide array of humour, particularly that based on scorn or misfortune. It explains why people laugh at (i) physical comedy, like slipping on a banana skin, or at (ii) stereotype ‘blonde jokes’ (Two blondes fell down a hole. One said, “It’s dark in here, isn’t it?” The other replied, “I don’t know; I can’t see.’), or at (iii) ourselves if, say, we put salt in our tea instead of sugar. In each case we are laughing because we enjoy the pleasure of being reminded of our superiority to, respectively, the clumsy oaf, the fool, or the absent-minded person we briefly were.

However, the superiority theory faces serious problems. First, it does not seem to be *necessary* for humour – that is, many things are funny without arousing feelings of superiority. So the superiority account cannot explain the funniness of wordplay in oxymorons (“I’d give my right arm to be ambidextrous”; “Who needs rhetorical questions?”) and Marxian (Groucho, not Karl) one-liners such as “Quote me as saying I was misquoted”, “Outside of a dog, a book is a man’s best friend. Inside of a dog, it’s too dark to read”, or “A child of five could understand this. Fetch me a child of five!”. Nor can the superior-

⁴Hobbes [3] pp. 54–5.

ity account make sense of the funniness of absurdity (is there not something hilarious in the title of Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, a play which is not about a singer, hairless or otherwise?), of incongruity (Morreall gives the wonderful example of how, much to his amusement, he once found a bowling ball in his refrigerator⁵), of surrealism (consider the famous opening lines of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect"⁶), of infant play (recall how babies laugh during peekaboo), of irony or of the lowly pun. For none of these examples of humour seem to arouse feelings of superiority, triumph or 'sudden glory'. There is no butt to whom scorn can be directed; the humour is in that sense non-comparative. Indeed, if anything, we ought to feel *inferior* before – or sneakily envious of – such comic material, which appears to stem from minds wittier and more ingenious than our own.

And second, superiority does not seem to be *sufficient* for humour – that is, many things arouse feelings of superiority without being funny. After all, as Hutcheson observed in the 18th century, we feel superior to, say, turnips, goldfish and babies yet none of these things are particularly amusing.⁷ We may also feel better off than the oppressed or the homeless, yet here again we are filled more with pity than with amusement. As Hutcheson rightly puts it, in such cases "we are in greater danger of weeping than laughing".⁸ At the same time, winning a boardgame or a marathon may lead to self-congratulation and 'sudden glory' but can hardly be said to produce comic amusement.

1.2 'Strained expectation': the incongruity theory

In light of these limitations, incongruity theorists claim that the source of comic amusement is not in feelings of superiority but rather in the presence of 'incongruity' – a rather broad term encompassing notions like inconsistency, unexpectedness, absurdity, inappropriateness, discordance, paradox. This was the view of Kant, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and others, and remains the most popular account today.

We can already see how incongruity gives us the resources to deal with some

⁵Morreall [9] p. 11.

⁶Kafka [6] p. 3.

⁷Morreall [10].

⁸Ibid.

of the objections to the superiority account. It explains why we might be amused at the sight of a stretch limo parked alongside a VW Beetle,⁹ of a very fat person beside his very thin friend (think Laurel and Hardie), or of a bowling ball in one's refrigerator. All these seem incongruous in one way or another. Neither bowling balls nor refrigerators are funny in isolation; but, *together*, they generate humour by their incongruity. Similarly, there is comic incongruity in *The Odd Couple*, which sees two men – one obsessively tidy, the other very messy – forced to live as roommates.

Let us try to make the notion of incongruity more precise. For Kant, incongruity refers to the mismatch between expectation and reality. As he puts it,

laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing.¹⁰

Kant's interpretation of incongruity theory – that the subversion of expectation is the source of humour – certainly has intuitive appeal. This is so for at least three reasons. First, there is certainly something funny about the subversion of expectation. This partly is why we are amused by Stewie, the talking one-year old baby on *Family Guy*. We do not expect babies to talk, much less to be witty and erudite. Thus our expectation is comically subverted when, for instance, Stewie orders his mother: "Heat up some gravy for our guest. My last helping of white meat was drier than Oscar Wilde". Or take Wendy Cope's amusing poem 'An Attempt at Unrhymed Verse':

People tell you all the time,
Poems do not have to rhyme.
It's often better if they don't
And I'm determined this one won't.
Oh dear.

Never mind, I'll start again.
Busy, busy with my pen... cil.
I can do it, if I try—
Easy, peasy, pudding and gherkins.

Writing verse is so much fun,
Cheering as the summer weather,
Makes you feel alert and bright,

⁹Carroll [1] p. 28.

¹⁰Kant [7] p. 199.

'Specially when you get it more or less the way you want it.'¹¹

In each couplet we are led to form an expectation of how the second line will end based on either a common idiom ('easy, peasy pudding and pie') or on a rhyme with how the antecedent line ends; and what makes the poem funny is that in each case a synonym subverts our expectation. The second advantage of the incongruity theory is that, as Morreall argues, it fits neatly with the comedian's language of 'set-up' and 'punch line'. The set-up creates the expectation (the 'something'); the punch line subverts it (the 'nothing').¹² And third, it can explain why a joke ceases to be funny if repeated too often – knowing what is coming, the set-up no longer instills in us an expectation that the punch line subsequently subverts.

Schopenhauer cashes out 'incongruity' differently to Kant. For Schopenhauer, incongruity refers to an absurd mismatch between a general concept and a particular instantiation of that concept. Schopenhauer gives the example of someone who says to a man that enjoys solitary walks: "you like walking alone; so do I: therefore we can go together".¹³ The general concept here is: 'whatever pastime two people enjoy individually they can enjoy together'. But this general concept, which works for most things like cinema-going or playing football, fails when the particular pastime in question is 'walking alone' – which is precisely the kind of thing that can be enjoyed singly but not jointly. The same applies for the joke about the overweight customer who, because he is on a diet, asks to have his pizza sliced into four rather than eight.¹⁴ Again, the general concept 'the fewer the slices of pizza, the more healthy' fails because, in this instantiation, the size of the slice is not being kept constant.

However, incongruity – in both its Kantian and Schopenhauerian interpretations – faces familiar problems. First, incongruity doesn't look *sufficient* for humour – that is, many things are incongruous without being funny. The 19th century philosopher Alexander Bain provides a host of incongruities that are not funny: "an instrument out of tune", "snow in May", "a wolf in sheep's clothing", "a corpse at a feast", "parental cruelty".¹⁵ These are unfunny incongruities that, rather, produce shock, pity, disgust – in Bain's phrase, they

¹¹Cope [2] p. 72.

¹²Morreall [10].

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Carroll [1] p. 78.

¹⁵Holt [4] pp. 92–3.

produce “anything but a laugh”.¹⁶ One way to block this objection is to argue, *à la* Suls, that humour requires not only incongruity but also a *resolution* to the incongruity.¹⁷ For instance in the joke, “Photons have mass? I didn’t even know they were Catholic!”, the apparent incongruity between the two sentences is ‘resolved’ by appreciating that the speaker is mistaking ‘mass’ in the sense of Holy Communion for mass in the sense of heaviness. However, even this kind of ‘resolvable incongruity’ is not sufficient for humour. Wyer and Collins give the example of John, who is telling a doctor about his ill father. His father’s symptoms are very incongruous – pain in the foot, together with hair loss, together with an outbreak of acne, etc. – the kind of symptoms that do not typically belong together. Suppose, suddenly, the doctors find a solution – perhaps they read about a rare disease exhibiting these symptoms in an obscure dusty journal.¹⁸ The solution of this incongruity may make John feel many things – happy, relieved, thankful – but surely not comically amused.

And second, incongruity doesn’t look *necessary* for humour – that is, many things are funny without being incongruous. Let us return to the examples we used to motivate the superiority account, those of blonde jokes and slipping on banana skins. In such cases, we do not seem to have incongruities (resolvable or not), and yet we have humour. And, even if we artificially stipulate some incongruity into the situation (e.g. the incongruity between how we expect a walker to move and how he does in fact move when he skids on the banana skin), it is doubtful that this alleged property of incongruity (rather than any of the other candidate humour-generating properties like superiority or the slapstick or surprisingness or embarrassment) is what exactly is really causing the funniness.

2 Humour as gentle norm-breaking

Given these problems with the two standard theories of humour, I shall now articulate a conjunctive account of humour as gentle norm-breaking.¹⁹ That is to say, a matter (sentence, situation, event, joke, what have you) is humorous just in case two singly necessary and jointly sufficient conditions are met:

¹⁶Ibid. p. 92.

¹⁷Hurley et al. [5] p. 49.

¹⁸Ibid. pp. 49–50.

¹⁹My characterization of humour as gentle norm-breaking resembles that of McGraw & Warren [8], though is, I think, appreciably different.

- (i) the matter is gentle
- (ii) the matter breaks some norm.

Both conditions should be very plausible. The first stems from the empirical psychological observation that feelings of genuine fear, anxiety or threat seem to drive out feelings of amusement. Hence a baby may giggle when a familiar person pulls a funny face, but is liable to cry and scream if a stranger pulls a similar face.²⁰ Banter may be amusing, but bullying is not. False fire alarms at inconvenient times (e.g. during a shower) may be amusing, but a real fire at an inconvenient time is not. A prank whereby someone wearing a scary mask jumps out becomes funny only once the initial millisecond of threat has passed. So it seems that when things are genuinely threatening they cease to be funny. The second condition should also be plausible. After all, much humour does seem to derive from a lack of ‘fit’ between the world as it is and the world as it should be – or, more precisely, between the world as we perceive it to be and the world as we perceive it should be. We laugh, for instance, at the “world’s funniest joke” because the hunter interprets “Let’s make sure he’s dead” as “Let’s see to it that he’s dead” – but really he ought not have done so. The hunter has broken a norm, in particular a norm of rationality.

This account has three advantages. First, it can account for the funniness of virtually every joke. All we have to do to explain the humour is identify the relevant norm that has been broken. For instance, in a scene from Lubitsch’s 1939 masterpiece *Ninotchka*, Leon tells a joke about a man who visits a restaurant and orders a cup of coffee without cream – to which the waiter brilliantly replies, “I’m sorry, sir, we have no cream. Can it be without milk?”,²¹. This is funny because it violates the *norm of rationality* – a rational waiter would realise that, since the man wants coffee without cream, whether the restaurant actually has cream or not is neither here nor there. Breaking the norm of rationality also accounts for blonde jokes: the funniness of one blonde saying to another, “If you can guess how many sweets are in my pocket you can have them both”, derives from the fact that a rational person would recognize that the answer is given away in the question. The norm of rationality also explains the funniness of *non-sequitur* such as Woody Allen’s remark, “I failed to make the chess team because of my height”, or Mark Twain’s essay ‘At the Funeral’, about the etiquette of funerals, which finishes unexpectedly with, “Do

²⁰Carroll [1] p. 29.

²¹Žižek [15] p. 765 mentions this scene, though not in the context of humour theory.

not bring your dog”.²² A second kind of norm is the *norm of propriety*. Thus the reason why we may be amused by someone who, say, burps loudly at a formal social function, or by Mr Bean’s antics in church (his violent sneezes, his mouthing the hymns without knowing the words, his falling asleep out of boredom), or by a child who innocently asks an adult lady how old she is – the reason why these are amusing is that they break certain norms of decorum and propriety that set out the appropriate, respectable way to behave in various settings. A third kind of norm is the *norm of language*, which explains the humour behind one-liners, wordplay, witticisms, puns, etc. This gives us insight into the comedy of Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing* who utters malapropisms like “comparisons are odorous”(instead of ‘odious’),²³ and of Wildean quips such as “I can resist anything except temptation” – which breaks language norms insofar as the claim about being able to resist anything is fully undercut by the claim about being unable to resist temptation. Other norms the breach of which gives rise to humour are *moral norms* (hence immoral or offensive jokes), *physical norms* (hence in *Tom and Jerry*, Jerry can be cut to pieces and yet survive), *cultural norms* and so on.

The second advantage of this account is that it can also explain why the unfunny is unfunny. Put simply, an unfunny joke or situation is unfunny either because: (i) it is not gentle, or (ii) it is not norm-breaking, or both. In other words, according to this conjunctive account of humour, unfunniness is due to one (or both) of the conjuncts failing to hold.

This should become clearer with a couple of examples. First, suppose the norm-breaking condition holds but the gentleness condition does not. Take the case of being mugged. There is nothing funny or comically amusing about being mugged. Why? Because, although mugging *is* norm-breaking, it does not meet the gentleness condition. That is to say, being mugged is too threatening, too menacing, too frightening to be funny. But suppose we slide up, so to speak, our mugger’s gentleness. Imagine a Gentle Mugger, who addresses you with great courtesy and self-deprecation: “Awfully sorry, sir... I beg your pardon, but... I’m broke and desperate and, alas, have no choice but to mug you unless you hand over your wallet... Please, guv, no hard feelings; it’s nothing personal...” Indeed, Gentle Mugger wishes you a good night and (without irony) a safe trip home as you part ways, sans wallet. There does, here, seem something comically amusing about Gentle Mugger; even as we

²²Twain [13] p. 786.

²³Shakespeare [14] p. 253.

hand over our wallet we may be quietly tickled by his strange and curiously genteel manner.

And second, suppose the gentleness condition holds but the norm-breaking condition does not. Take the case of wearing pyjamas to bed. There is nothing funny about wearing pyjamas to bed. Why? Because, although wearing pyjamas to bed *is* gentle, *is* non-threatening, it does not meet the norm-breaking condition. That is, wearing pyjamas to bed doesn't break any social, cultural, moral norm. But suppose, this time, that we slide up the norm-breakingness a little. Imagine a history professor who delivers his keynote lecture at an important academic conference wearing pyjamas. This would now be hilarious because the professor breaks certain norms – in particular, norms about the appropriate dress code for formal occasions – though in an unthreatening way.

This account, then, gives us an explanation of what makes the unfunny unfunny: the lack of gentleness, or the lack of norm-breakingness, or both. And, furthermore, it gives us a strategy for injecting comedy into an unfunny matter: increase the gentleness or norm-breakingness of the matter, as required.

And the third advantage of this account is that it points towards an answer to an important question (though not one that I am treating in any depth), namely that of why humans have evolved with humour. For, while certain animals do laugh, humans appear to be the only sentient creatures with a sense of humour and a capacity for comic amusement. Might, then, humour have survival value; might there have been evolutionary pressure to preserve humour as a character trait? If the account of humour as gentle norm-breaking is true, then it is possible that, by gently treading on normative boundaries, humour reminds us where those boundaries actually are. In other words, humour enables societies to locate, carve out and publicize the limits of acceptable conduct and reaffirm obedience to a society's norms.

Before concluding, let us counter one potential objection to this account of humour as gentle norm-breaking. This account, it could be claimed, is so broad and catch-all that it is vacuous and uninformative, for we can always artificially construct a norm to fit the joke. For instance, the funniness of finding a bowling ball in one's refrigerator can be explained away as a violation of the 'norm' against putting bowling balls into refrigerators – but is there really such a norm as this? We can respond to this objection in two ways. First, the objection has force if we state norms in a very specific and *ad hoc* way (e.g. the norm against a history professor delivering a keynote lecture in pyjamas, or the norm against Mr Bean falling asleep in church). But if we state norms more generally (e.g. the norm of appropriate dress, the norm of respect in formal occasions), the charge that the criterion is *ad hoc* and

vacuous loses its force. Indeed, it is quite possible that all norms may reduce to a handful of general ones (norms of language, of rationality, of morality, of dress, of culture, of decorum, etc.). So the objection is blunted once norms are stated with an appropriate balance of generality-specificity. The second way of responding to this objection is to note that there is a difference between generality and vacuity. Just because a theory is general enough to explain very many jokes does not make it an empty tautology (“It’s funny because it’s funny”). For instance, the laws of physics explain (virtually) everything; but the laws of physics aren’t empty tautologies. They unite disparate particular observations – a falling apple here, an accelerating car there, etc. – within a general and coherent explanatory framework.

In conclusion, then, I have discussed two standard theories of humour – the superiority theory and the incongruity theory – and argued via counterexamples that neither of them provides necessary and sufficient conditions for humour. I then articulated a theory of humour as gentle norm-breaking, motivated this theory in three ways, and defended it against the potential objection that it is overly broad.

References

- [1] Carroll, N. (2014) *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [2] Cope, W. (2008) *Two Cures for Love*. London: Faber and Faber.
- [3] Hobbes, T. (1994) *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic: Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*, J.C.A. Gaskin (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [4] Holt, J. (2008) *Stop Me If You’ve Heard This: A History of Philosophy and Jokes*. London: Profile Books.
- [5] Hurley, M. M. & Dennet, D.C. & Adams, R.B. (2011) *Inside Jokes: Using Humour to Reverse-engineer the Mind*. Massachusetts, MA: MIT Press.
- [6] Kafka, F. (2012) *Metamorphosis and other stories*, W. & E. Mair (trans.). London: Vintage Books.
- [7] Kant, I. (1952) *The Critique of Judgement*, J.C. Meredith (trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- [8] McGraw, A.P. & Warren, C. (2010) 'Benign Violations: Making Immoral Behavior Funny', in *Psychological Science* 21: 1141–1149.
- [9] Morreal, J. (1983) *Taking Laughter Seriously*. New York, NY: SUNY Press.
- [10] Morreall, J. (2012) 'Philosophy of Humor', in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [Online] Available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor/>
- [11] Smuts, A. (2009) 'Humour', in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [Online] Available at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/humor/>
- [12] The British Association for the Advancement of Science (2002) *Laugh-Lab: The Scientific Quest for the World's Funniest Joke*. London: Arrow Books.
- [13] Twain, M. (1992) *Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, and Essays: 1852–1890*. New York, NY: Library of America.
- [14] Shakespeare (2012) *Much Ado About Nothing*, C. McEachern (ed.). London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- [15] Žižek, S. (2012) *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. London: Verso.

What is the Relation between Conditional and Unconditional Hospitality?*

Joseph Palasz

University of Sussex

This essay will argue that the main distinction (and therefore relation) between conditional and unconditional hospitality is their conflicting assumptions about just what constitutes a human being.

Before we launch into our main analysis, I would like to raise two issues that we shall keep in mind throughout this essay:

The first issue is *xenia*. A familiar classical construct, *xenia* consists in a set of rules between a host and guest (involving the giving of gifts, a protocol of interrogation and other courtesies) as portrayed in Homer's *Odyssey*.¹ Derrida describes *xenia* as a type of right by pact (a conditional hospitality²). Let us consider in this essay what Derrida intends with this characterisation and its implications for our own contemporary multicultural practices of tolerance.

The second issue is that of macro and micro; is Derrida's argument directed towards how society as a whole should treat the *Other*, or occupied with how the conscientious individual should choose to treat the *Other*? The first concern is political; the second, ethical.

1 What is 'conditional hospitality'?

Let us try to reconstruct this type of perspective towards the *Other*: the most important aspect to note about conditional hospitality is that it is the hospitality of prejudice;³ it contextualises who the stranger is. The question 'Should I welcome this stranger?' is first posed by the subject and then (to answer) it is asked 'Who is this stranger?' Irreparably, they are 'the *Foreigner*'.⁴ There-

*Delivered at the BUPS Spring Conference 2014 in April at the University of Sheffield.

¹Homer [3].

²Derrida [1] p. 21.

³Zukić [12] p. 1.

⁴Derrida [1] p. 27.

fore conditional hospitality necessitates that the subject impose the identity of *Foreigner* onto the *Other*, giving the *Other* a contextual identity (a family, a nation, a culture⁵). Then, and only then, can one decide whether or not to be hospitable to this *Foreigner*.

This process is a forced application of my own contextual conditions (my traditions, my state, my nation, my citizenship, my ethics, my language, my culture, etc.) onto the *Other* (as they are now defined negatively as foreign in relation to these conditions). The act of forcing is the act of interrogating (analysing) the *Other* through my conditions.⁶ Moreover, he must conform to my conditions, or I shall be hostile towards him. This is the condition of my hospitality. The subject will suspend its hostility (is conditionally hospitable) only as long as the condition (of adhering to my conditions) is met.

2 What underlies this position?

There is an underlying attitude of fear in this account; more precisely, a trepidation that the stranger might harm me, my people and/or my culture.⁷ The attitude of fear hence directly derives (as a negative from the positive) from a principle of social preservation (i.e. that me, my people and my culture should be preserved; being harmed is to be avoided and thus feared).

In this, we have deduced the motive for the forced application of my conditions onto the *Other*; I think my conditions (my traditions, state, nation, citizenship, ethics, language and culture) in themselves are worth preserving and so I apply them in an attempt to preserve.

3 What is the motivation for the principle of social preservation?

We might find the answer in Rousseau.

Rousseau claimed that the first duty of the state is preservation of that state's

⁵Ibid. pp. 43–44.

⁶Ibid. p. 15.

⁷Ibid. pp. 49–53.

society⁸ and thus the state should engage only in conditional hospitality. Society has a living existence;⁹ it should be viewed as effectively a living animal, an animal irreducibly constituted by the living totality of its comprising human beings.¹⁰ As an animal, society is motivated by *amour de soi* (a love of self: a will to preserve its own existence;¹¹ the general will). Humans in society have ceased to be human animals (i.e. beings of individual subsistence¹²) but are now socialized human beings, are conscious. This metamorphosis occurs after humans accidentally¹³ create a society (not to be confused with wilfully joining the legitimate state¹⁴). A socialized human being is constituted by nothing but his society.¹⁵ A social human is motivated by *amour propre*, only truly subsisting as a communal entity in a particular society¹⁶ and dependent on that society for both mental (only being conscious through communal language¹⁷) and physical (in the division of labour, birth and other practical relations of dependency¹⁸) subsistence. The socialized human being is, and can only be, one piece of a whole.¹⁹

The legitimate state (a legitimate governance of society) is of absolute importance to social man; for the animal of society that now exists must uniformly work for its own existence or be in disarray.²⁰ A society's drive to preserve itself is not just analogous to an animal's drive to preserve itself but is identical to it. The principle of preservation is built thus, on society's fundamental drive of *amour de soi* and indeed on a human being's understanding of *amour propre*.

⁸Rousseau [10] p. 203 (*Social Contract*, Book 2, Chapter 4).

⁹ Ibid. p. 190 (Book 1, Chapter 6).

¹⁰Ibid. pp. 192–94 (Book 1, Chapter 7).

¹¹Ibid. p. 47.

¹²Ibid. p. 71.

¹³Ibid. p. 85.

¹⁴Ibid. p. 119 (Book 1, Chapter 6).

¹⁵Ibid. p. 91.

¹⁶Ibid. p. 91.

¹⁷Ibid. p. 68.

¹⁸Ibid. p. 81.

¹⁹Ibid. p. 116.

²⁰Ibid. p. 119 (Book 1, Chapter 6).

Let us recall the theme of micro and macro: *amour de soi* explains society's motivation for preserving itself (engaging only in conditional hospitality), but does this justify the individual conscious choice to preserve society and act prejudicially towards the *Other*? We have, of course, deduced in this account that individual and society are mutually reliant – the death of society spells death for the individual – but is this enough to ensure a moral correctness in the individual's choice to uphold the principle of social preservation?²¹ The question must be whether it is a moral duty to preserve one's life at all costs. Do we have an ethical duty to preserve our lives even at the expense of another's? It seems unlikely. So, though I admit at this juncture conservatism – action on the principle of social conservation – has a conceivable political justification for conditional hospitality, I note it lacks a clear ethical argument for why the individual should treat the *Other* in a conditional way. A possible ethical argument for conservatism, however, shall be pondered in the last portion of this essay.

I have now established the perspective behind conditional hospitality.

4 Formalization of conditional foundations

We have determined this:

Conditional hospitality is rooted in the belief that the 'I' is constituted by nothing but the conditions of society and hence must protect those conditions (as any being might protect itself) by forcefully applying them to the *Other* (who, being alien to those conditions by definition, is a threat to those conditions). The assumption here is:

(A1) A human being is a thing constituted absolutely in and of its retrospective culture.

And the prescription deduced from this assumption is one of conservation (i.e. conservatism):

(P1) The laws of the state should be directed towards the good (preservation and proliferation) of the respective host culture.

How have we deduced (P1) from (A1)? The legitimate state is thought of as nothing more than organisation of human beings in the interest of those

²¹Ibid. p. 207–9 (Book 2, Chapter 5).

human beings; assume (A1) and the sole interest of a human being naturally becomes (P1).

Therefore, from (P1) we conclude that conditional hospitality is a correct political practice of society. We have yet to deduce its ethical justification on an individual level.

5 What, then, is unconditional hospitality?

Derrida sees something absolutely paradoxical about conditional hospitality; we assess the *Other* on the grounds of our conditions, but in doing so we presuppose the *Other* is under (and therefore not other) to those conditions.²² If the *Other* is indeed other to the conditions we apply, the *Other* intrinsically violates the condition of our hospitality (to adhere to our conditions) and thus our hospitality is no hospitality at all (but hostility).

An unconditional hospitality is one that does not prejudicially apply conditions; it is blind to context.²³ No question is asked of the *Other*. The *Other* is accepted as they are. This is thought to be grounded on some universal obligation (by some right of the *Other*) to be hospitable.²⁴ Such hospitality is universal (and thus unconditional). The *Other* has retained his identity absolutely and has no status of *Foreigner* forced upon him.²⁵ He is treated as he is, in and of himself.

Let us recall *xenia*. Why does Derrida think the welcoming practice of *xenia* is a conditional hospitality? Because Derrida thinks *xenia* is in itself a condition.²⁶ It is a traditional pact, an ethical system unique to ancient Greek culture. Any hospitality granted through *xenia* is automatically conditioned through that Greek culture. Though *xenia* grants rights, they are rights of the *Foreigner*, rights by tradition, by condition, by pact. Derrida needs, if his right to hospitality is to be universal, a universal right.²⁷ It is for this reason that the Western European notion of multicultural tolerance is not uncon-

²²Derrida [1] pp. 15–16.

²³Ibid. p. 25.

²⁴Ibid. p. 55.

²⁵Ibid. p. 29.

²⁶Ibid. p. 21.

²⁷Ibid. p. 55.

ditional; though, like *xenia*, it is polite, respectful and diplomatic, it so on condition (the condition of mutual tolerance). It is toleration by tradition, and not acceptance. In this we may realise the extent of what is demanded in an unconditional hospitality: complete acceptance.

6 What is this universal right of the *Other*?

There are two grounds Derrida entertains to explain this right. The first (which Derrida apparently rejects) is Kantian and the second is a justification grounded in ethical openness.

7 The Kantian grounding

A universal right, by definition, is non-contextual. The first recourse for the explanation of such a right is to claim it is a right decreed by divinity. This is the justification employed by Locke²⁸ and in the American Declaration of Independence.²⁹

Obviously, no man can be held accountable to such a doctrine of divinity, as there is no way to prove (deduce, induct or intuit) this doctrine. There may indeed be such divine rights, but such rights (because they are not provable) are mysterious and irrelevant outside of the tradition of a particular religiosity. The Declaration of Independence states that a man may intuit these truths. However, this is evidently wrong for, if God had made these American rights plain to humanity, we would see consistency in accordance with them across all human cultures. We do not.

We may also employ the Euthyphro dilemma³⁰ to defeat such divine explanations. We ask ‘Are these rights obligations because God chooses them or did God choose them because these rights are obligations?’ The former option makes divine rights essentially arbitrary. The latter option grounds divine rights in something other than divinity.

Kant grounds his universal right in reason. Kant believes that the universal rights of man are laws decreed by (and hence that might be deduced by) rea-

²⁸Locke [8] p. 107.

²⁹United States Declaration of Independence [11].

³⁰Plato [9] pp. 9–10.

son.³¹ Kant in this seems to assume reason to be a constant in humanity (his table of judgements is deduced in such a way as to suggest this³²) and thus thinks of all humanity as accountable to reason.³³ Furthermore, reason's authority comes from its being epistemologically – through a transcendental relation – related to the truth.³⁴ If the right of hospitality is a right by reason then it is not an act of philanthropy (of a generous inclination based on conditions) to grant these rights, but it is a command (an obligation) of reason (and thus a supposition of objective truth³⁵). We would think, then, that such a universal right goes beyond the problem of the traditionalist *xenia*.

8 Formalisation of the Kantian grounding

To hold that all men are essentially something universal you must hold that a human being is something other than its context; for Kant, he is reasonable.³⁶ Once a human being has been granted an escape from his context, he is no longer limited to it; to treat him in a reasonable way is to treat him as he is in and of himself. The assumption, then, is:

(A2) A human being is a thing constituted in and of itself.

It should be noted that Rousseau directly opposed the idea that reason existed prior to social convention;³⁷ the animal of man in nature is unreasonable. It is a question of whether man has developed in accordance with reason or whether reason is a mere social construct of man. It is a question whether Kant's interpretation of A2 – that man is made of his reason – is not open to Rousseau's interpretation of A1. We must further note that neither the *Critique of Pure Reason* nor the *Groundwork* may settle this, for both are philosophical justifications of reason and not explanations of reason through social anthropology.³⁸ Neither work answers directly if humans have always been

³¹Kant [5] pp. 22–56.

³²Kant [4] pp. 79–83,

³³Kant [5] p. 40.

³⁴Kant [4] pp. 83–87.

³⁵Kant [6] pp. 137–42.

³⁶Kant [5] p. 11.

³⁷Rousseau [10] p. 47.

³⁸Kant [4] pp. Bvii.

and must always be reasonable. We should then take the universal interpretation of A2 as a possible interpretation of Kant and as a position of its own commonly held in Europe.

The prescription from this assumption is one of liberalisation (i.e. liberalism).

(P2) The laws of the state should be directed towards the good of the individual.

For, if the state is constituted by individuals, it cannot violate individuality without violating its legitimacy. Note that, for Kant, ‘the individual’ may be replaced with ‘autonomy’ (the self-legislating, reasonable agent), making the political P2 a reverse articulation of the ethical categorical imperative.³⁹ This, yet again, is fearfully close to Rousseau’s general will and, under a conventional conception of reason, the conservative account. I suggest thus that, if Kant is successful in drawing an ethical account out of the categorical imperative, the conservative might also be successful in drawing a ethical imperative from the general will. However, interpreting Kant liberally, we suppose we have achieved unconditional hospitality in both the relations of the state and in the relations of individuals.

9 Analysis of Kantian grounding

Kant has demanded that all men, no matter their relation to society or the state, be treated reasonably and thus, assuming a rational interpretation of A2, as they are in themselves.

Derrida rejects the account of hospitality in Kant’s *Perpetual Peace* because he thinks this hospitality conditional and therefore contradictory to Kant’s supposed unconditional foundations.⁴⁰ We have already considered there to be an interpretation of Kant’s account that accepts the principle of preservation and therefore conditional hospitality. Added to this, Derrida has a wariness of the notion of ‘right’, as it teeters on the edge of the paradox mentioned above.⁴¹ In short, he believes that a reasonable right may fall into the *xenia* trap, as it is dependent on the individual being reasonable and thus is not universal but conditional.

³⁹Kant [5] p. 34.

⁴⁰Derrida [1] p. 67.

⁴¹Ibid. pp. 69–71.

Derrida, however, is sympathetic to the Kantian foundations,⁴² although he cannot accept a Kantian formulation of (A2) as his deconstructionism⁴³ is in opposition to such a foundation. But it is important that Derrida holds some formulation of A2 to maintain unconditional hospitality: Derrida makes it clear that he believes all humanity to have some universal features in common.⁴⁴ What exactly these are is unclear. His hospitality, however, is not simply the recognition (and therefore a conditional recognition) of this universal human feature.

The conservative would reject Kant's argument on the grounds that reason could not be shown to be absolutely about the truth, nor is it common to all humanity (it is but a closed system of social convention). It is not evident this objection would refute Derrida's formulation, as it is not yet clear just what Derrida's formulation of A2 is.

10 Derrida's grounding

The very notion of unconditional hospitality is resistant to any attempt to ground it in argument; it must be absolutely unconditional. Derrida, however, does employ the notions of 'openness' and 'justice',⁴⁵ working on the principle that openness is always beneficially for nurturing justice. Unconditional hospitality encourages openness, and, since all humans have a duty to be just, all humans have a duty to be unconditionally hospitable.

This grounding, we must note, is an absolutely ethical, not at all a political argument.

11 Analysis of Derrida's grounding

The understanding of humanity exposed in Derrida's grounding is fundamentally opposed to the conservative.

The conservative understanding is thus:

⁴²Ibid. p. 71.

⁴³Derrida [2] pp. 278–94

⁴⁴Ibid. p. 280.

⁴⁵Lawlor [7].

A human being is a being of prejudice.

Something very precise is meant by this seemingly vague statement: a human being's mentality is one built on an essential disjunction of '*Them*' and '*Us*'.

The *Us* is an other considered (by the subject) both as a human individual and as an essential part of its own humanity; the *Us* is a result of the mutually reliant and cohesive relationship of society. The *Us* is single identity for a multitude (an identity to which the subject considers themselves to absolutely belong). The subject must then consider all *Us* as the same, meaning the same as themselves and therefore as human beings.

The conservative thinks it is this relationship of the *Us* that is the source of empathy and therefore ethics (Rousseau grounds his ethical theory in humanity's innate ability to pity⁴⁶). I think this is intuitive. Empathy with our friends, community and family is a primary, if not the only, source of ethically good acts, great and mundane.

On the contrary, the *Them* are considered to the subject as subhuman beings. By definition, the *Them* (whoever the *Them* might be) are not, and can never be, like or part of the subject (and thus are absolutely alien from it) and, as a consequence, cannot be human in the same way (they are dehumanised in the subject's mind). Empathy, the relation to another as to oneself, is hence impossible.

It is this relationship (of the subject to the *Them*) that is the root for almost every despicable human act directed towards another human being; for what person could abide genocide or the like (which they undoubtedly have) without being completely disassociated from the victims of that atrocity? A lack of empathy (and therefore, seemingly, a lack of ethics) is immensely dangerous.

It is for this very reason that the *Them*, though they may be docile for the present, are held in constant contempt by the conservative subject. For the subject is always aware of his own apathy and hence his own ability to be immensely harmful to *Them* and thus he presumes that the *Them* is equally apathetic and able to be equally immensely harmful to the *Us*. The subject hence remains continually vigilant in his hostility – his fresh antipathy – to the *Them*.

All I have said of the conservative view up to this point would seemingly support Derrida's argument for openness. Let us assume what is meant by

⁴⁶Rousseau [10] p. 61.

‘openness’ is the complete expansion of the *Us* to include all of humanity, annihilating the *Them* and the disjunction with all despicable acts.

But this is misguided, for we have noted the disjunction was the source of empathy as well as antipathy. To destroy the *Them* would also destroy the *Us*. Any attempt to break the hostility towards the *Them* is also an attempt to break down the loving bonds of the *Us*. Derrida’s unconditional subject does not associate the *Other* with the *Them* or the *Us*; they simply accept them in a non-prejudicial way. Thus, his subject fails to recognise the *Us* as well as the *Them*.

Maybe this disjunction is too simplistic an account of the conservative’s vision. But I certainly think the main sentiment convincing: if we accept the *Us* (that being the *Us* of community, friends and family) as a, if not the, good – an ethical good – must we not protect it? The principle of preservation hence derives an ethical grounding here. Openness, or even justice as fairness, given this, is not considered ethical. We have lost all duty to be open or just. The conservative, from his point of view, sees no ethical, nor political, incentive to act in a charitable way (or even in a just way) towards the *Other*. It does not matter if conditional hospitality is simply a deferred hostility; it is an articulation of his fundamental antipathy. I have rooted this in the conservative’s essential conception of what constitutes a human being.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show in this essay that this conflict (a conflict about just what a human being is) is the essential distinction between conditional and unconditional hospitality.

References

- [1] Derrida, J. (2000) *Of Hospitality*, R. Bowlby (trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- [2] Derrida, J. (1967) *Writing and Difference*, A. Bass (trans.). London: Routledge.
- [3] Homer (2011) *Odyssey*, T.E. Lawrence (trans.). London: Harper Press.
- [4] Kant, I. (1993) *Critique of Pure Reason*, V. Politis (ed., trans.). London: Everyman’s Library.

- [5] Kant, I. (2012) *Groundwork for The Metaphysical Morals*, M. Gregor (ed., trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [6] Kant, I. (1913) *Perpetual Peace: a Philosophical Essay*, M. Campbell Smith (ed., trans.). London: George Allen & Unwin.
- [7] Lawlor, L. (2011) 'Jacques Derrida', in E.N. Zalta (ed.) *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [Online] Available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/derrida/>
- [8] Locke, J. (2009) *Two Treatises on Government: A translation into Modern English*, L.F. Abbott (trans.). Manchester: Industrial Systems Research.
- [9] Plato (1997) *Euthyphro*, in J. Cooper & D. Hutchinson (eds.), *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- [10] Rousseau, J. (1993) *The Social Contract and The Discourses*, G.D.H. Cole (trans.). London: Everyman's Library.
- [11] United States Declaration of Independence (1776).
- [12] Zukić, N. (2009) 'My Neighbor's Face and Similar Vulgarities', in *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 5(5).

Critically Assess Nagel’s Defence of the Claim that “... the World is not our World, even Potentially”*

Madeleine Hyde
University of York

Introduction

In *The View from Nowhere*, Nagel defends a form of realism: that “in a very strong sense, the world extends beyond the reach of our minds”.¹ He is opposing idealism in terms of the idea that reality only extends as far as what we as human beings could possibly conceive of. Against this, Nagel argues that reality might extend beyond even our *possible* realms of thought. Despite admitting that this is an unverifiable statement, Nagel holds that it is nevertheless one that we can make sense of.

In this essay I will focus on two of Nagel’s arguments from his chapter titled ‘Thought and Reality’: in Section 1, his argument by analogy; and in Section 2, his argument against Davidson. As I will demonstrate, the case Nagel presents us with is not strong enough for us to give up on the possibility of idealism in favour of his unverifiable realist view. In presenting a case for why we should be reluctant to hold onto claims that can never be verified, I will appeal in Section 3 to Dummett’s comments on how our inability to place a truth-value on propositions for which the truth-conditions can never be met brings us to question how they could be significantly asserted. As a result, I will conclude that Nagel’s realist claim, in virtue of being unverifiable, is essentially a non-starter.

1 Nagel’s Argument from Analogy for Realism

One way in which Nagel defends his version of realism is by appealing to an argument from analogy. The argument begins with the suggestion that things may be incomprehensible to us because we lack the capacity to understand

*Delivered at the BUPS Spring Conference 2014 in April at the University of Sheffield.

¹Nagel [4] p. 90.

them, in the same way that a congenitally blind man cannot form a conception of colour in the way that we can. Nagel then asks us to compare our world to an imaginary world in which we coexist with humans that all have the mental age of nine. The nine-year-old humans are restricted as to how much of reality they can conceive of. By comparing their experience to ours, we can see how *our* constitution might be such that we are living in a world which has features that are beyond our capacity for understanding. We can further imagine a world in which we coexist with a more intelligent race that understands aspects of the world that we cannot. This world provides an even clearer picture of how we might be such that we could never reach a complete understanding of reality.

However, there is an important difference between imagining the world of nine-year-olds and questioning our own conceptual limitations. In imagining a world containing humans with a limited mental capacity compared to ours, we use ourselves as the standard against which to make this comparison. Similarly, when we compare the congenitally blind man's understanding of colour to ours, we are comparing his conceptual capacity against our own standard. When we try to see the limitations of our own understanding of reality, however, we have no higher beings against which to make such a comparison. We can indeed imagine a world in which we coexist with beings that have a better conception of reality than we do. However, positing such beings does not actually aid our understanding of our own world. As far as we know, ours is the best possible conception that an intelligent being could have of this world. Any talk of future human understanding, or the possibility of discovering a more intelligent alien race is *speculative* at this point. It seems to me that the argument from analogy does not actually substantiate Nagel's claim that that reality necessarily extends beyond the limits of human conception. Its consequences, I think, are still idealist: it leaves us with the fact that the bounds of human conception remain the highest standard against which to judge how accurately our thoughts match up with the world. Nagel himself admits that he is working with an unverifiable contingency in making this claim. The idea that humans might know everything about reality is not ruled out, thus idealism remains a genuine possibility.

2 Nagel's Argument against Davidson's Idealism about Truth

Part of Nagel's defence of his realist position lies in his criticism of a form of idealism that he attributes to Davidson. Davidson's theory of meaning includes the idea that all we know of truth simply *is* the sum total of propositions that we could assert to be true. This includes sentences in other languages that

say true things about the world, if we are able to successfully translate them. One consequence of this, as Nagel takes it, is that we end up saying that ‘inconceivables’ are actually things that we can think about, and hence are conceivable after all. For example, when we say something like ‘things exist that we cannot conceive of’, we are applying the general idea of ‘existence’, which is a notion that we can make sense of. In Davidson’s terms, if we understand a language, we know what objects fall under the concept of ‘existence’ by using Tarski-style axioms. As a result, the notion of something being inconceivable becomes incoherent, because anything that we can apply concepts to remains within the bounds of what we can make sense of linguistically, and what we can assert is coextensive with the limits of our conception.

In order for Nagel to uphold that there are actually things that we cannot make sense of, even in such a general way, he would have to reject Davidson’s whole system of language and thought. To justify this, Nagel tries to show that Davidson’s doctrine has paradoxical conclusions² by returning to his analogy of the world containing only humans with a mental age of nine. If one of these nine-year-olds were a realist, they would be right, because reality does actually extend beyond their conception. If another nine-year-old were a Davidsonian, however, they would be wrong, for the same reason. Yet, according to Davidson’s doctrine, a nine-year-old Davidsonian would still be right in this scenario, hence what we have here is a paradoxical conclusion.

The conclusion of this analogy, I argue, is no paradox, but rather a straightforward conflict between realism and idealism. The realist nine-year-old is right in this case because we know that they have a limited conception of the world they live in because we can observe this. The Davidsonian nine-year-old is not wrong from the point of view of the nine-year-old humans. Their conception of truth cannot transcend what they know to be true: that’s just how truth works.

The problem with Nagel’s argument here, then, is twofold. First, the analogy asks us to move from an imaginary world, in which we know for a fact that reality goes beyond the bounds of possible human conception, to our world in which we have no way of ever knowing this. The nine-year-old humans have no conclusive reason to believe that reality extends beyond their conception of it; equally, nor do we. Secondly, Nagel begs the question in his rejection of Davidson’s conception of truth. Of course, if we accept that we can meaningfully speak about things that we hold to be true or to exist outside of what

²Nagel [4] p. 95.

we know to be true or to exist, then we can say that there are things that exist that are just inconceivable to us in a way that excludes them from the category of ‘things that we can understand’. We would have to reject Davidson’s picture of language in order to accept Nagel’s conclusion that the nine-year-old Davidsonian is wrong to hold that truth *as he sees it* cannot exceed the totality of sentences that he knows are true in his or any translatable language.

3 How could an Unverifiable Proposition be Meaningful?

Before concluding this essay, I will address a problem for Nagel’s realist claim that arises from his discussion on a form of idealism in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. As a sketch: Nagel reads Wittgenstein as arguing that meaningful assertions are only possible against a background of agreement within a linguistic community. Nagel’s realist claim cannot work within this picture of language, as its subject matter transcends lived experience, and thus cannot be agreed upon within a linguistic community.

Nagel thinks that this conflict cannot be directly resolved, but instead rejects Wittgenstein’s picture of language altogether, on the basis that it has absurd consequences. What interests me here is less the fact that this is an unsatisfying response, but rather the fact that its explanation illuminates a potential problem for his realist claim. For Nagel, the absurd consequences of Wittgenstein’s picture lie in his ideas about rule-following, particularly with reference to Kripke’s reading, in which the infinite application of any rule is impossible because there is nothing in my mind that can perform it. Instead, all rule-following amounts to is applying a rule, correctly or incorrectly, as we mean to carry on. As Kripke takes it, this is an argument from Wittgenstein towards his sceptical conclusion that “the entire idea of meaning vanishes”.³ This is unacceptable on Nagel’s terms, as the idea that propositions that require infinite application (which are, by their nature, unverifiable) can be meaningful is necessary for Nagel to uphold his realist claim. If an unverifiable proposition is necessarily meaningless, then we cannot make sense of Nagel’s realist claim.

I think there is a genuine worry here concerning how unverifiable propositions can be significant. This worry is addressed by Dummett in *The Seas of Language*. If the verifiability of a proposition (as a central notion of truth) lies in knowing whether or not its truth-conditions could obtain, we appear to be confronted with a problem when it comes to propositions for which this is

³Kripke [3] p. 22.

not, even theoretically, possible. Propositions like those that use a universal quantifier over an infinite domain, or whose truth-conditions refer “to regions of space-time in principle inaccessible to us”,⁴ transcend the practical ability of any speaker to know their truth-value. Hence, on this theory of meaning, such propositions cannot have a determinate truth-value, because determining a truth-value relies on whether or not this can actually be decided. As a result, unverifiable statements cannot be taken to be significant assertions of the same class as other truth-apt propositions.

Moreover, what does the idea that there are things we cannot ever conceive of actually add to our conception of the world? I would say that, by definition, it adds nothing at all. As Nagel sees it, denying that reality can only co-extend with the farthest reaches of human knowledge shows ‘humility’. Yet we cannot even begin to conceive what this world *would be like*. All that the realist claim can appeal to is our imagination. Nagel’s claim cannot even provide a conception of what the obtaining of its truth-conditions would look like. As such, and in light of Dummett’s comments on the matter, Nagel’s realist claim is arguably vacuous as a proposition.

How might someone respond to the claim that an unverifiable statement is meaningless in this way? One could raise Gödel’s incompleteness theorems as counter-examples, given that they both show inherent limitations in the axioms of mathematics, such that there are true statements in mathematics which can be neither proved nor refuted. Gödel’s theorems certainly appear to give cases of unverifiable propositions that are widely accepted as true. My response would then be to pose the question of whether or not such truths in mathematics should be considered in the same way as purported truths about the world, as the two have been frequently treated separately throughout the history of philosophy. This can be seen, for example, in Kant’s claim that mathematical judgments are knowable as synthetic *a priori* judgments. This means that we cannot judge the truth of mathematical propositions from our experience of the world or by definition alone; in contrast to empirical facts, which are knowable *a posteriori*. Kant argues that calculating the truth-value of mathematical propositions is something of a quasi-perceptual experience involving the use of our pure intuitions of space and time. Mathematical propositions, on Kant’s picture at least, are treated differently from facts about the world.

Is this distinction enough to allow us to discard Gödel’s incompleteness theorems as genuine counterexamples to my rejection of Nagel’s realist claim? I

⁴Dummett [2] p. 15.

think it is sufficient as a basis for an argument which allows us to maintain that Nagel's unverifiable claim is meaningless. Part of what emerges from Dummett's comments is that there are different kinds of propositions besides those which are conclusively 'true' or 'false'. Unverifiable propositions, which have no determinate truth-value, can be significant in disciplines like mathematics which are, as Gödel demonstrated, by nature incomplete. However, I do not think that we should accept unverifiable propositions about the world like Nagel's in the same way. It is because they purport to tell us something about the world, yet are incapable of doing so, that their lack of truth-value is problematic. Gödel's incompleteness theorems, then, are not devastating counter-examples to my argument, but have instead helped us to make a distinction between claims like Nagel's and claims to which we can successfully apply truth-value.

Conclusion

My criticism of Nagel began with the fact that his argument from analogy fails to successfully apply its conclusions to our world, because in our world we have no higher standard against which to compare our conception of the world. This was also a problem when Nagel tried to defeat an idealist consequence of Davidson's conception of truth by placing the realist/idealist debate into the world of nine-year-old humans. The fact that we, as onlookers, can see that the nine-year-old realist is coincidentally right that there is more to the world than their conception of it does not make realism any more reasonable a claim *for them to hold*. For all the nine-year-old humans know, the nine-year-old Davidsonian could be right.

The sceptical conclusion of Wittgenstein's rule-following argument (on a Kripkean reading), which Nagel considers to be an absurd consequence of Wittgenstein's picture of language, has interesting consequences for Nagel's realism. In light of Dummett's comments also, I think that the problem remains of how a realist claim, as wholly unverifiable, could hold any significance. I agree with Dummett that we should not readily accept unverifiable assertions, as far as they purport to have a determinate truth-value. Given that we have no notion of how the truth-conditions of Nagel's claim might even possibly obtain, it is essentially meaningless, as it cannot ever fulfil its basic promise: to tell us something about the world. Nagel's claim that "... the world is not our world,

even potentially”⁵ is both unverifiable and unfalsifiable. Moreover, it is not successfully supported by his arguments from analogy or against Davidson’s form of idealism about language. As such, I conclude that Nagel’s realist claim is a non-starter.

References

- [1] Davidson, D. (1984) *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [2] Dummett, M. (1993) *The Seas of Language*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- [3] Kripke, S. (1982) *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. Harvard University Press.
- [4] Nagel, T. (1986) *The View from Nowhere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [5] Wittgenstein, L. (2009) *Philosophical Investigations*, G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker & J. Schulte (trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.

⁵Nagel [4] p. 108.

‘City in Words’: Hermeneutic analysis of Plato’s *Republic**

Lukas Clark-Memler

University of Otago, New Zealand

When he [Plato] was about to die, he saw in a dream that he had become a swan and was going from tree to tree, and in this manner he caused the greatest trouble for the bird-catchers. Simmias the Socratic judged that Plato would elude those after him who wished to interpret him. For the interpreters who attempt to hunt out what the ancients had in mind are similar to bird-catchers, but Plato is elusive because it is possible to hear and understand his words in many ways, both physically, and ethically, and theologically, and *literally*.¹

Nothing is accidental in a Platonic dialogue; everything is necessary at the place where it occurs.²

Sir Thomas More begins his *Utopia* with an epigraph acknowledging the influence of Plato: “Plato’s *Republic* now I claim, to match, or beat at its own game; for that was just a myth in prose.”³ More coined the term ‘utopia’ from the Greek *ou* (‘no’) and *topos* (‘place’): utopia is literally ‘no place.’ But the etymology of utopia is not so straightforward, for the homophonic Greek prefix *eu* (‘good’) can be equally applied to the word; More was a satirist and recognised the ambiguity of the term. Thus, the Western tradition of interpreting Plato’s *Republic* as a utopia is problematic.

Should we consider the constitution of the *Republic* to be a blueprint for an ideal political state, or is it merely a ‘myth in prose,’ a ‘city in words?’⁴

*Delivered at the BUPS Spring Conference 2014 in April at the University of Sheffield.

¹Olympiodorus [31] Book II lines 156–162, emphasis added. Olympiodorus was a 6th century Neoplatonist who taught at the school of Alexandria.

²Strauss [45] p. 60.

³More [30] vi (“Lines on the Island of Utopia”).

⁴Plato regularly refers to the *Kallipolis* (city of the Republic) as a ‘city in words’ – [34] 369c, 592a; [33] 739c. From the Greek ‘*en logōi*’ – best translated to ‘in words’ (though some versions of the *Republic* translate it to ‘in theory’ or ‘in speech’).

The orthodoxy holds that Plato's political proposals in the *Republic* are sincere; this interpretation is strengthened by the clear designation of the *Laws* as a 'second-best'⁵ constitution. However, this reading does not take into account the structural subtleties of the *Republic* and close examination of both dialogues finds the standard 'literalist' interpretation lacking on many levels. I propose a new interpretation of Plato's *Republic*, based on the unity and 'form' of the dialogue as a whole.

The purpose of this inquiry is manifold. By considering the flaws in 'literalist' interpretations of the *Republic*, I can defend Plato from allegations of totalitarianism. Through hermeneutic analysis of the Platonic corpus, I will show the importance of 'action' in the dialogues. And by considering the structural symmetry of the *Republic*, I can make the impressive claim that the dialogue itself is a concrete example of 'dialectic.'⁶ So understood, the *Republic* does not offer a blueprint for political reform, and should not be interpreted literally as representing Plato's ideal state.

The task at hand is of no small importance. Considering the influence of Plato and his *Republic* on Western thought,⁷ the possibility of two thousand years of misinterpretation is indeed alarming. I must ensure that my argument is clear and comprehensive. Because of the inherently esoteric nature of such an inquiry, the potential for convolution is great; I proceed to outline the essay in appropriate detail. I will begin by discussing the totalitarian implications of the 'literalist' reading, highlighting the danger of misinterpretation. I will then analyse the relationship between the *Republic* and the *Laws*, focusing on the oft-quoted 'second-best' passage of the latter. After showing that the *Kallipolis* is not Plato's ideal constitution, I will begin to develop a new interpretation of the *Republic*, based largely on the structure and form of the dialogue. The second section of the essay considers the 'action' of the dialogue; I contend that the central theme of the *Republic* is exemplified by the actions of its charac-

⁵Plato [33] 739a-e.

⁶'*Dialectic*' is the ultimate philosophical activity that leads the capable student to an ineffable vision of the Forms. While Socrates regularly mentions the power of *dialectic*, he does not offer any comprehensive guide to the *method* of dialectical inquiry. In Book VII of the *Republic*, Socrates describes *dialectic*: "whenever someone tries through argument and apart from all sense perceptions to find the being itself of each thing and doesn't give up until he grasps the good itself with understanding itself. . . dialectic is the only inquiry that travels this road, doing away with hypotheses and proceeding to the first principle itself" (Plato [34] 532a-533e).

⁷"The safest general characterisation of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato" (Whitehead [48] p. 39).

ters.⁸ The third and final section of this inquiry concentrates on the structural symmetry, or ‘form’ of the *Republic*. Upon close reading, we find that Plato uses the various topics of the dialogue to demonstrate *dialectic* at work; as the text progresses, we witness the ascent of the Divided Line to the Good itself, and the subsequent attempt to use the Forms to impose order on the ‘sensible world’. This interpretation takes heed of Friedrich Schleiermacher’s maxim that Plato’s “form and content are inseparable”.⁹ And it respects Plato’s great premeditation in composing the dialogue.¹⁰

1

A literal interpretation of the *Republic* naturally leads to accusations of totalitarianism. The absolute rule of the philosopher-kings and the ‘noble lie’ have lead philosophers like Richard Crossman to claim that the *Republic* is, “the most savage and the most profound attack upon liberal ideas which history can show.”¹¹ Indeed the rigid autocracy and propagandistic indoctrination of the *Republic* were echoed in the dictatorial regimes of Hitler and Stalin.¹² Karl Popper, too, is critical of Plato: “I believe that Plato’s political program, far from being morally superior to totalitarianism, is fundamentally identical with it.”¹³ Yet neither Popper nor Crossman consider the fact that the political

⁸A survey of the Platonic corpus finds that this ‘self-referential’ nature is common – I will use the *Meno* as an example of the dialogue ‘acting’ on its characters.

⁹Lamm [27] p. 103. At this point, I should acknowledge the range of renowned Plato scholars that this interpretation is influenced by. Schleiermacher’s insistence to view Plato as both an ‘artist and a philosopher’ greatly enhanced my perspective. Strauss’ hermeneutic techniques were of much use in this inquiry, as was the work of translators Allan Bloom and James Adam, who both rejected the notion that the *Republic* is a sincere political treatise. Robert Brumbaugh and Drew Hyland’s unique views on Plato were also significant to the development of my interpretation.

¹⁰Ibid. p. 73. Further evidence that supports the view that Plato’s composition of the *Republic* was exhaustively premeditated and deliberate, comes from Dionysius of Halicarnassus. In his *On Literary Composition* he notes that, “Doubtless the stories about the man’s love of labour are familiar to every lover of speeches, especially, among others, the one about the tablet which they say was discovered when he died, with the beginning of the *Republic* set down in manifold ways” (Roberts [38] p. 25).

¹¹Crossman [14] p. 92.

¹²Ibid. p. 9. Crossman deems the *Republic* a “handbook for aspiring dictators”.

¹³Popper [36] p. 84. Bertrand Russell approved of Popper’s criticism of Plato, writing in an introduction to Popper’s text that the “attack on Plato, while unorthodox, is in my opinion thoroughly justified”. Russell is also critical of Plato – in his magnum opus *History of Western*

proposals of the *Republic* are insincere and should not be taken literally.

Before I can discuss my interpretation of the *Republic*, I must dispel the belief that the *Kallipolis* is Plato's ideal political constitution. Many scholars see the *Laws* as representing a revised, more practical manifestation of the *Republic*'s 'utopia', and that Plato's "faith in enlightened absolutism" waned in the years between the composition of the two dialogues.¹⁴ This school of thought contends that Plato abandoned the *Kallipolis* in favour of Magnesia:¹⁵ the more refined, albeit pessimistic, constitution of the *Laws*. To explain the doctrinal development, scholars point to the downfall of Sparta,¹⁶ as well as Plato's failure at Syracuse in educating Dionysius II. This interpretation is attractive, since Plato's ostensible political maturity matches the chronological order of his political dialogues. The *Republic* comes first, as the optimistic, idealistic utopia, where a young Plato builds a transcendental society from the ground up, relying only on the Forms. This is followed by the *Statesman*, which gives the idealistic principles of the *Kallipolis* a practical dimension; and finally, the *Laws*, a comprehensive guide to legislation in the ideal society, where divine philosophising is eschewed for practical policy. However, the problem with this interpretation is that it presupposes the *Republic* to be a sincere political model; this is a position that must be challenged.

The obvious refutation of the 'literalist' interpretation is that the constitution of the *Republic* is too politically naïve to be taken seriously; for to "suppose that Plato ever thought that the *Republic* was attainable would be to suppose him capable not merely of optimism or idealism but of sheer political naïveté".¹⁷ However, the problem with an 'insincere' reading of the *Republic* – allowing that Platonic irony leads to a non-literal interpretation – is that the *Laws* explicitly discusses only the 'second-best' state: "The state which we

Philosophy, he aims to treat Plato "with as little reverence as if he were a contemporary English or American advocate of totalitarianism" ([41] p. 109). Yet we should be reluctant to take Russell's criticism seriously, for he also attacks Plato on theistic grounds (he uses the Benjamin Jowett translation that inaccurately refers to God); since we now know that Jowett was mistaken in his translation – nowhere in the text does Plato mention a god – Russell's critique is misguided.

¹⁴Vlastos [46] p. 216.

¹⁵'Magnesia' is the name that Plato gives to the constitution discussed in the *Laws* – in the dialogue, Magnesia is to be established in an abandoned part of Crete.

¹⁶In 371 BCE, Sparta was defeated by Thebes at the Battle of Leuctra, ending Spartan supremacy in Ancient Greece. Because Plato was influenced by Laconian society, the decline of Sparta may have led him to revise the *Republic*.

¹⁷Saunders [33] p. 28.

have now in hand [Magnaesia], when created. . . takes the second place”.¹⁸ This leads the ‘literalist’ school to claim that the *Kallipolis* is Plato’s *ideal* society and Magnesia is simply the closest any human could come to replicating the perfect model. Analysis of the aforesaid passage reveals the error in this judgement.

The Athenian Stranger¹⁹ describes in detail that the best state will be one of absolute communism: property, family, and honour will be shared by *all* citizens.²⁰ To conclude from this statement that Plato endorses the constitution of the *Kallipolis* is to misinterpret the Athenian’s words. In the *Republic*, Plato restricts communism to the guardians (philosopher-kings and auxiliaries); he allows the ‘third class’ of merchants and producers to have private property. Sir Ernest Barker considers the *Kallipolis* to be only “half communism”.²¹ The ideal constitution presented in the *Laws* is ‘full communism,’ in which *all* citizens share *everything*. Plato scholar Christopher Bobonich discusses this distinction:

The *Laws* passage presents as the ‘first-best’ city, not that of the *Republic*, but one in which there is, throughout the entire city,

¹⁸Plato [33] 739e.

¹⁹The fact that it is an ‘Athenian Stranger’ and not Socrates that dominates the *Laws* is a significant point, and strengthens the argument that the *Republic* is not a sincere political dialogue. Many scholars, including Aristotle, simply consider the Athenian to be an incarnation of Socrates, but this is false reasoning. Strauss examines this situation: “The emphatically political character of the *Laws* would seem to explain why that work is the only Platonic dialogue in which Socrates does not participate, for Socrates was prevented by his *daimonion* [‘voice of the *daimon*’] from engaging in political activity” ([44] p. 1). In the *Apology* (31c–32a) Socrates describes his *daimon* as an inner voice that alerts him when he is making a bad decision: “It is a voice, and whenever it speaks it turns me away from something I am about to do”. If the *Republic* were a political dialogue, then it follows that Socrates’ *daimon* would have prevented him from participating in the discussion. We should not underestimate the importance of character in the Platonic dialogues. Scholars who believe that the Athenian Stranger is Socrates, point to the passage in Plato’s *Crito*, where Socrates alludes to the fact that Crete is the one place he would go *if* he were to escape from his cell (the *Laws* takes place in Crete).

²⁰The best state is one where, “there is observed as carefully as possible throughout the whole State the old saying that ‘friends have all things really in common’ . . . In which there is community of wives, children, and all chattels, and all that is called ‘private’ is everywhere and by every means rooted out of our life, and so far as possible it is contrived that even things naturally ‘private’ have become in a way ‘communised’ . . . No one will ever lay down another definition that is truer or better than these conditions” (Plato [33] 739b–d). See Sir Ernest Barker [4] p. 370, for an in-depth discussion on the ‘three grades of constitutions’ – the best is that of absolute communism, the second-best is Magnesia, and the third best involves all actual constitutions that are closest in kind to Magnesia. The *Kallipolis* is not even on the list.

²¹*Ibid.* Also see footnote 1 to pages 370–71.

a community of property and of women and children. So the claim that the city sketched in the *Laws* is second-best does not suggest that the *Republic* still represents Plato's ideal political arrangement. What the *Laws* represents as the ideal... is a city in which *all* citizens are subject to the same extremely high ethical demands.²²

Advocates of the 'literalist' interpretation can no longer use the *Laws* as evidence that the *Republic* is a sincere constitutional model. Comparative analysis of the two dialogues shows that Plato instead believed absolute communism to be the ultimate political ideal; the 'second-best' constitution of the *Laws* is his "practical utopia."²³ I can now comfortably reject readings that hold the *Laws* to be an expression of "senescent disenchantment" or "senile aberration" or that it is "the outcome of a change in Plato's views about human nature."²⁴ Only when Plato's *Kallipolis* is considered to be a sincere political model does it follow that his political theory changed as he aged.

But if the *Republic* is not a blueprint for an ideal society, then what is it about?²⁵ This section of the essay has been largely *elenchic*. In the spirit of Socrates, I have revealed the flaws in common interpretations of the *Republic*; in doing so, I have forced the 'literalist' to renounce her belief and the conceit of knowledge. In the next two sections of the essay, I will develop a new interpretation based on the structure and 'form' of the dialogue: starting with the 'action' thesis, and concluding with a discussion of *dialectic*.

²²Bobonich [6] pp. 11–12 (emphasis added).

²³Moore [29] p. 82.

²⁴Strauss [44] vii; Dodds [15] p. 216; Saunders [33] p. 545.

²⁵There are a myriad of 'positive' interpretations of the *Republic* that do not involve a sincere political constitution. Many consider the dialogue to simply be an exaggerated, shocking statement; a catalyst for political discussion. The Roman philosopher Cicero would subscribe to this reading: "Plato has given us a description of a city, rather to be desired than expected; and he has made out not such a one as can really exist, but one in which the principles of political affairs may be discerned" (Cicero [12], *De re publica*, Book II, Chapter XXX). The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau considered the *Republic* to be a text on educational reform – in *Emile* he writes: "Do you want to get an idea of public education? Read Plato's *Republic*. It is not at all a political work, as think those who judge books only by their titles. It is the most beautiful educational treatise ever written" ([39] p. 40).

2

There is a tendency in contemporary Plato scholarship to see the dialogue form as a hindrance to philosophical clarity. But to isolate the doctrine from the dialogue is to underestimate the importance of ‘form’ in Plato’s writing; such an act ignores the great premeditation of Plato’s composition. We should acknowledge Schleiermacher’s insight that in the Platonic dialogue each sentence can only be correctly understood in its place.²⁶ Hegel’s claim, that scholars must “separate the form . . . in which Plato has propounded his ideas . . . from philosophy as such in him,”²⁷ represents the modern error of anachronistic interpretation. Leo Strauss abjures this variety of analysis and recognizes the “logographic necessity of every part.”²⁸ In *The City and Man*, Strauss outlines his hermeneutic principle:

One cannot understand Plato’s teaching as he meant it if one does not know what the Platonic dialogue is. One cannot separate the understanding of Plato’s teaching from the understanding of the form in which it is presented. One must pay as much attention to the *how* as to the *what* . . . one must even pay greater attention to the ‘form’ than to the ‘substance,’ since the meaning of the ‘substance’ depends on the ‘form’.²⁹

In light of this assertion, I will consider the ‘action’ of the dialogues and how it contributes to the overall meaning. Close examination of the Platonic corpus reveals that the characters of the dialogues exemplify the abstract themes that they discuss. In this way, the dialogues are fundamentally reflexive and self-referential. The Straussian distinction between ‘speech’ and ‘deed’ clarifies this aspect of the dialogue form. The speech of the characters is analogous to the ‘substance’ of the dialogue (the various Platonic doctrines), but the ‘deeds’ involve the traits of the participants, the manners in which their conversations arise, and the development of character.³⁰

²⁶Rhodes [37] p. 73.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Strauss [45] p. 52.

²⁹Ibid. Strauss’s hermeneutics are essential in understanding Plato, and we can ignore his obscurantism without affecting our interpretation.

³⁰Strauss [45] pp. 58–61.

An example of this relation will make this thesis clear. In Plato's *Meno*, the eponymous interlocutor demands an answer to the question, "can virtue be taught?". Socrates considers the various positions of the argument – the Gorgian method of didactic instruction,³¹ or the virtuous man teaching by example – but ultimately ends up in *aporia*.³² *Meno* is an excellent example of Socratic *elenchus* at work, but 'Meno's Paradox'³³ remains unsolved at the finish. While the substance of the dialogue results in no clear conclusion, the form and action of the dialogue shed light on the central theme; while Plato does not define virtue, he *shows* us virtue.

Over the course of the dialogue we witness the transformation of Meno from irritable and rude, to calm, wise and indeed virtuous. At the outset, Meno rashly accuses Socrates of intentional deception,³⁴ and interrupts him with frustrated comments; there is little harmony in the conversation. However, towards the end of the dialogue, after Socrates' experiment with Meno's slave, there is a clear shift in attitude. Meno improves in courtesy, wisdom and temperance; he becomes more agreeable and is better able to follow the discussion. From the action of the dialogue we learn that there is at least one way of teaching virtue: Socratic inquiry. The drama, characters and form of *Meno* answer the central question, while the substance (the 'doctrine') is inconclusive. Such is the power of the Platonic dialogue.

This is the first important aspect of my interpretation of the *Republic*: the dialogue itself 'acts' on the characters; there is an intrinsic relation of action and theme. For an obvious example of this effect, consider Socrates' 'taming' of Thrasymachus in Book I. We are introduced to Thrasymachus the Sophist by way of metaphor: "He coiled himself up like a wild beast about to spring,

³¹This is the standard Sophist position of pragmatism – 'virtue' can be taught, if virtue is understood as the practical means of 'getting ahead in life.'

³²*Aporia* is a situation typical in the Platonic dialogues, where Socrates objects to all definitions but fails to offer one himself. It is a 'negative' position where *elenchic* deconstruction results only in confusion.

³³"Man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know ... He cannot search for what he knows – since he knows it, there is no need to search – nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for" (Plato [32] *Meno*, 80e).

³⁴"O Socrates... you are casting your spells over me, and I am simply getting bewitched and enchanted, and am at my wits' end ... And I think that you are very wise in not voyaging and going away from home, for if you did ... you would be cast into prison as a magician" (Plato [32] *Meno*, 80a–c).

and he hurled himself at us as if to tear us to pieces.”³⁵ Thrasymachus forcibly enters the discussion and demands a definition of justice from Socrates (much like Meno). And while no conclusion is reached by the end of the first book, the temperament of Thrasymachus has softened.³⁶ His brief character arc is itself a model of justice. Through engaging in philosophical discussion, Thrasymachus becomes more reasonable and restrained.³⁷ The ‘wild beast’ is tamed by justice in action. Strauss writes that, “the first book surely does not teach what justice is, and yet by presenting Socrates’ taming of Thrasymachus as an act of justice, it lets us *see* justice.”³⁸

Similar results hold for the other characters of the *Republic*. While we are explicitly informed that the “city is the soul writ large”,³⁹ and that there is an isomorphism of city and soul, we can implicitly identify the three principal characters with the sections of the tripartite soul. Socrates is unequivocally wisdom embodied. Glaucon – ambitious, competitive and musical⁴⁰ – represents the ‘spirited’ part of the soul: he has all the personality traits characteristic of ‘*thumos*’. Glaucon is capable of abstract and theoretical discourse; it is he who discusses the Divided Line with Socrates in Book VI, and the cave and Forms in Book VII. Adeimantus can then be identified with the ‘appetitive’ section of the soul. He is concerned with empirical observations and concrete proof; he discusses the degeneration of the aristocrat to the tyrant and the problems of poetry.⁴¹

³⁵Plato [34] *Republic*, 336b.

³⁶To those that claim Thrasymachus has merely lost interest in the discussion and has given up on Socrates, I would point out that the transformation from angry abuse to apathetic calm is itself an impressive act of justice. Most modern prisons would consider such a transformation to indicate the success of the ‘justice system’.

³⁷At the end of Book I, Socrates thanks Thrasymachus for becoming more ‘gentle’ and ceasing harassment (Plato [34] *Republic*, 354a–c).

³⁸Strauss [45] p. 138 (emphasis added).

³⁹Plato [34] *Republic*, 368d–369b.

⁴⁰In Book III of the *Republic*, when the discussion turns to music, Adeimantus departs, and Glaucon is left to consider the intricacies of “words, harmonic mode, and rhythm”. When Glaucon asks which harmonies are “expressive of sorrow”, Socrates answers, “You tell me, since you’re musical” (398d–e). In Book VIII, Adeimantus claims that the timocratic man would be “very like Glaucon . . . as far as the love of victory is concerned”, to which Socrates responds, “He’d [the timocratic man] be more obstinate and less well trained in music and poetry” (548d–e).

⁴¹Consider the fact that Adeimantus is satisfied with the “city of pigs” and agrees that economic interests are the most important. The dialogue might have stopped there had Glaucon not interrupted with the desire to create a “luxurious city” (372a–373a): “It seems that you make

In the first half of the text (roughly, Books I–VI), there is a tension between the three characters. Glaucon derides Adeimantus and objects to much of what Socrates says. Adeimantus regularly interrupts to voice his dissatisfaction with the abstract nature of the discussion. But after the Divided Line and cave are explored, harmony descends on the trio. Humor takes the place of discord; the interlocutors no longer interrupt, Socrates no longer condescends. The three laugh together, and this transformation – from heated debate to amiable conversation – personifies the correct alignment of the tripartite soul (Socrates’ definition of justice from Book IV). While Socrates’ definition of justice makes use of a metaphorical city, Plato uses his characters to exemplify justice in the soul. The form of the dialogue and dramatic development are essential in interpreting the *Republic* accurately. Plato constructed a ‘city in words’ but the reader need only consider the character relations to see justice in action.

3

So much, so good, but the ‘action’ thesis does not explain why the *Kallipolis* dominates the dialogue, nor does it address the structural abnormalities of the text. I now move on to the second tenet of my interpretation: that the aesthetic symmetry of the *Republic* highlights the art of *dialectic*, and that instead of simply acting on the characters, the *Republic* ‘acts on’ the reader. In her popular work of Plato scholarship, *Platonic Ethics, Old and New*, Julia Annas questions why Plato wrote Books VIII through X, since the ‘ideal’ constitution has already been described, and justice in the soul and state identified, by Book VII.⁴²

The ‘literalist’ would indeed see the second half of the *Republic* as unnecessary and repetitive, and she would happily stop reading after the education of the philosopher-kings is adumbrated at the end of Book VII. In fact, the latter half of the dialogue is key to understanding the overall meaning. Reflection on the discussion topics of each book of the dialogue, and consideration of the themes synoptically, reveals a distinct aesthetic symmetry. At first this seems strange and erratic, and raises many questions: for instance, why does Plato abruptly return to poetry in Book X? While some translators, so unimpressed by the seemingly random digression, abandon conventional division of the

your people feast without any delicacies ... If you were founding a city for pigs ... wouldn't you fatten them on the same diet?" (Plato [34] *Republic*, 372c–d).

⁴²Annas [2]; Kamtekar [23].

books and opt for their own, more ‘logical’ order; we must remember that with Plato, “nothing is accidental”.⁴³

The dialogue begins with a descent (“I went down to the Piraeus”), and finishes with one too (Er’s descent to the underworld). This is the first instance of symmetry, and the ‘descents’ of the *Republic* characterise the structural pattern of the dialogue. The discussion then turns towards the topic of poetry and its role in the education of the guardians. But midway through the exchange Socrates claims that he “cannot settle the matter at present”,⁴⁴ and so the subject of poetry is postponed until the beginning of Book X. In Book IV, the tripartite soul is introduced and justice in the soul is defined. Once again, the same topic returns in Book IX with the haunting metaphor of the “many-headed beast”.⁴⁵ Book V is wholly concerned with detailing the constitution of the *Kallipolis*,⁴⁶ while in Book VIII, Socrates considers the degeneration of the state.

This structural pattern is certainly unusual: the introduction of a theme in the first half is balanced by a return to the same theme in the final half.⁴⁷ Why is there this thematic duplication that repeats topics in reversed order? We should note that the two treatments of the topics are not the same; by identifying the difference, we can begin to recognize the meaning and significance of the symmetry.

The first half of the dialogue is characterized by ascent:⁴⁸ definitions are given,

⁴³Strauss [45] p. 60. The passage continues, “Everything which would be accidental outside of the dialogue becomes meaningful within the dialogue”.

⁴⁴Plato [34] *Republic*, 392a.

⁴⁵Ibid. 588c–589c.

⁴⁶Note that Book V begins with an interruption from the long dormant Polemarchus. While Socrates begins to discuss the various kinds of constitutions (and corresponding souls), Polemarchus and Adeimantus demand that Socrates instead elaborate on the constitution of the *Kallipolis*. Socrates is once again pulled off track by the interlocutors; he returns to his original topic in Book VIII. Why are the interlocutors not ready to discuss the varieties of constitutions and souls? Because they have yet to fully grasp the abstract idea of the *Kallipolis* itself. They have yet to perceive the Good, and are not ready to incorporate concrete examples into the inquiry.

⁴⁷If we allocate numbers to the themes – justice is 1, poetry is 2, the soul is 3, and the state is 4 – we can clearly model the structural symmetry: 1-2-3-4-5-4-3-2-1. I have yet to discuss the axis of symmetry (the fifth topic), but the astute reader will be able to quickly identify it with the analogies of the Forms in Books VI and VII: the Sun, Divided Line, and Cave.

⁴⁸While I already acknowledged that the dialogue begins with a descent, it would in fact be more accurate to claim that it begins with an *ascent*. For Socrates begins his story after having already left Piraeus, and is walking back, *up*, to Athens when he is confronted by Polemarchus.

the state is erected, the discussion rises from ‘Becoming’ to ‘Being’; from the World of Appearances to the World of the Forms. In Books I-VII we may recognise an isomorphism between the levels of discussion and the stages of the Divided Line.⁴⁹

The latter half of the dialogue has the distinct feel of descent: the decay of the *Kallipolis* to the rule of tyranny, the fall of the ‘just’ man. The discerning reader should now ask the obvious question: which theme acts as the axis of symmetry? And such a reader should already know the answer, for the peak of the *Republic*’s ascension, the vertex of the Becoming-to-Being trajectory, the apotheosis of the inquiry, is the Good itself; a vision of the Forms marks the completion of the philosopher-king’s education.⁵⁰

As we read the *Republic* and consider the structural symmetry, we witness the power of *dialectic*. The first five books of the dialogue represent the ascent of the Divided Line – from *eikasia* to *noêsis*⁵¹ – the discussion centers on abstract ideas, without reference to concrete phenomena; the basic templates of justice, the soul, and the state are identified. And then we reach the pinnacle of philosophical inquiry with a vision of the ineffable Good; like the philosopher-kings, we marvel at the majesty of the sun, blinded by the light. But after perceiving the Forms, we must descend back into the cave. A fact that is most often overlooked in Platonic epistemology, is that the dialectical method is not completed once the Forms have been reached; that is only half the journey. For *dialectic* does not follow an upward sloping line, instead, it takes the shape of a parabola.⁵² In the words of classicist James Adam, “The dialectician’s progress involves both an ascent and a descent”.⁵³

The second half of the *Republic* is thus most important, for now that the ab-

⁴⁹Brumbaugh [11] p. 34.

⁵⁰“Quite literally, the Divided Line divides the dialogue, and what comes after it is illuminated by the vision of the intelligible world and its distinction from the sensible world” (Bremar [8] p. 78). Note that the Good (through analogy) is the only theme that does not get the double treatment.

⁵¹Plato [34] *Republic*, 509d–511e. The Divided Line, from bottom to top: *eikasia* (imagination), *pistis* (belief), *dianoia* (thought), *noêsis* (understanding).

⁵²More specifically, an upside-down parabola where the vertex is the Good, and the corresponding coordinates (sharing the same *y*-axis values, but differing *x*-axis values) form the ascending and descending curves.

⁵³Adam [1] p. 71. This passage is from Adam’s commentary on the *Republic* 511b: “Having grasped this principle [the Forms], it [*dialectic*] reverses itself and, keeping hold of what follows from it, comes *down* to a conclusion” (emphasis added).

stracted topics have been explored, the adequacy of the principles can be tested – empirically and existentially. The pure theorizing of Books I–VI is applied to the recalcitrant matter of the world in Books VIII–X. The Forms are the ordering principle of the sense world – they are what give shape and value to all material objects – but instead of merely describing this process, Plato *shows* it to us.

Consider the development of the *Republic*'s themes. The account of poetry changes from a meditation on meter and cadence, to the actual effect of *mimesis* on the soul. The tripartite soul is first identified using the law of non-contradiction, and three corresponding character types are clearly defined – each perfectly fitted for a role in the ‘tripartite society’ of the *Kallipolis*. Compare this to the description of the man, lion and hydra fighting for attention in Book IX; the neat divide of the soul is no longer appropriate once applied to physical beings. The abstract templates inform the sensible phenomena, but must be adapted and molded to accommodate the complexities of human nature.

In sum, the symmetry of the *Republic* is key to understanding the dialectical process of inquiry. The treatment of themes in the first half is marked by pure rationalism, with the elimination of factors not relevant to the creation of generalized principles. This is reversed in the second half, where focus is given to empirical and existential application. So understood, the *Republic* depicts *dialectic* in action, with an actual application of the Forms to the sensible realm – introducing order to the world, and harmony to the soul. Thus, to “read it as a practical political proposal is to miss its point”.⁵⁴

Because modern interpretation attempts to isolate a clear philosophical doctrine from the dialogue, the unity of the *Republic* as a whole has gone unappreciated; key aspects of the dialogue – the ‘action’ of the characters, drama, and dialectical process – have gone unnoticed. The Classical Greek audience would have been able to recognize the aesthetic symmetry of the text⁵⁵ and appreciate the irony of the political proposals, though this temperament had largely dissipated by the Hellenistic period. Modern readers ignore the importance of form, which leads to profound misinterpretations; it is absurd to take

⁵⁴Lewis [28]p. 245.

⁵⁵See Bremar [8] pp. 78–82, for a discussion on the ‘Golden Section’ and the mathematical temperament of Ancient Greece. Also consider ‘Plato’s Number’ – a “perfect number” that “controls better and worse births” (Plato [34] *Republic*, 546a–e) – famous for its detailed and complex equation that controls the birthing cycle. This highlights Plato’s expectation of mathematical and aesthetic competency in the original audience of the dialogue.

one section of the text (Books IV–V, the description of the *Kallipolis*), out of context, as the literal meaning of the *Republic*. When the dialogue is examined as a whole, it is obvious that Plato’s ‘utopia’ is an “incomplete abstraction, not a prudential blueprint”.⁵⁶

The ‘literalist’ school cannot explain why Plato repeats themes, but they clutch to a concrete doctrine, separating the ‘philosophy’ from the drama, desperate to taxonomize.⁵⁷ By focusing on specific sections of the *Republic*, it is easy to consider the text to be pessimistic – with its emphasis on the inherent instability of justice in the city and soul, and the perpetual danger of moral degeneration. But by interpreting the complete dialogue to be a detailed account of *dialectic*, we find Plato at his most hopeful. We are treated to a rare glimpse of the Good, and come to understand that “there is order to be found when we use the light of the ideal to view the actual”.⁵⁸

If my interpretation is correct, then Plato’s *Republic* should not be considered a work of political philosophy. The construction of the ‘city in words’ is simply a component of the dialectical inquiry; the political proposals themselves are of little importance to the overall meaning. Yet as an epistemological and metaphysical work, the *Republic* is the most important dialogue in the Platonic oeuvre, as it is the only account of *dialectic* in action. While other dialogues take an abstract theme up the Divided Line, only in his *Republic* does Plato use the Forms to impose order and harmony on the physical universe.

Due to the esotericism of hermeneutic analysis, the present inquiry may be insufficient in defending such a sweeping claim. But in developing a new interpretation of the *Republic*, I have honored the Platonic tradition by adding one more voice to a two and a half thousand year discussion; a discussion that began with a descent, and continues to progress towards the light.

⁵⁶Brumbaugh [11] p. 36. Only when read alongside the constitutions of Book VIII does the construction of the *Kallipolis* have any meaning; a certain ‘holistic completeness’ is an integral feature of Platonic philosophy, to isolate one ‘part’ of the ‘whole’ is to lose the overall meaning.

⁵⁷It has become standard in modern philosophy to taxonomize doctrines according to very specific criteria. The obsession with categorisation began with Aristotle and his rigid identification system. The difference in method of Plato and Aristotle cannot be overstated – we may be reminded of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s assertion that, “Every man is born an Aristotelian or a Platonist. I do not think it possible that anyone born an Aristotelian can become a Platonist; and I am sure that no born Platonist can ever change into an Aristotelian. They are two classes of man, beside which it is next to impossible to conceive a third” ([13] p. 125).

⁵⁸Brumbaugh [10] p. 668.

References

- [1] Adam, J. (1969) *The Republic of Plato, Edited with Critical Notes, Commentary and Appendices, Vol. II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Annas, J. (1999) *Platonic Ethics, Old and New*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- [3] Ausland, H.W. (1997) 'On Reading Plato Mimetically', in *The American Journal of Philology* 118(3): 371–416.
- [4] Barker, E. (1964) *Greek Political Theory*. London: Methuen Publishing.
- [5] Bloom, A. (1968) *The Republic of Plato*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- [6] Bobonich, C. (2002) *Plato's Utopia Recast*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [7] Bobonich, C. (2012) 'Plato on utopia', in E.N. Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [Online] Available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-utopia/>
- [8] Bremer, J. (2000) 'Some arithmetical patterns in Plato's Republic', in *Hermathena* 169: 69–97.
- [9] Brown, E. (2004) 'From Republic to Laws: Plato on Democracy', in *The Classical Review* 54(1): 71–72.
- [10] Brumbaugh, R.S. (1967) 'A New Interpretation of Plato's Republic', in *The Journal of Philosophy* 64(20): 661–70.
- [11] Brumbaugh, R.S. (1989) *Platonic Studies of Greek Philosophy: Form, Arts, Gadgets, and Hemlock*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- [12] Cicero (2009) *The Republic and the Laws*, C.D. Yonge (trans.). Digireads.com Publishing.
- [13] Coleridge, S.T. (1835) *Specimens of the Table Talk of the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. New York, NY: Harper.
- [14] Crossman, R.H. (2012) *Plato Today*. London: Routledge.
- [15] Dodds, E.R. (1951) *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Berkeley, IL: University of California Press.
- [16] Franklin, L. (2001) 'The Structure of Dialectic in the Meno', in *Phronesis* 46(4): 413–39.

- [17] Grant, G.P. (1954) 'Plato and Popper', in *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 20(2): 186–94.
- [18] Grube, G.M.A. (1980) *Plato's Thought*. London: Athlone Press.
- [19] Hackforth, R. (1942) 'Plato's Divided Line and Dialectic', in *The Classical Quarterly* 36(1): 1–9.
- [20] Howland, J. (1991) 'Re-Reading Plato: The Problem of Platonic Chronology', in *Phoenix* 45(3): 189–214.
- [21] Hyland, D.A. (1994) 'Potentiality and Presence in Plato: The Significance of Place in the Platonic Dialogues,' in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 8(1): 28–43.
- [22] Hyland, D.A. (1988) 'Taking the longer road : The Irony of Plato's Republic', in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 93(3): 317–35.
- [23] Kamtekar, R. (1999) 'Review of *Platonic Ethics Old and New* by Julia Annas', in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*. Available at <http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/1999/1999-09-28.html>
- [24] Kargas, A. (1998) *The Truest Tragedy: A Study of Plato's Laws*. London: Minerva Press.
- [25] Kraut, R. (2010) 'Ordinary virtue from the *Phaedo* to the *Laws*', in C. Bobonich (ed.), *Plato's Laws: A Critical Guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [26] Laks, A. (1990) 'Legislation and Demiurgy: On the Relationship between Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*', in *Classical Antiquity* 9(2): 209–29.
- [27] Lamm, J.A. (2005) 'The art of interpreting Plato', in J. Mariña (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [28] Lewis, B. (2000) 'The Seventh Letter and the Unity of Plato's Political Philosophy', in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 38(2): 231–50.
- [29] Moore, K.R. (2012) *Plato, Politics and a Practical Utopia*. London: Continuum Publishing.
- [30] More, T. (2009) *Utopia*, P. Turner (trans.). London: Penguin Books.
- [31] Olympiodorus (1956) *Commentary on the First Alcibiades of Plato*, L.G. Westerink (trans.). Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing.
- [32] Plato (2002) *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*, G.M.A. Grube (trans.), 2nd ed. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.

- [33] Plato (1970) *The Laws*, T.J. Saunders (trans.). London: Penguin Books.
- [34] Plato (1992) *Republic*, G.M.A. Grube (trans.), 2nd ed. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- [35] Plato (1928) *Seventh Letter*. Internet Classics Archive, J. Harward (trans.). Internet Classics Archive. Available at http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/seventh_letter.html
- [36] Popper, K. (2011) *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. London: Routledge.
- [37] Rhodes, J.M. (2003) *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence: Plato's Erotic Dialogues*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press.
- [38] Roberts, W.R. (ed.) (1910) *On Literary Composition*. London: Macmillan.
- [39] Rousseau, J. (1979) *Emile: Or, On Education*, A. Bloom (trans.). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- [40] Rowe, C. (2010) 'The relationship of the *Laws* to other dialogues', in C. Bobonich (ed.) *Plato's Laws: A Critical Guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [41] Russell, B. (2012) *History of Western Philosophy*. London: Routledge Classics.
- [42] Sachs, D. (1963) 'A Fallacy in Plato's *Republic*', in *The Philosophical Review* 72(2): 141–58.
- [43] Schleiermacher, F. (1936) *Schleiermacher's Introductions to the Dialogues of Plato*. Cambridge: J. & J.J. Deighton.
- [44] Strauss, L. (1975) *The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- [45] Strauss, L. (1964) *The City and Man*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
- [46] Vlastos, G. (1973) *Platonic Studies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- [47] Vlastos, G. (1994) 'Was Plato a Feminist?', in N. Tuana (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Plato*. University Park, PA: Penn State Press.
- [48] Whitehead, A.N. (2010) *Process and Reality*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Vagueness, and the Sorites Paradox*

Jonathan P. Martindale
Christ Church, Oxford

Introduction

Of a single grain of wheat, it is false to state thereof: ‘this is a heap of wheat’. Since adding a single grain of wheat to a non-heap of wheat appears obviously inadequate to transform that non-heap of wheat into a heap of wheat, and since this procedure can be recursively applied to any new non-heap of wheat so produced, we reach the curious conclusion that no collection of wheat grains, no matter how large, can properly be said to be a heap of wheat. Working on the inverse principle that subtracting a single grain from what we readily accept to be a heap of wheat cannot justify our calling that which remains after the subtraction anything other than a heap of wheat, we further discover that any collection of wheat grains of any size whatsoever can be justifiably called both a heap of wheat and a non-heap of wheat, and this is straightforwardly absurd. (Similar ‘logic’ can be applied to the cases of the hairs on the head of a bald man, or the colours of a strip of material running from clear red at one end to clear orange at the other and with some zone of indeterminate colour between.)

Hanoch Ben-Yami has suggested the following ‘Wittgensteinian solution’ to the Sorites paradox. The Sorites Paradox is constituted by a concatenation of *modus ponens* arguments, and, though each application of that principle may itself stand as correct when considered in isolation, Ben-Yami argues that the concatenation thereof can be simultaneously invalid “if it passes the vague boundary between cases where it does not apply”.¹ There is, however, nothing more to be said about the ‘reasons’ for this fallacy other than the fact that committing it leads one to make manifestly false arguments; i.e. that a single grain of wheat is both a heap and a non-heap of wheat. The “semantics and logic of semantic and logical concepts”, Ben-Yami informs us, “are determined

*Delivered at the BUPS Spring Conference 2014 in April at the University of Sheffield.

¹Ben-Yami [1] p. 233.

by those concepts they describe, and not *vice versa*".² Styles of reasoning appropriate in mathematical contexts may be invalid elsewhere, and in those contexts avoidance of the fallacy identified by Ben-Yami might be seen to possess a status similar to more commonly accepted principles regarding logical validity (perhaps, say, the law of non-contradiction).

Ben-Yami takes his approach to be 'Wittgensteinian' on account of its apparent quietism. Readers generally critical of such an approach may already feel inclined to protest an argument which identifies instances of reasoning as fallacious on account of their violating some principle, yet which in turn grounds this principle on nothing more than its violation leading to false conclusions. This, critics might claim, is no better than explaining a driver's accident by recourse to their sleep deprivation, and then explaining the significance of sleep deprivation in terms of its generally causing traffic accidents. What we want to know, the critic might insist, is why sleep deprivation leads to such accidents, e.g. through its delaying the driver's reaction times, or leading to their unconsciousness at the wheel. (Advocates of Occam's razor might also be wary of this apparent expansion of the basic rules constitutive of our logical repertoires so long as any rival explanation lacking recourse to such expanded principles seems at least in principle possible.)

Ben-Yami would, of course, respond that any attempt to 'go further back' – to look for ever more basic foundations for our practices – is here, as elsewhere, both fruitless and unnecessary. (As Wittgenstein might have had it: explanations come to an end somewhere.) In this paper, however, I want to suggest that several insights expressed by Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations* allow us to state more about where the reasoning of the Sorites Paradox goes wrong than Ben-Yami's 'Wittgensteinian' account seems to allow. These insights, concerning the finitude of concepts and the vital role of practice and practical engagement with the world in determining the sense our language games possess, can in turn be expanded upon with recourse to several themes regarding the nature of the human being-in-the-world discussed by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*. (Those surprised that much of relevance to a seemingly minor linguistic oddity as this is to be found between those pages of grandiose ontology and gloomy existentialism are, of course, advised to read on.)

²Ibid. p. 235.

1 Evaluation and Description

In §116 of the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein famously writes that

When philosophers use a word – ‘knowledge’, ‘being’, ‘object’, ‘I’, ‘proposition/sentence’, ‘name’ – and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language in which it is at home? –
What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.³

With that thought in mind, consider the following examples. In both, a builder *B* requests that an assistant *A* bring him ‘a heap of bricks’, bricks being vital to many of the tasks *B* typically undertakes on the building site where they both work. (The request perhaps reads a little awkwardly, but remains comprehensible and adequate for the purposes of the point to be illustrated). When *A* returns with some collection of items, *B* utters the following rebuke: ‘This is not a heap of bricks’. In the first case under consideration, this is because *A* has indeed returned with some number of bricks, but a rather small number, one which, acknowledging our ignorance of the finer details of the workings of building site and the tasks of its occupants, we would probably conclude could not reasonably be called a heap. In the second case however, the assistant has (bizarrely) returned to *B* bearing two ripe melons.

The question I wish to raise is: does *B*’s complaint possess in both cases of its utterance the same meaning? Here is one reason to deny that it does. In both cases, *B*’s utterance can be taken as a rebuke of *A*’s offering. But in the second case, the rebuke is given because what *A* has provided simply is not a heap of bricks, no matter how charitably interpreted. Of two melons, it is straightforwardly true to state thereof that ‘this is not a heap of bricks’. It would not, for instance, even make sense to try to evaluate a heap of bricks during some competition to determine the largest fruit produced during a harvest. Heaps of bricks are not things that can be so evaluated. In the first case, by contrast, what is expressed by *B*’s utterance is, in some sense, evaluative. If what *A* provides is unsatisfactory, this is because it can be judged under, and found wanting by, some applicable standard of evaluation, not because such standards simply do not make sense as applied to the proffered object.

³Wittgenstein [7] §116.

2 A Further Complication

The perceptive reader may already suspect where this line of thought leads. If a descriptive use of a sentence ‘this is or is not an *X*’ can be seen to be straightforwardly true or false regarding that to which it refers, an evaluative use might seem better understood in terms of its being more or less justified given the criteria according to which such an evaluation is made. Perhaps, when we ordinarily state of some *X* that *X* is a heap or that *X* is bald, we are not offering a description of that *X*, but rather an evaluation of it according to certain criteria. And, since such evaluations can only be more or less justified and not strictly true or false, the fact that reasonable persons cannot agree on some exact point at which non-heaps or bald heads really do transition to being heaps or heads of hair is hardly problematic, since relevant statements made thereabout need not be seen as either ‘true’ or ‘false’ in such a way as to require the existence of such a rigid cut-off.

This thought, however, seems to run into difficulties once we acknowledge that the scope of the Sorites Paradox seems to extend far beyond the traditional range of vague predicates to cover, as Peter Unger argues, almost the entirety of the class of ordinary things. Suppose, for instance, we take a chair to be something composed of some a finite number of atoms. We can hence remove an atom and ask whether what remains is still a chair. Since one atom can hardly differentiate chair and non-chair, we can continue until we reach a single atom; something that is clearly not a chair. Yet here it seems unintuitive to resolve this dilemma by stating that the word chair (or indeed any such ‘ordinary thing’ word) is used to ‘evaluate’ some particular object, rather than simply state a truth or falsehood regarding it. Things can just be or not be tables, and no evaluation here seems required. The exact relationship between evaluation and description thus needs to be restated.

3 Bringing Heidegger In

Let us return to our first case. Here *A* can contest the justifiability of *B*’s complaint by recourse to standards in a way that is unavailable in the case in which two melons are proffered. (What is stated in that case is simply a fact about what particular objects are.) The question now arises as to how the discoordination of plans caused by the disagreement of *A* and *B* regarding the adequacy of *A*’s ‘heap of bricks’ might be resolved. Several options discernible on reflection are, I believe, crucial to understanding where and how the Sorites Paradox goes wrong. For, as our introductory example showed, Sorites reasoning is crucially numerical. It depends on treating some entity chiefly in terms

of its being constituted by some numerical quantity N of constituent X s (e.g. a bald head by the hairs it possesses), and exploiting the fact that, while we know the boundaries of the applicability of that concept must lie somewhere, we find it impossible to pin them to any specific point.

Suppose A responds to B 's rejection of his 'heap' that B will have to more adequately specify what he takes a heap of bricks to consist in. In imagining this scenario, the reader ought to consider: need B 's explication contain any explicit reference to numbers at all if A is to properly grasp the sense of that which B is thereby trying to convey? This, it seems, need not be the case. One way B could explicate his earlier instruction might be simply to gesture at or outline some region of space with his arms and state 'that many', or even utter 'enough for me to work for two hours', or 'enough to get a reasonable amount of work done'. How, then, is A meant to know what 'enough' means here? Can we not just simply suppose that he is acquainted with the work performed on the site, the time it generally takes builders to complete particular tasks or the amount of bricks the projects of the site generally require, and that this knowledge need not be specifiable in terms of exact figures?

A major theme of Heidegger's *Being and Time* is that the relationship of human beings (*Dasein*) to the world is primarily constituted not through their detached contemplation thereof, but by their engaged involvement therewith during the undertaking of specific tasks. Entities (a term which for Heidegger encompasses everything that is, including rocks, tables, thunderstorms, societies, and so on) such as hammers are not initially encountered by agents as brute lumps of matter bearing predicates, but as tools to be skilfully employed in achieving relevant ends. Indeed, as Heidegger has it, proper understanding of the hammer as a hammer involves not simply our being able to state facts about it, but most importantly our being able to use it for the procedures for which it has been designed. During such procedures, for the skilful worker the hammer itself recedes from their direct awareness as they become fully absorbed by the task at hand. As Heidegger puts it

The less we just stare at the hammer thing and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relation to it become and the more unveiledly it is encountered as that which it is – as equipment.⁴

As Hubert Dreyfus elaborates, for Heidegger any kind of mentalistic directed-

⁴Heidegger [4] p. 98.

ness of human beings toward entities in the world presupposes ‘a more basic form of being with things which does not involve mental activity’:⁵ a kind of skilful or knowing coping-with in the process of the realisation of particular possibilities. Yet, if the being of entities (i.e. that which makes those entities what they are and intelligible as such) appropriately characterised using vague predicates can be modelled on the being of items of equipment, the following strategy opens itself to us. The scope of a vague predicate may, in a particular case, be filled out by agents’ pre-linguistic knowledge of how to cope with that to which the predicate applies in light of the particular tasks of that environment and role they occupy. The predicated entity hence becomes simply taken for granted in its sense, with this kind of knowing involvement with the world preceding detached conceptual reflection thereupon as a mode of agents’ understanding relationships thereto.

4 Raffman’s Contextualism

The approach to resolving the Sorites taken in this paper is contextualist. Where the Sorites Paradox goes wrong is in taking in curious results regarding vague predicates in Sorites contexts to extend to the uses of those predicates in non-Sorites contexts. It will be helpful here to consider, both in contrast to our own account and as a supplement thereto, an alternative contextualist account provided by Diana Raffman. Raffman asks her reader to consider a coloured strip, running from clear red and clear orange at opposing ends, with a region of indeterminate colour between. In two scenarios, the strip is divided into 100 colour samples, and an agent is asked to judge, for each sample as presented consecutively, whether it is red or orange. In the first scenario, the agent’s memory of previous judgements is wiped after each judgement is made, and so each new sample is approached as if it were the first. In the second scenario, by contrast, each new sample is presented for classification to the agent alongside the previous sample as known to be already judged.

We can suppose that, in the first scenario, ‘Sample 47’ would be the first to be classified by the agent as orange instead of red. In the second scenario Sample 47 would, however, be presented alongside Sample 46 as already known to have been judged red, and if we suppose that here the agent can discern no phenomenal difference between the two in that case, brute consistency seems to commit them to judging that 47 is also red, and so on for further cases. For

⁵Dreyfus [2] p. 52.

Raffman, these examples simply draw attention to the fact that subjects employ ‘anchoring heuristics’ when making judgements; they “categorise stimuli relative to certain mental reference points (or anchors)”,⁶ and these anchors in turn affect what judgement is reached. Yet with this psychological insight, Raffman argues that the fallacy of the Sorites is hence nothing more than its drawing conclusions about vague predicates as observed in singular presentational contexts from those predicates as observed in pair-wise or consecutive contexts.

5 Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Conceptual Finitude, Coping, and Interpreting

Though bearing certain similarities, Raffman’s account as outlined above obviously differs from the explanation we are attempting to develop in the present paper. In limiting her examples to cases of detached commentary on samples, Raffman arguably overlooks the more basic practical dimension and context in terms of which human beings typically encounter entities in the world and through which vague predicates may ultimately gain their sense. But her account contains an important insight, one which, when combined with a reading of the following quote from Wittgenstein, helps show why demarcating the boundaries of vague predicates in context of a Sorites Paradox seems ultimately so arbitrary and senseless.

I say, “There is a chair”. What if I go to fetch it, and it suddenly disappears from sight? — “So it wasn’t a chair, but some kind of illusion.” — But in a few seconds later, we see it again and are able to touch it, and so on. — “So the chair was there after all and its disappearance was some kind of illusion.” — But suppose that after a time it disappears again – or seems to disappear. What are we to say now? Have you rules ready for such cases – rules saying whether such a thing is still to be called a ‘chair’? But do we miss them when we use the word ‘chair’? And are we to say that we do not really attach any meaning to this word, because we are not equipped with rules for every possible application of it?⁷

⁶Raffman [5] p. 448.

⁷Wittgenstein [7] §80.

Robert Fogelin claims the problem here is not one of vagueness, since “we are not inclined to treat this instance as a borderline case of being a chair”. Rather, we are “stumped as to what to say at all”.⁸ But consider the ordinary criteria by which something is judged to be a chair. This allows us to see the oddity of Unger’s treatment of ‘ordinary things’ primarily in terms of their being variously sized collections of atoms. For, as Heidegger would note, what makes a chair a chair is not anything directly to do with its physical constitution. Rather, it is to do with the ends to which it may be and is indeed put to use by some individual or community. (As Wittgenstein might elaborate, one can say ‘I mean that this [chess] piece is called the ‘king’, not this particular bit of wood I am pointing at’.⁹) The physical constitution of an object may certainly determine whether or not it is suitable for use as a piece of equipment, but it is ultimately its usability and not the empirical preconditions of that usability that makes that entity the entity it is.

Through Heidegger, the possibility of a more satisfactory account of the ‘evaluative’ and ‘descriptive’ uses of sentences (and the relationship there between) becomes apparent. For Heidegger, although all engagement with entities presupposes some prior understanding of the being of those entities, our average everyday state is one of a ‘falling’ into the world: a forgetfulness of being. The world we immediately encounter is one not populated by meaningless lumps of matter, but by tables, chairs, hammers, clothes – every possible manner of equipment. But this apparently direct presentedness with entities presupposes those entities’ satisfying the criteria for their being the kind of beings they are – in the case of a chair, that it is given in the context of a projective structure of possibilities for future use. During absorbed coping with the world, when that projective structure recedes from any direct awareness thereof and entities as understood are simply taken for granted as given, we can indeed then make statements in a manner characteristic of the descriptive use of ‘this is not a heap’.

Furthermore, in our example of the builders, the question of what properly counted as a heap was seen to arise from an interruption in continued practical coping with the tasks constitutive of those agents’ identities. This is in keeping with Heidegger’s account of equipmental comportment, according to which items of equipment as made sensible in terms of their statuses in networks of other tools and tasks only become directly present in the case of their mal-

⁸Fogelin [3] p. 52.

⁹Wittgenstein [7] §35.

functioning. (The hammer in the carpenter's hand becomes directly present to the carpenter as its breakage prevents the completion of his task, as does the end to which that task was aimed.) In this case, our pre-mental coping with the world interrupted, we must subsequently consciously interpret entities in the world in order to remedy that which is obstructive of their practice. Only here, then, must *Dasein* attempt to understand that which makes a heap understandable as a heap in explicitly conceptual terms.

We noted above Raffman's suggestion that the fallacy of the Sorites Paradox stemmed from taking judgements regarding vague predicates taken as evaluatively anchored to other judgements in a pair-wise context to extend to those predicates as applied even outside those contexts. In ordinary contexts, we have suggested, what supplies the boundaries of a vague predicate is an inarticulate and practical understanding of a range of ways that that which is appropriately so characterised can appear to us or constitute a part of certain tasks, and, in cases of equipmental breakdown, these possibilities are hence what ought to be appealed to (as indeed our builders do). In the case of Sorites Paradox, however, the very fact that entities are approached *qua* their numerical distinctions from other entities as likewise so judged means the appropriate criteria for those entities being what they are are taken to be numerical. No evaluative criteria for determining the numerical boundaries of a vague concept, however, need here have been demarcated at all.

Numbers do, of course, bear some relationship to vague predicates. We have already noted that the particular practical possibilities of an entity may depend upon its physical constitution, appropriately numerically defined. And when operating in a numeric context, one's vague sense of the numeric boundaries of a vague predicate may importantly relate to the extent to which a particular figure seems compatible with that collection of constituent units standing compatible with the range of tasks and appearances in terms of which that vague entity is usually understood. But the boundaries of intelligibility of vague objects as discerned through our pre-reflective coping therewith cannot be captured using the exact distinctions characteristic of numeric language. Wittgenstein's example of the chair, however, shows why this conceptual finitude, or finitude of rules, is unproblematic. Our concepts gain their sense from, and are 'designed' to function in light of, brute facts about the world and our practices therein, and nothing in the Sorites prevents their continuing to so function.

This is not to suggest that Fogelin is incorrect to point out the problem of Wittgenstein's chair is not one of vagueness. But, agreeing with Fogelin, we are suggesting, more controversially, that the Sorites Paradox as stated is, in this sense, not one of vagueness either. For vagueness relates to the indeterminacy of boundaries, and we have suggested that entities and the concepts

under which they are given simply do not have boundaries as demarcated in the numerical as opposed to practical terms the Sorites Paradox appeals to. We might indeed stipulate in a given case that we are to call some quantity of *X* a heap of *X* only if that quantity is comprised of between 100 and 1000 units of *X*. But the specificity of this new term arguably renders it crucially distinct from the term ‘heap’ as we usually operate with it, a term for which we can draw no satisfactory numerical boundaries. To quote an apt observation from Wittgenstein elsewhere:

imagine having to draw a sharp picture ‘corresponding’ to a blurred one ... if the colours in the original shade into one another without a hint of any boundary, won’t it become a hopeless task to draw a sharp picture corresponding to the blurred one?¹⁰

6 Concluding Remarks and Possible Difficulties

Our aim in this essay has been to explicate a solution to the Sorites, drawing on insights from Wittgenstein and Heidegger that go beyond the ultra-quietism of the ‘Wittgensteinian’ account offered by Ben-Yami. Our claim has been that entities subject to the Sorites paradox should be seen as primarily constituted, not by the numerical makeup that paradox asserts, but by the roles those entities play in our everyday pre-conceptual practical coping with the world (that in terms of which they are initially encountered). The pre-conceptuality of these roles as understood, however, means that any attempt to translate the boundaries of those roles into numerical figures, or judge the identities of those objects according to such criteria, must necessarily fail, for no such criteria are engendered in our concepts of those entities. Any vestiges of sense a proposed boundary in a Sorites context may possess must stem ultimately from a vague sense of the compossibility of those figures with the practical or perceptual possibilities primarily constitutive of the identity of the entity under consideration.

Bearing in mind Wittgenstein’s observations on the diversity of language games, it perhaps ought to remain an open question whether in some cases a different solution to the Sorites may be available (one more in line with the straightforward evaluation–description distinction as detailed in §2 and §3 of this essay). Even if readers feel compelled to question some of the finer details of this account, they will hopefully see that the attempt to approach entities subject to

¹⁰Ibid. §77.

the Sorites Paradox in practical and not numerical terms is at least a potentially fruitful one, since in those terms the vagueness such conceptual boundaries possess seems far less problematic, stemming as it does from human ability. Readers may perhaps worry regarding the plausibility of such an account regarding seemingly less practical predicates such as ‘bald’. But, though this might be a genuine issue, once we grasp that the possibilities constitutive of the being of an entity need not be reducible to any consciously assembled list, but may range across the totality of possible explicit and tacit observations and practical engagements (which may not always be amenable to articulation), the difficulty in principle of giving such an account in all cases may appear less pressing or problematic.

References

- [1] Ben-Yami, H. (2010) ‘A Wittgensteinian Solution to the Sorites’, in *Philosophical Investigations* 33(3): 229–44.
- [2] Dreyfus, H.L. (1991) *Being-in-the-world : a commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time, Division I*. Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press.
- [3] Fogelin, R.J. (1996) ‘Wittgenstein’s Critique of Philosophy’, in H. Sluga & D.G. Stern (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Heidegger, M. (1967) *Being and Time*, J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson (trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- [5] Raffman, D. (2002) ‘Vagueness without Paradox’, in T. Williamson & D.G. Fara (eds.) *Vagueness*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- [6] Unger, P. (2002) ‘There are no Ordinary Things’, in T. Williamson & D.G. Fara (eds.) *Vagueness*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- [7] Wittgenstein, L. (2009) *Philosophical Investigations*, G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker & J. Schulte (trans.). Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Interview: Philosophy Bro

www.philosophybro.com

For the benefit of anyone who's picked up the print edition and has no access to the internet, could you describe what you do briefly?

I summarize and interpret historically important works of philosophy and answer questions on philosophical topics. I do it on the internet and in a vulgar (and to some sensibilities, hilarious) patois aimed at lay readers and non-experts. I also tweet stupid philosophy jokes from that are popular with people in the field from @PhiloBro.

How did you first get interested in philosophy? What were you first exposed to?

Can I say, 'the normal way'? I got interested in philosophy the normal way: by being exposed to it even a little bit. Have you SEEN how interesting philosophy is?

Obviously that oversimplifies it. There was one year where I was asking theological questions that bled into metaphysics and also debate led me to reading political philosophy and also I started working through a logic textbook in the hopes that I would win even more arguments that way. I don't remember which of those came first; it doesn't really matter. Any one of them would have been enough.



A friend of mine tells a really funny story about how when she was in Pre-K and learning addition, she kept asking the teacher, "what is 2? Like what IS it?" and the teacher had no fucking clue what to even say to that. I was a similar sort of kid who never got the 'why?' taken out of me as a child. Whatever questions I started out with just happened to be the ones I was asking when I discovered philosophy, but I think my personality was such that sooner or later, I was going to end up here.

I worry that makes me sound like some sort of profoundly inquisitive child,

when really I was much closer to a tiny asshole who wanted to be right more often and about more important things. I'm glad I've matured past that.

What's your educational background? Why do you maintain the anonymity that you do?

My educational background is above-average and, I think, includes some really cool work with some very smart people, but it isn't jaw-dropping or uniquely impressive.

I began anonymously because I wasn't sure how well the project would be received in a lot of corners: philosophers generally, people I'm in contact with, whatever. This is a very swearsy, aggressive project on the Internet that appropriates a sub-culture people tend to have strong feelings about both ways. Some people really like what I'm doing, but some people really hate it, and sandboxing the project in anonymity really helped me avoid a lot of headaches in my personal life, I think. Also, it was really cool to have someone recommend my own work to me without any idea that I was doing it, which took about a year and was totally worth it.

I continue to maintain the anonymity because I don't think my identity is a big deal at this point. Philosophy Bro has been well received, and the writing has stood on its own for long enough that it's not like it needs credentials backing it. Some people who know me personally also know I run the site, and revealing myself has paid off in certain circumstances (I'm not above taking advantage of whatever capital I've built up in a tiny corner of the interwebs), but in general there's no need for it. I've found a good compromise between complete anonymity and full endorsement that works for me.

Your site covers a much wider range of philosophical thought than most students would ever be likely to meet in a single philosophy degree; do you feel the specialisation most modern philosophers have is a problem?

When you consider the staggering breadth of things we know an awful lot about or have quite a bit to say on, specialization seems inevitable. Good philosophy often proceeds at a creep: really smart people propose nuanced and complicated ideas they've thought very hard about, and then other very smart people think about them for a while and offer criticism, and then the original smart people consider that criticism and refine even further. Then new ideas get proposed that build on the last round, and so it goes. It's hard to get that attention to detail without some degree of specialization, and I think that level of detail is a good thing. Even (especially) the great leaps in philosophy were informed by and benefited from that level of detail, of being truly steeped in the inherited canon.

The fact that not every bit of published philosophy sees the light of day outside academia isn't really a problem; it's all part of the process of hammering out the ideas that do make their way into the public consciousness. Consider how many of your thoughts are never spoken out loud because they're still works in progress, right? A parallel process happens outwardly: philosophers have published lots of papers that only get read by other philosophers, but those papers still contributed to the development of some other important or more well-known final product. I think undergrads are often afraid to go to office hours or seek help because they're afraid their ideas won't be viewed as original if they're informed by a professor, but if you turn to the 'Acknowledgements' page of almost any good book of philosophy, you'll see that the best philosophers are often also the ones who consulted with their peers most closely.

That does make it difficult to get to the deepest levels, but that problem is hardly unique in academia to philosophy, and it's not the case that one needs to read at the deepest level to benefit. Nor is it the case that even these deeply specialized ideas stay cloistered within academia: Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* won a National Book Award in America. W.D. Ross and Karl Popper were knighted. John Searle and Dan Dennett gave TED Talks with a total of around two million views. Last year, Thomas Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos* was discussed openly and widely and its ideas interpreted (sometimes more carefully than other times) for a less technically-minded audience. And those are just the bits of philosophy that jump directly out of academia; there are also tons of ways (e.g. philosophy podcasts, the Blackwell series, Julian Baggini's work) that academic philosophy leaks out to non-academics.

Plus, (not to kick a man when he's down but) I think Colin McGinn's *Really Very Bad Year* illustrates some of the dangers of pretending to a sort of generalism. His collection of essays on the philosophy of physics really got the shit kicked out of it by several reviewers for lacking any familiarity or engagement whatsoever with the existing literature, and before publishing it he had made some comments about "doing the triple", working on three different books at once. It didn't seem to work out very well for him in this instance.

So no, I think specialization is one of the things that lets philosophers do really good, interesting work. You absolutely have to immerse yourself in ideas when they get this complicated. I'm glad apparati are constantly emerging to convey the very best ideas back to the surface, and I'm even gladder to be a part of that work.

Philosophy often faces the criticism that it just consists of jargon that excludes outsiders – particularly given the nature of your work, do you feel that’s a fair criticism?

I certainly don’t think it’s fair to say that philosophy is all jargon. I mean, Peter Singer’s ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’ is outright fucking terrifying in its clarity. It’s impossible to read without moral panic welling up just a little bit. That motherfucker was not playing around.

I also don’t think labeling something ‘jargon’ is actually a strong criticism. You have so much more work to do to get from ‘jargony’ to ‘merely jargony’. Sometimes philosophers are writing for other philosophers whom they expect to be familiar with existing jargon. It’s tempting to describe this as exclusionary to outsiders, but I think e.g. the contemporary epistemologist is justified in throwing up his hands and saying, ‘what do you want from me here? I’m trying to advance a conversation that has been happening with these same people and their students for decades, and we’ve developed a shorthand that works for us. We’ve also written textbooks that explain much of that shorthand. Sorry you can’t just jump right in to our conversation wherever the fuck you please, but we have other internal priorities that we’re allowed to have’. As far as learning philosophy goes, you should avoid relying on this type of jargon; it will make you a better philosopher if you can get by without it. Be relentless in trying to simplify your language, and you’ll only use jargon when you absolutely need to and once you really understand what you’re saying.

Other times jargon happens because a philosopher is a straightforwardly bad writer who doesn’t even know he’s doing it. You can tell Kant wants to make himself understood; he’s just so, so bad at writing, poor guy. So bad. Like really bad. But his work is not merely jargon; in fact, his work only survived because his ideas were so brilliantly original. It survived in spite of, not because of, the jargon.

Sometimes what you might want to call jargon is actually a way to include outsiders rather than excluding them. Plenty of philosophy uses terms unfamiliar to society at large because society at large doesn’t even have terms for what we’re talking about. Does the difference between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ seem jargony to you? Because an entire population uses that distinction to identify and describe what they feel as an incredible, deep-seated anxiety about aspects of their very identity. So, you know, fucking deal with it a little bit.

And yes, sure, some philosophers are lazy or inconsiderate of their readers or trying to be clever and showing off. Sometimes branches of philosophy get so far up their own jargony assholes it’s hard to see the original point. Philosophers are people too, and some of them are even jerks. Lots of them. So

sometimes jargon is a problem. But no one is more critical of philosophers who use jargon problematically than other philosophers. There are good examples from all branches of philosophy: Elizabeth Anscombe argued that literally centuries of ethical philosophy were predicated on jargon that had gotten away from us. Patricia Churchland pretty brutally policed the jargon used to talk about consciousness. Martha Nussbaum has done work that is deeply concerned with ensuring that new understandings or articulations of an injustice are useful in developing real proposals to fix that injustice. ‘Some people are creating problems with words’ is a servicable abstract for literally hundreds of great philosophy papers.

I think jargon-related criticism is at its fairest when a philosopher steps into the public eye or makes claims in the public sphere, rather than just academia, and doesn’t take the time to break his shit down for non-specialists. If the epistemologist from above were asked to testify in a court of law about whether a witness should or shouldn’t be believed, it would be a problem for that epistemologist to just spout jargon to the jury and smile. Lots of scholars have taken the work of important political philosophers or theorists and tried to export it directly into public dialogue, and it’s like, dude, c’mon, you can’t just march into every room spouting Foucault and Marx with no explanation and sneering at everyone else and expecting no one to get sick of you.

So while there are certainly good jargon-related criticisms to level at aspects of philosophy, anything as sweeping as ‘it’s all jargon all the time’ is not one of them.

What’s your advice to students trying to tackle the, shall we say, less approachable works?

Other than the generic, ‘actually do the reading, don’t try and bluff your way through Hegel, no shit it’s hard but start somewhere’?

It’s not a mistake or a coincidence that Philosophy Bro is pathologically conversational. One really effective way to understand something is to try to explain it to someone else, and breaking it down into a conversation, even if you’re playing both sides, forces you to understand what you’re saying and reframes the text in a more familiar way. When we say things like ‘you have to actually grapple with the text’, it’s sometimes hard to know what exactly ‘grappling’ looks like. This is one useful method of grappling: rephrase into a conversation.

And if that’s getting you nowhere, which happens sometimes, then go to office hours like a goddamn adult and ask for help.

I think almost everyone studying philosophy has had the experience of telling someone, only to fend off the inevitable ‘oh, so what’s the meaning of life, then? Let me tell you *my* philosophy...’ As someone whose work is more accessible to philosophical ‘outsiders’, what’s your opinion on the difference between philosophy as an academic practice and philosophy as perceived by the mainstream?

Because of how bad the very worst of what gets called ‘philosophy’ is – hucksterish lifestyle design, quantum idiocy, New Agey whatever – and how intensely we conduct academic philosophy amongst ourselves, it’s tempting to think that the academic practice and the mainstream perception are completely divorced. The good news is that I don’t think that pessimism is entirely warranted. In fact, I think it’s probably a mistake to say there is a unified, monolithic ‘mainstream’ with a single opinion; mainstream (read: non-academic) uses of the term actually cover a wide variety of activities, including academic philosophy. Within academic circles it’s probably okay to insist on the difference between academic philosophy and other stuff, but some of that other stuff is even closer to what Socrates was doing. We shouldn’t let a useful academic distinction turn into a fortified border. Academic philosophy shouldn’t be – and fortunately isn’t – the only real philosophy getting done in the world.

Once I was partying with like six Navy SEALs on leave for the weekend, and one of them did exactly that thing: he launched into his personal philosophy about living life to the fullest because you never know when it might end, whatever. Normally we get that line from shallow YOLOers excusing some stupid shit, right? Or else as a way of saying, ‘Oh, I didn’t spend much time on philosophy, because life is too short’. But this guy was really earnest about it; there was almost a tinge of apology, like he knew that’s not quite what I meant but this was the best he could do. He lived with the constant and very real possibility of being sent halfway around the world on a moment’s notice to kill or be killed, and being ready for that dysjunction when it mattered took up most of his mental energy. He didn’t have a lot of time to decide between competing theories of the Good. And so what we normally roll our eyes at or think of as insipid excuse-making was really, for him, an honest attempt to work out a meaningful guide to life while being constantly confronted with mortality.

Also, what was I going to do, tell a Navy SEAL that his life philosophy is stupid?

I think that sort of inquiry is very common and often motivated by the same spirit that started this whole mess way back when. It is also typically conducted quietly and personally and among friends, so the toxic bullshit grabs a

disproportionate amount of the spotlight. Even the people who fall for that, though, are looking for answers to questions like ‘what exactly is the nature of reality?’ or ‘how should I conduct my life?’. If the answers of those in the mainstream (again, read here as ‘non-academics’) frequently seems specious or poorly systematized to us when we encounter them, well, not everyone had the opportunity to develop, in the comfortable safety and immersion of the academy, mental filters like methods of formal logic or an opening book of common arguments/fallacies.

Yes, it can be exhausting to constantly explain your research or studies to non-experts, even if it is good practice. But so then fucking don’t make it all about you every time, is one solution. If you take a second to sketch a line from someone’s ‘personal philosophy’ to some ideas that are similar but more philosophically respectable, she may be as receptive to academic philosophy as to anything we might frown upon. This is surprisingly easy to do, even for beliefs that seem absolutely insane to you. Panpsychism, by way of example, is a view that everything in the universe has mental properties of some sort, and tenured-ass professors at important fucking institutions believe that shit.

Sometimes someone is just looking for a fight or being a stubborn intellectual narcissist (we were all seventeen once). If someone is being a real pushy asshole about it then sure, yes, obviously it’s incredibly fun to just take him absolutely to pieces, really dismantle everything, all his ideas, so he hasn’t a single fig-leaf of a proposition left to hide his shameful intellectual nakedness. Even so: if you’re going to chiffonade someone like that, doing so calmly and respectfully is much more effective, because it removes the ‘what a jerk, never mind’ excuse to ignore you. We have the tools to dismiss the pathetic wares of e.g. self-help gurus or snake oil salesmen or Deepak Chopra thoroughly and convincingly and on principled grounds.

In short, I think the mainstream perception of philosophy includes more varied and typically (but not exclusively) worse attempts to explain the world than academic philosophy does. If we take seriously – and I think we should – the pretense that philosophical inquiry can accompany and inform even the most pedestrian human activity, then I also think we should be as charitable as possible in those encounters rather than punishing people for trying to make sense of their world in whatever way they can. As Hume put it, “be a philosopher, but amidst all your philosophy, be still a man”. Or a woman, whatever. Be human. Don’t use your powers for evil.

What are you working on now? What are your plans for the future?

In the next month or so, I’m relaunching the site at www.philosophybro.com, which has been dormant for almost two years now but which I plan to dedi-

cate much more time to. The *reason* it has been dormant is: I've been working on a top-secret project that has been taking up all of my time, but which I'm getting really close to being ready to announce. I have an entire draft complete of *whatever the project may be*, and I'm in the review stage now, and I'm really excited to move forward with it. Keep an eye on my twitter page (twitter.com/PhiloBro) for continuing updates about those! And thanks so much for having me, this was a real treat.

The *BJUP* team is extremely grateful to Philosophy Bro for taking the time to answer our questions in such detail.

Interview: Miranda Fricker

University of Sheffield

Why were you initially drawn to social epistemology?

My answer to this question is a story, which begins when I was a student. I was instinctively drawn to what are now recognised as questions in social epistemology long before that category became, happily, available. What drew me in was an inchoate and troubled interest in the idea that there were all sorts of connections between social identity, power, and epistemic authority that were stubbornly difficult to articulate in the vernacular of Anglo-American philosophy. A sense that there was nonetheless surely something worth saying that might after all find expression in this idiom was what led me into any kind of research in philosophy.



As an MA student (on an interdisciplinary Women's Studies MA) I read some feminist philosophy. It was a revelation. These theorists were asking what struck me then, as now, to be entirely natural and compelling philosophical questions, yet questions I had never heard posed elsewhere. Questions such as, how does social power influence how we perceive and deal with each other as knowers and reasoners? How do gender, race and class affect epistemic authority? These and related questions were not of course expressed quite like that in those days. They were expressed rather in the terms proper to the feminist theory of the time, most of which drew on the only discourses in town that made questions of power seem remotely relevant to matters epistemic. These were principally Marxism (especially Lakatos who emphasised the idea of an epistemically privileged 'standpoint' of the proletariat), postmodernism (and the 'Continental' philosophers that gave that *Zeitgeist* its philosophical articulation – Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida), and also psychoanalysis (especially Lacan, and the French feminist theorists who championed what came to be thought of as 'difference feminism', notably Irigaray). As a consequence, the sorts of questions that were floating around were: is there a standpoint of women as

there is a standpoint of the proletariat? Does this standpoint enjoy any kind of epistemic privilege? What is situated knowledge? Is reason a form of social power? Is the very idea of objectivity a sublimated assertion of power? Is reason masculine? Is language phallogentric? and so forth.

I found myself in complete disagreement with answers to any of these questions that made one or other pseudo-radical move (as I saw it) that reduced reason to social power, or handed over human rational or linguistic capacities to an exclusively masculine psycho-sexual make-up. Reason was mine, reason was *ours* – with feminists like these, I wondered, who needs sexists? All this was a useful spur. I remained, however, in fascinated sympathy with the politicising spirit of these questions – in sympathy with the thought that at least some of them were questions worth asking, and that perhaps all of them could be asked in a form that rendered them deeply interesting. And some feminist philosophers were posing the questions in that way, developing new theoretical stances with inspiring lucidity and creativity. First, the question about reason and masculinity, for instance, makes perfect sense so long as we are talking about constructions or imaginings of reason – the history of philosophy, and the imaginary of philosophy, as these might be found to reflect wider social attitudes to gender. Further, the various related attempts to disrupt the over-confident, narrowly rationalistic sensibility so often found in philosophy came to seem profoundly sensible to me. (In the early nineties it was an almost exclusively feminist concern to argue that emotion and reason should not always be thought of as radically contrasting categories, and that emotions might at least sometimes have cognitive content. These days such an idea approximates an orthodoxy.) Finally, and concerning now the philosophical canon, the most basic driving intuition among feminist women in philosophy of that time was, I think, the idea that it can make a difference *who* is doing the philosophy. Here again, I think that is true. I mean, the sense in which it's true is completely obvious. Our discipline has a history, therefore it could have taken a different course. If it had been as female-dominated as it has *de facto* been male-dominated, it would very likely have been different. At least this is a perfectly coherent possibility. Yet even this much acknowledgement of contingency in intellectual activity is suppressed in so many philosophical conversations of the recognised kind – perhaps because the very thought threatens to undermine Anglo-American philosophy's self-conception as a universalistic discipline.

Of course our aim is and should be universalistic, if what that amounts to is a commitment to arguing for things on grounds that anyone could accept. That is a sound and supremely valuable Enlightenment ideal, and moreover a semi-realistic aim for those areas where it is sufficiently determinate *what*

anyone could accept (though naturally there is room for disagreement about which areas these are). But philosophy as I encountered it in those days too often seemed to conflate this aspirational possibility with actuality, transmuting a democratic regulatory ideal into an unspoken affirmation of extant philosophy's universalist achievement. This narcissistic fantasy resulted in the silencing of a most important species of critical claim in philosophy: claims that some philosophical lines of thought reflected a particular point of view or background experience of the world just sounded like gibberish in the face of philosophy's self-image as a definitively universalistic enterprise. This fantasised ahistorical self-image deeply embedded in the philosophical psyche made it seem heretical (no, worse! It made it seem like one was 'missing the point') to protest as a student, 'I don't get it. If philosophy's so neutral, how come you're all men?'¹

People talk about loving their subject. I love doing philosophy; though it's more a matter of not being able to help it. In particular, what I can't help is my fascination with philosophy's power of self-deception. (It must be hard, after all, being the discipline that remains after all the others have left home to become, variously, physics, biology, chemistry, history, literature, poetry. . . No wonder philosophy has a continuing identity crisis, a manifest need to explain itself to itself, to affirm what it is and what it can do – witness recent outpourings of metaphilosophy.) Perhaps that's good. Perhaps it shows that despite being so incredibly old, philosophy is actually still in its adolescence, with plenty of future ahead of it in which to blossom and own itself. (Maybe, like Orlando, it will turn out less stably gendered than expected too. Time will tell.) I am getting a little loose-tongued here. Certainly I am generalising – of course not all Anglo-American philosophy is as I am describing it etc. etc.; and it's our intellectual culture more than the published literature that is on the couch, a set of assumptions about what we really think we're doing when we teach our students how to muster another counter-example. Still my therapeutic diagnosis is that philosophy's tendency to self-deception is no fleeting complex, but rather a condition that characterises the tradition in virtue of two of its most essential features. For the discipline stands permanently under tension: the tension created by its definitive universalist aspiration on the one hand, and the awkward fact against which that aspiration must continuously strain, namely the fact of philosophy's historical situatedness.

¹Not all, but still today a great majority. For recent figures in the UK, see Beebe, H. & Saul, J. (2011) *Women in Philosophy in the UK: A report by the British Philosophical Association and the Society for Women in Philosophy UK*.

Here's another way of putting it. I did Philosophy and French as an undergraduate, and the contrast with literature allowed me even then to sense that the philosophy I was being educated in had somehow repressed the knowledge that it's a text. Why? Perhaps the knowledge would threaten to reveal that, like all texts, philosophy has an implied reader. This risky truth threatens to reveal an implied reader who is not the boasted universal 'anyone' after all. Philosophy's concerns might be revealed as universal merely in form, concealing a shamefully parochial content. There should be no shame in being parochial in that sense; but still, my impression then was that this was a manifest truth that philosophy found threatening. Texts are situated in history, and there's something deep in the psyche of Anglo-American philosophy that is still in denial about having a history, or at least about some of the implications of having a history. One way of talking about what the advent of feminist philosophy signified is to say that feminists asked philosophy to confront the fact that it is a text, so that the uninvited figures of author, narrator, implied reader and real reader all crowd into the space in which we are trained to pretend need make room only for a rational being or two.

Insofar as philosophy generates or aims at knowledge, then all of the above not only tells a story that happens to explain why I was personally drawn to social epistemology. Much more importantly the story points to twin questions that together constitute a central project in social epistemology: How is philosophical knowledge generated, and how far are the current practices both effective and fair? I don't know the answer to these questions, but I look at the gender figures, reflect on the drastically monotone ethnicity of our profession, and it is immediately obvious that things aren't nearly as different from when I was a student as I find myself imagining them to be. In this I catch myself in the grip of the very self-deceptive fantasy I have attributed to our discipline (philosophy as floating free from the circumstances of its production). No surprise there. It is the nature of the beast. The continuing narrowness of the philosophical population is something for which I must own my part in the collective professional responsibility, and while there are still no instant remedies, there are more things we can do in as much as the climate is more receptive to concerns about implicit bias. Probably the most important measures are practical-institutional – measures to counter implicit bias in how we perceive and assess each other (anonymising CVs, getting training in how to use terms of praise that are thoroughly non-gendered as we write letters of reference, keeping an eye on whether it is really necessary to have an all-male

line-up at a conference – sometimes it might be, but usually it is not).² But some of the things we can do concern the content of the philosophy that gets written, and that has implications for how we might continue to develop the remit of social epistemology: Doing social epistemology in a way that draws attention to the contingencies and possible injustices in what is recognised as knowledge, or as rational, or as interesting, as a strong argument, or a significant counter-example, represents a tiny but real impetus in a progressive direction. Or so I would like to believe. In any case, a fascination with such possibilities is what drew me to social epistemology, and what keeps me doing it.

What are your main contributions to the field of social epistemology?

I hope to have said something useful about the significant overlap between epistemology and ethics. This overlap was the subject matter of my work on epistemic injustice. It concerns possibilities for people to wrong each other specifically as epistemic subjects: a hearer may wrong a speaker, for instance, by allowing prejudice to depress the level of credibility given (testimonial injustice); or, alternatively, people may be structurally wronged as epistemic subjects by being prevented from participating fully in those practices through which shared meanings form and gain collective currency (hermeneutical marginalisation), where this generates an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences (hermeneutical injustice). I suppose my hope is that in opening up the theoretical space of epistemic injustice I might have made certain philosophical thoughts more articulable for those who want to pursue further possibilities.

In effect I hope therefore to have integrated certain politicising insights into epistemology in a way that implicitly makes plain that they belong there. In particular I think this has illustrated how it can pay philosophical dividends to look at our epistemic practices from the point of view of those on the losing end. More generally, I hope to have advanced the idea that one useful sense of ‘social’ in social epistemology implies a lot more than just doing epistemology in a way that has more than one individual in its purview. Rather the ‘social’ in social epistemology can usefully be a fully socialised conception of the epistemic subject: someone necessarily functioning under the constraints of relations of power and identity. But this more fully socialised conception needs to situate epistemic subjects in time too, so that certain essentially diachronic aspects of epistemic practices may come to light. (I believe, for in-

²For concrete suggestions as well as the diagnosis, see Beebe & Saul (2011).

stance, that we cannot properly understand the value of knowledge without taking a diachronic view of our strategies for reliably achieving and retaining truths.) What the label ‘social epistemology’ primarily signals is a liberation from the default of atemporal individualism that pervades so much philosophy. This liberation means that social epistemology can account for those collective strategies for achieving and sharing knowledge which are so basic in human life and which are necessarily extended in time.

What is the proper role of social epistemology in relation to other disciplines?

Different kinds of social epistemology can help forge links with neighbouring disciplines – common questions, common methods, more of a shared critical repertoire. Just as formal social epistemology and empirical social epistemology help cultivate positive intellectual relations with psychology and the social sciences, my hope would be that the kind of social epistemology I do might also help forge links with neighbouring humanities such as history, literature, and also law.

One of the ways that social epistemology can do this – though I would emphasize this is not the only way – is to adopt an aim that is normally the province of literature: that of being well observed. The writer who is a perceptive observer of human life produces works that are truthful in the imaginative sense of being true to life. Might this not be a proper aim of at least some kinds of philosophy? If so, we should ask what methods might facilitate such work. Our default method is conceptual analysis. But it should not be a default if that means adopting it unthinkingly, for it is far more limiting to the philosophical enterprise than we normally allow. First there is the relatively obvious thought that if the concept or practice that we want to explain is a family concept in the Wittgensteinian sense, then manifestly any attempt at analysis is doomed to failure (though we may learn something along the way). But what is far less obvious is that there might be cases – perhaps many cases – of concepts or practices that do permit of analysis, but whose most characteristic and explanatorily fundamental features are not quite necessary conditions. Such important features cannot therefore earn a place in our definition. Where this is so, the strict definition of the concept or practice will not give a full description of the basic or paradigm case. And so when we do, finally, end the trial by counter-example, at last to stand back and view the residue of our clever inquisition, what we find is something significantly lesser than the thing we hoped to understand. Granted, what is distilled will be an essence of sorts, but an essence composed of elements jointly sufficient only for some highly atypical cases of the phenomenon we had wanted to illuminate.

If, on the other hand, we reflect more explicitly than we normally do upon what sort of philosophical understanding we want to achieve, then we may be able to develop alternatives to conceptual analysis that may serve us better on some occasions. One kind of possibility here is State of Nature explanations, a sub-class of genealogical explanations (the sub-class that does posit an original position whose features are thereby argued to be necessary to the concept or practice we are aiming to explain). This method seems to me a very natural one to use in social epistemology, not least in the obvious sense that a characteristic feature of the State of Nature is that it contains more than one person.

But this is not the only method. A closely related but perhaps less cumbersome approach is simply to let the social imagination go to work a little more than usual: try out a hypothesis about what elements of a given concept or practice are plausibly basic in the here and now. (This is actually what most State of Nature stories effectively do too, only their narrative form makes for confusion about whether or how far one is making an *as-if* or imaginary historical claim, a real historical claim, or an immediately synchronic claim about the present content of the concept or the function of the practice. This muddies the waters in a way that is often unhelpful.) Once one has hazarded the hypothesis, which should be suitably informed by a sense of the point and purpose of the concept or practice in question, then one can go on to test out how far that basic practice is explanatorily prior to other, less basic versions of the practice. Either the account will cohere and stabilise or it won't.

This is not as alien a philosophical method as it may at first sound when it is stated quite so explicitly. Such a method is at least partially on display, for example, in P.F. Strawson's approach to explaining the stability of moral responsibility in relation to the apparent threat of determinism. What is most basic, he asserts, in our practices of holding each other responsible (and so presuming each other free in the requisite sense) is the operation of the human 'reactive attitudes'. They are fundamental to a recognisably human mode of interaction, and are in that sense necessary (one might say, original).³ This assertion about our paradigmatic practice of holding each other responsible can then be tested out in relation to other, perhaps secondary, aspects of that practice – such as what goes on in situations where we find ourselves suspending the reactive attitudes (they suspend themselves), to be replaced by the resulting 'objective attitude', which has one withdraw from the fray of participation to simply manage others' behaviour. If the picture overall holds together, and

³Strawson, P.F. (1974) 'Freedom and Resentment', in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*. London: Methuen.

especially if there are useful explanatory relations that emerge as holding between the purported primary and secondary aspects of the practice, then the account may stabilise. None of this need involve any search for necessary and sufficient conditions, and it may be that looking for stable accounts that furnish explanatory relations within and between our various practices constitutes a philosophical method that is better suited to some subject matters, and better suited, I surmise, to creating philosophy that is truthful.

The focus on what is human, and a certain faith in our powers of observation and judgements about what is explanatorily basic in human life, would help make philosophy more of the humanistic discipline it deserves to be.⁴ This would re-connect it with its humanistic neighbours who, at present, talk amongst themselves while philosophy limits its own horizons by conversing too exclusively with the sciences.

What have been the most significant advances in social epistemology?

To show that epistemology is not exhausted by attention to individuals, or even relations between individuals as such. More generally, and in relation to my personal intellectual priorities, what I find most significant is the breadth of reference that social epistemology has effectively achieved, spanning formal epistemology, some of feminist epistemology, and as I will suggest below, collective epistemology. I think that the category ‘social epistemology’ is incredibly progressive in this way, and it has allowed more different voices to become intelligible to one another.

What are the most important open problems in social epistemology and what are the prospects for progress?

Let me point not to individual open problems (of which there are surely many – in fact, aren’t they all open? Even the original social epistemological questions such as the epistemology of testimony remain stubbornly open). Let me point instead to a new and burgeoning area: the epistemology of collectives. The reason why I feel this is such a promising and open field is chiefly its promise of making connections with political philosophy.

This is because political philosophy is interested in the proper institutionalisation of power, and institutional bodies are vitally important as collective epistemic subjects. Employers, juries, governments... all such bodies perform

⁴In this connection, see Bernard Williams’ ‘Philosophy As A Humanistic Discipline’ (2006), in his posthumous collection of the same name, ed. A.W. Moore (New Jersey: Princeton University Press).

epistemic tasks that are of the utmost importance in social life, so that the propriety or impropriety, functionality or dysfunctionality, of real epistemic processes in institutions needs to be attended to and understood. But that is not just a question of theorising ideal epistemic practices. The power relations and vested interests at work in the economy of credibility also mean that we need to understand not only what ideal collective epistemic practices are like, but (perhaps first) what the salient risks of dysfunctionality are. How are our epistemic practices most likely to go wrong in the real world of institutional interactions? We need some social epistemology that is informed by the *realpolitik* of collective epistemic practices in a way that connects with political philosophy. One sort of connection might be this: if, for instance, citizens suffer epistemic injustices at the hands of a complaints panel, a police force, or an employer, this undermines their power to contest, and reveals them as dominated. On some conceptions at least, this compromises their political freedom.⁵

In political philosophy there is a useful distinction between ideal theory and non-ideal theory. I tend to think that in social epistemology what we need is a healthy dose of non-ideal theory. We need more often to inflect our theories with a realistic sense of how things tend to go wrong, and in particular how they create unfair advantage and disadvantage. Only once that picture of things is achieved might it become clearer what ameliorative measures are required to stabilise our practices for the better. For this we could no doubt benefit from interdisciplinary help – from the sciences to determine what disadvantages occur, how much, and to whom; and also from neighbouring humanities to help us understand the significance for human beings of suffering such disadvantages. Modelling good institutional epistemic practices (such as sharing information, seeking advice, setting up authorities, dealing with disagreement) is something social epistemology should surely have a hand in. But it should do so, I believe, by paying special attention to risks of dysfunctionality first, remedy second. Philosophy has a tendency to characterise the ideal. By contrast I think it is useful to focus on failure, most especially on the kinds of failure that create disadvantage. A methodological commitment to the dysfunctional and the unfair promises a more truthful philosophy of the functional case.

The BJUP team is extremely grateful to Professor Fricker for allowing us to print this interview, which is forthcoming in *Social Epistemology: 5 Questions* (London, Automatic Press/VIP), edited by V.F. Hendricks & D. Pritchard.

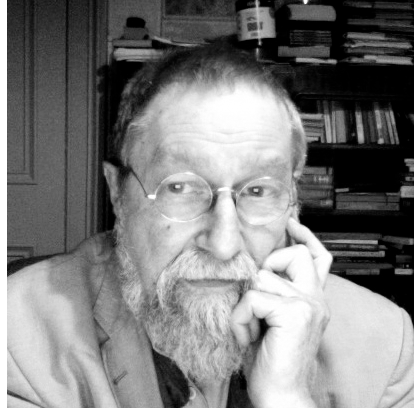
⁵I develop this idea in ‘Epistemic Justice as a Condition of Political Freedom’ (2013), *Synthese*.

Interview: Bob Hale

University of Sheffield

What is philosophy? What do you think of as its role?

I think it is very difficult – and maybe not very useful – to give a definition in general terms, because philosophical questions arise in relation to very different areas, or regions of thought and enquiry, and what gives them their special importance and interest often depends on features of one area which have no obvious analogue in other areas. There is therefore a danger in giving a general answer that one will succeed in saying something that applies across the board only at the price of not saying anything very informative.



Of course, there are some fairly general things one can say. In many important areas, it is plausible that the kind of thing we say and think about them is open to assessment as true or false, and when this is so, we can ask whether the true statements we can make in that area are, in some sense, objectively true, and if so, what is the basis or source of their truth; and we can ask whether, and if so how, we can know them or be justified in taking them to be true. And once these questions arise, they bring others with them, such as questions of ontology, i.e. about what kinds of thing exist. This is certainly the case with the areas of philosophy in which I mainly work. The philosophy of mathematics affords a very good example. Its fundamental questions are very simple (at least to state – answering them is another matter!): what is mathematics about? How do we know about it? These questions have more or less obvious analogues in some other areas. Of course, there are other important questions in the philosophy of mathematics which don't. These concern the philosophical significance of major theorems and results, such as Gödel's incompleteness theorems, the Löwenheim-Skolem theorems, the independence of the continuum hypothesis for the axioms of standard set theory, and so on. Something similar goes for the other area in which I mostly work, i.e. the philosophy of modality. Here too, if we assume, as is plausible, that we can make true or false claims about what's necessary or what's possible, we face

questions about what makes such claims true, when they are, and how, if at all, we can have modal knowledge. Of course, even in these areas, the idea that what we say and think involves putting forward true propositions can be challenged, just as it can, and has been, challenged in other areas, such as morals and aesthetics. If such a challenge can be sustained, then we face other questions, about what we *are* up to when we make moral pronouncements or aesthetic judgements, if not expressing true or false propositions, and whether what we are doing is subject to any sort of rational control, and so on.

I haven't said anything yet about the role of philosophy. At one level, I think the answer is much the same as I would give about physics or mathematics or history or archaeology – just as these disciplines have their distinctive questions, so do we, and our job is to answer them as clearly and fully as we can, and as far as we can, to justify our answers and explain why they are correct. Of course, there is a wider, and important question about the role of philosophy in culture and society. I think the kind of unfettered critical enquiry philosophy fosters is an essential element in anything worth calling a developed civilisation. But I am very sceptical about attempts – all too prevalent in recent and current policy making in higher education and the funding of research activity – to measure this piecemeal in terms of so-called 'impacts'.

What was your first exposure to philosophy? How did things progress from then?

I was very lucky indeed. When I was a sixth-former, planning on reading English at university, we had long periods allocated to private study in the library. These periods were supervised by our teachers, who would occasionally take an interest in what we were reading. One teacher, with whom I am still in touch, noticed that I was reading a book about existentialism, and after the library session ended, took me on one side and suggested that I would understand little of what I was reading unless I had first studied Descartes. He lent me a copy of the *Meditations*, and after I had read it, we had some discussion of my questions about it. By the time I left school, we had worked our way through a good chunk of Hume and the first part of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. I don't know how much I understood, but I certainly developed a lifelong addiction to philosophy, largely thanks to his intervention and encouragement. I went up to university to read English and Philosophy joint, and soon switched into single honours.

What's your advice to students interested in becoming philosophers, or struggling with philosophy at the moment?

Doing philosophy is hard, and doing it well is very hard indeed. And it doesn't get easier. If you go in for it, you'd better be prepared for a hard time, espe-

cially now, when securing a permanent, full-time job as a philosopher is probably harder than it ever has been. It's certainly harder than when I started. I feel I've been incredibly lucky to have been able to make a living, not just doing philosophy, but working, for the most part, in areas which tend not to attract large numbers of students. Universities, especially here, are fighting hard, in the teeth of largely wrong-headed policies of successive Labour and Conservative and now Conservative-Liberal Democrat administrations on higher education, to salvage as much of the scholarship and research that is their essential and most important contribution to culture and society. One can only hope that there will continue to be opportunities for a decent number of gifted students to become professional philosophers, but I am afraid it is not realistic to suppose that all of those who deserve an opportunity will get one. So my advice to would-be philosophers is simple and rather banal: Work as hard as you can and hope for the best!

You are known for your long collaboration with Crispin Wright; how did that arise? Do you feel that working in an intellectual partnership is significantly different from the life of the stereotypical solo thinker?

I first met Crispin when we were both postgraduate students in Oxford, but didn't get to know him well until a while later, when I was working in Lancaster. Crispin took a keen interest in some work I was doing on singular terms, and made use of some of the ideas we discussed in his book on Frege, which appeared a little later. Soon after that he suggested I write what became *Abstract Objects*, for a series he was co-editing. We discussed almost everything in that book in great detail. Our first joint paper, on Hartry Field's nominalism, started life in a memorable walk up Ingleborough hill in winds which must have been around 8 on the Beaufort scale – so severe that we had to *crawl* down from the summit about 100 feet before we could stand up!

Working together is very different from working on one's own. It has both advantages and drawbacks, but the former certainly outweigh the latter. Of course, few, if any, good philosophers work entirely on their own, without the aid of critical, and preferably constructive, feedback from fellow thinkers. There may be some noteworthy exceptions of isolated genius, but far more commonly the result of isolation is quirky and irrelevant fantasy – often ingenious, but fantasy none the less. But working jointly is rather special. We all get stuck when trying to think about philosophical problems, and we often, thinking on our own, fail to follow up lines of thought worth pursuing, or to ask ourselves awkward questions we'd do well to ask. Time and again, when this happens to one of us, the other pushes the thought further, or asks the awkward question; and often, this leads to a better result. I think the papers we write together have a character of their own. People often tell me that our

joint work reads quite differently from what each of us publishes separately. That doesn't surprise me; perhaps the single most important thing in publishing joint work is that the end result must be something of which we both feel ourselves to be owners, and behind which we both stand. I suspect that if the day should come when one of us, under pressure of criticism, feels the need to plead 'well, I didn't write that bit', that will signal the end of our collaboration. I hope it never comes! Of course, this kind of long-term collaboration is quite unusual. One important ingredient is that when we start a new paper, we can take for granted a lot of agreement, partly in views on philosophical issues, but more importantly, about how to do philosophy. Obviously other things play a significant part – humility, trust, respect for each other, and being good friends are some of them. I know I have benefited enormously from working with Crispin. In an odd way, I think it has also helped me to find my own voice, in the work I do on my own.

What do you see as the relationship between neo-Fregean accounts of mathematics and the work of Frege himself? What is the current state of the neo-Fregean project?

It's very important to separate the interpretation of Frege's work from the neo-Fregean development of some of his ideas. I think the work that Crispin and I and others have done does grow out of some important ideas in Frege, and that some of his fundamental ideas are basically right. But our primary concern has always been to make the strongest case we can for a position suggested by Frege's work, rather than fidelity to what Frege actually says or thought. How far that position diverges from what Frege himself thought, or would have agreed with, is another, and to my mind, less important question. But that isn't to say that we can't learn a great deal by trying to understand his published works.

Your second question here really requires a much longer answer than I should attempt now. Roughly speaking, we have made a case for a neo-Fregean foundation for arithmetic in Hume's principle – the principle that the number of F s = the number of G s iff there is a one-correlation of the F s with the G s – together with a suitable formulation of second-order logic. Less work has been done on analysis, but there are at least two ways of defining the real numbers in line with a neo-Fregean approach – mine, and another by Stewart Shapiro which appeared a little later. There has been a lot of very good work on a neo-Fregean foundation for set theory, but no clearly satisfactory neo-Fregean reconstruction has yet emerged. Even what we have done for arithmetic remains very controversial. There are well-known and much discussed problems, such as the Julius Caesar problem, the problem about Bad Company, and the issue about the status of the background second-order logic needed for the pro-

gramme. We have had a lot to say about these problems. We haven't convinced everyone – but that is just how things are in philosophy! There is lots still to do, and we are still working at it.

Are you the number 3?

Nice question! I'm pretty sure I'm not. I think I am a concrete object, and I think the number 3 is an abstract object, and that no object is both. But of course the real question is whether this negative answer can be substantiated on the basis of the definition of cardinal numbers we propose, using Hume's principle. Frege thought not, and that's why he abandoned Hume's principle as a definition, in favour of an explicit definition of numbers as equivalence classes of concepts under the relation of one-one correlation. Crispin and I have tried to explain why we think that, contrary to first appearances, one can get the result that numbers aren't people on the basis of our definition, together with some general considerations about categories of entity.

How essential is it for philosophers working in the philosophy of mathematics to have a strong mathematical background? What about philosophers more generally?

As I said in answer to your first question, the basic questions in the philosophy of mathematics are very simple, and arise in relation even to the most basic of all mathematical theories – elementary arithmetic. But there are other important questions which can really only be understood and thought about with some knowledge of more advanced parts of mathematics, especially analysis and, perhaps most of all, set theory. And in practice, the discussion even of the the most basic and simplest questions can't always be understood without a reasonable grounding in at least these bits of mathematics. Of course, there are lots of highly specialized bits of mathematics one doesn't need to know much about. But that doesn't mean that knowing about them isn't useful. So I think the answer to your question is, in broad terms, that one does need a fairly good knowledge of some fundamental mathematical theories, such as arithmetic, analysis and set theory – but one does not need to be an expert. And obviously, the more you know, the better. As for philosophy in general, I think there are big areas where not knowing much mathematics need not be a serious disadvantage. But I think there are very few, if any, areas of philosophy in which a good knowledge of logic isn't a real advantage, if not a prerequisite.

Besides the philosophy of mathematics you are well-known for your work in metaphysics and the philosophy of language. Could you adumbrate your positions in these areas?

My work in metaphysics has mainly been concerned with the nature and basis

of necessity and possibility, and our knowledge about them. At first, I was almost exclusively focused on *logical* necessity, but I gradually came to think – I would say, realize – that logical necessity is really best understood as a special kind of absolute metaphysical necessity. Although I started out with quite a lot of sympathy for the view that logical necessity has its source in meaning or concepts, I have come to think that this kind of attempt to reduce modality of meaning or conceptual relations is wrong, even in the case of logical necessity. Considerations about meaning and concepts have much to do with how we can recognise necessity *a priori*, when we can, but nothing to do with its basis. I think other attempts to reduce necessity and possibility to something else – such as attempts by David Lewis and others to explain them in terms of possible worlds – are unsuccessful. My positive view is that necessity has its source in the natures of things. So I favour a kind of essentialist theory of necessity. I don't think of this as a reduction of necessity to something else (as perhaps Kit Fine, who holds a superficially similar view, does). Rather, I think we have to accept necessity and possibility as indispensable to comprehensive thought about reality, and as irreducible features of it. This is the theme of the book I mentioned before.

My position in philosophy of language is less easily summarized. Although I think Kripke's work in *Naming and Necessity* is enormously important, I don't find his widely accepted criticism of Frege's position convincing, and remain broadly Fregean in my sympathies, in that I think what is valuable in the developments Kripke initiated can be accommodated within a broadly Fregean framework. But I think aspects of Frege's position – especially concerning the way in which the analysis of language, and distinctions among logical types of expression, connect with ontological distinctions (between objects, properties, relations, functions, etc.) – require rethinking.

Do you think of your work in different areas of philosophy as disjoint, or should the philosophies of mathematics, language and reality aim to provide some kind of single unified account?

Briefly, no and yes, respectively. I think these areas are quite closely intertwined, and certainly my own work in each of them interacts with my work in the others. I think this is especially true of my work in the metaphysics of modality. In a sense, the over-arching idea of my recent book *Necessary Beings* is that questions about the nature and basis of necessity and possibility and questions about what kinds of things exist are deeply and importantly interdependent – hence the subtitle: *an essay on Ontology, Modality, and the Relations between them*. In practice, I had worked somewhat separately for a long while on the philosophy of mathematics and ontology, on the one hand, and on the other, on the philosophy of necessity and possibility. But in more recent

work, I've tried to bring these things together, paying more attention to the obviously important connections between them.

What are you working on at the moment?

Well, I'm still working in the areas I've talked about in answer to earlier questions. I have several papers on the go. In one of them, I'm trying to take further some ideas about properties and second-order logic which I put forward in a paper a couple of years ago. There is a paper on basic arithmetical knowledge which Crispin and I have been working on for several years now; and another, which may also end up being joint with him, is about Bolzano's definition of analytic propositions. I'm also working together with Øystein Linnebo on a paper about syntactic and ontological categories and the problems which we run into if we try to theorize about the connections between them; and with my former student and now Sheffield colleague, Jess Leech, on a paper on how to define relative forms of modality. Finally, for now at least, I'm trying to get a better understanding of Aristotle's view on definition and essence – my own view has some obvious affinities with some of what he says, but diverges from his position quite fundamentally at some points; I would like to write something about this, investigating the strengths and weaknesses of both views, and perhaps also taking in some study of Kit Fine's position, which also has affinities with Aristotle's, and is broadly similar to my own, while differing from it in crucial ways.

The *BJUP* team is extremely grateful to Professor Hale for taking the time to answer our questions in such detail.

Interview: Angie Hobbs

University of Sheffield

What is philosophy?

‘Philosophy’ simply means ‘love of wisdom’ (*‘philosophia’* in ancient Greek). As an academic discipline, it asks fundamental questions concerning the nature of e.g. reality, knowledge, time, mind, language, values and how best to live. It seeks to explore and, where possible, answer these questions in a particularly rigorous way, involving, for example, the precise analysis of concepts and the deployment of deductive and inductive arguments.

What do you think of as its role?

Philosophy has many roles, both within and without the academy. It both seeks knowledge for its own sake and it can also be of great benefit in helping investigate urgent current concerns, such as how best to understand and use money, or what constitutes a fair wage. The training it provides in the analysis of concepts, and the analysis and construction of reasoned arguments, is invaluable in almost any line of work, and in daily life generally. Crucially, studying the theories of past philosophers can help someone appreciate



that there are different ways of living, being and thinking than those on offer in their immediate environment. Philosophy is one of the disciplines that can help us extend our imaginative range about how to live, both as individuals and as groups. For all these reasons, plus the fact that philosophy is often most effectively conducted in dialogue form, I believe that both primary and secondary school children should study philosophy, both as a subject in its own right, and by drawing out the philosophical questions in other subjects, such as science and history.

What was your first exposure to philosophy? How did things progress from there?

I studied Classics at university, so my introduction to philosophy was through

the Presocratics – I was particularly intrigued by Heraclitus’s disciple Cratylus saying that one cannot step into the same river twice, and Zeno claiming that the moving arrow is motionless; we then moved on to the sophists, Plato, Aristotle and the Hellenistics. I was hugely fortunate to have some wonderful teachers: M.M. McCabe, Geoffrey Lloyd, David Sedley, Malcolm Schofield. I loved all of it, but Plato’s vivid dramatic dialogues particularly resonated with me, and when I took a job teaching English in Naples after graduating – protesting that I had had enough of exams for a bit - I found myself visiting the *Biblioteca Nazionale* to seek out his works. So I went back to Cambridge to study for a PhD on Plato’s psychology and ethics, supervised by the inspirational Myles Burnyeat; then, after a Research Fellowship at Christ’s College, in 1992 I moved to the Philosophy Department at Warwick University and broadened my teaching portfolio over the years to include the history of ethics and applied ethics as well as ancient Greek philosophy. I also began to be asked to appear on radio and TV programmes and undertake other media and public speaking work, and I gradually came to feel that there could be a formal role promoting the public understanding of philosophy.

What do you think is special about the classical philosophers that has made their work so enduring?

There are many reasons, but I’ll pick out three. Firstly, they are not afraid to ask the big questions about the cosmos and humanity’s place in it, and the fact that – certainly before Aristotle – the subject was not yet subdivided meant that they could be wide-ranging in their approach. For example, in the *Republic*, Plato begins by asking an ethical question, namely whether it pays the individual to be just, but as the work progresses he makes it clear that this question can only be fully addressed if we understand how the human psyche is constructed and how it operates; he then shows that the psyche can only flourish if reason is in control, and that appreciating what rational control involves will require in turn an understanding of what constitutes knowledge, and the nature of the realities that can be known. So a study of ethics swiftly leads us into moral psychology, epistemology and metaphysics. Secondly, in ethics, the Greeks mostly share Socrates’ view that the main ethical questions are (a) how should I live? and (b) what sort of person should I be? They also share his view that we want to be flourishing people, living flourishing lives. I think a number of people respond to this agent-centred approach, which can take on board the complexities of lived experience and narrative; to my mind, it is more compelling than act-centred ethical theories based on duties or consequences.

I also think we enjoy being challenged by the wide variety of styles in which Greek philosophy is written: the allusive and elusive aphorisms and paradoxes

of Heraclitus; the epic hexameters of Parmenides; Zeno's paradoxes against motion; the knotty and elliptical lecture notes of Aristotle. All of these writers make interpretive demands of the reader and require our active engagement and Plato's dialogues in particular, in which he never speaks in his own voice, provide space for future readers to enter the discussion.

Could you give us an outline of what you argue in your book *Plato and the Hero*?

I wrote it because I believe Plato's thinking on courage, 'manliness' and heroism is both profound in itself and has much to teach us, and also because it offers an excellent gateway to many other aspects of his philosophy. I examine Plato's developing critique of both the notions and embodiments of manliness in his culture (particularly those inherited from Homer); I also explore his radical attempt to redefine the notions in accordance with his own ethical, psychological and metaphysical principles, an attempt in which he confronts directly issues of sex and gender and follows the historical Socrates in arguing that the ethical subject is human rather than, specifically, male or female. Both his critique and attempts at redefinition are located within the overall framework of an ethics of flourishing and virtue, and the question of why courage is necessary in a flourishing life is seen to lead directly to Plato's bid to unify the noble and the beneficial, even in the realm of the Forms. But this unification creates profound and interesting tensions between human and divine ideals.

You are currently working on a new translation of and commentary on Plato's *Symposium*. What are you seeking to achieve with the translation that hasn't been achieved before?

Almost all translators strive to get as close as possible to the ideal of combining accuracy with attractive readability, but both goals will require a fresh translation. Perceptions of what constitutes attractive readability constantly change and views of what counts as an accurate rendering of the Greek will depend on the individual translator's interpretation of Plato's local and general aims in the dialogue. So, to take two examples. The *Symposium* opens with Apollodorus telling a group of unnamed businessmen that he went up to Athens 'prôên'. The word can either mean 'the other day' or 'the day before yesterday'. I have a view about how the *Symposium* is intended by Plato to relate to the *Republic* which means that I think it is important that the word be translated precisely as 'the day before yesterday'. Secondly, the Greek term '*kalon*' is central to the work and it can mean many things, including (aesthetically) 'beautiful' on the one hand, and (morally) 'fine', 'honourable' or 'praiseworthy' on the other. When the translator comes across it, does she or he translate it by the term that they feel is most appropriate to the particular context? But

that would prevent the reader from realising that Plato is employing the same term, that there is a pattern of connections throughout the dialogue, that the aesthetically alluring and the morally praiseworthy are very closely linked. Yet selecting just one (English) term could read awkwardly, and that would not be true to Plato's graceful and fluid style. The solution I have currently opted for is to use the English term that I feel is most appropriate to the particular context but include '*kalon*' in brackets – though of course that's not perfect either.

As the UK's first Professor of the Public Understanding of Philosophy, what do you see as the challenges of bringing philosophy to the public?

It's clearly important to be honest: technical academic philosophy can be very difficult and it can take years of training to attempt some of its steeper slopes. Those of us involved in trying to bring the pleasures and riches of philosophy to wider audiences need to make it plain that what we are usually offering are introductions to difficult issues and questions – invitations to explore, in the first instance, the foothills of the Himalaya. Some people new to the subject will want to explore further for themselves; some will not. But providing one is honest, that's fine, and philosophy can benefit the lives of both groups in different ways. It is worthwhile to study the violin for just a few grades (or no grade at all): not everyone has to go on to be a concert performer.

And of course it's also important that philosophers don't whoosh in to a situation of which they may know little and arrogantly assume that they can fix it in a trice, or even at all. However, I don't know of any responsible philosopher who does think that – if anything, the problem in the UK tends to be that philosophers under- rather than overplay what the subject can offer. Philosophy can provide important tools of analysis and argument to help us think through problems, and it can suggest different goals to work towards: the voices of philosophers can be a very helpful inclusion in current debates.

It's still the case that most non-academic bookshops place philosophy somewhere between 'religion' and 'self-help'. Do you find the gap between academic philosophy and what the public understand by the term frustrating?

No. Academic philosophers do not have a monopoly of the love of wisdom, and, in any case, not many people look good looking down from a high horse. Of course, it's sometimes important to point out the different ways in which the word is currently used, but it's also important to pick one's battles with care.

What role do you see see philosophy as having in public life in particular? Is it something that everyone should have some knowledge of?

Philosophy can help greatly as we try, for example, to work out what money – or economic growth – is for, or how fairness relates to equality, or whether the concept of flourishing can offer an ethical approach of value to people of all religions or none. Almost everyone's lives can be enriched by some philosophical training, and even those who through illness or disability are unable to study philosophy at all themselves can have their lives enriched by the care of those who have been able to examine life.

What are you working on at the moment?

As well as the ongoing project of translating the *Symposium* and writing a commentary on it, I am writing two academic papers: one on *eros*, philosophy and magic in Plato and Ficino and the other on Plato's tale of Atlantis in the *Timaeus* and *Critias*. I am also writing and presenting an *Archive on 4* programme for the BBC on the notions of the hero and heroism.

The *BJUP* team is extremely grateful to Professor Hobbs for taking the time to answer our questions in such detail.

Interview: Duncan Pritchard

University of Edinburgh

What is philosophy? What do you think of as its role?

For a short but general characterisation of philosophy, I don't think I can improve on that offered by Wilfrid Sellars, who wrote (in his famous essay, 'Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man'):

The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.

This gets quoted a lot, but I think that by itself it is apt to mislead, since it might be thought to suggest that philosophy is somehow dislocated from any particular inquiry, as if, for example, the philosopher of science needn't know anything about science. But Sellars didn't think that. In fact, he was of the view that in order to practice philosophy, one needed to have a reasonable grip on a range of core specific inquiries. As he put it (in the same essay), "one can't hope to know one's way around in 'things in general', with-



out knowing one's way around in the major groupings of things". This was very much the intellectual ideal right up to the early modern period. The great philosophers of the past didn't just practice philosophy in the contemporary sense of the term, but were also often polymaths with expertise in mathematics, physics, astronomy, and so on. While the development of specialist academic areas since the early modern period has meant that this ideal isn't practical any more, the general point still holds. Philosophical inquiry is not completely insulated from other inquiries, even if it has a very different angle of attack. As Sellars put it, the philosopher has his or her "eye on the whole", and this is what distinguishes the philosopher from the "persistently reflective specialist; the philosopher of history from the persistently reflective historian".

Philosophy isn't just characterised by the particular kind of angle of inquiry that it embodies, however, since there is also an important element of *attitude*. In *Twilight of the Idols* (his "grand declaration of war"), Nietzsche urges us to "philosophize with a hammer". He means that we need to test our idols by giving them a sound thud from our philosophical hammer (he contrasts this with merely "tapping them as if with a tuning fork"). The point is that if the idols are hollow, then they will shatter. I don't think that such a level of critical scrutiny, even as regards one's idols, is peculiar to philosophy; arguably it is part of what characterises any good inquiry. But philosophers certainly should aspire to this particular intellectual virtue (which is a kind of bloody-mindedness), especially since much of the great philosophy that's ever been produced arose out of this virtue.

What was your first exposure to philosophy? How did things progress from then?

When I look back now on how I became an academic philosopher, I'm frankly amazed that everything turned out as well as it did. My background is, I realise now, completely different from the background of your average academic. My father worked in the local factory, my mother worked as a secretary. Crucially, no-one locally was university-educated, nor did I recall anyone ever talking about university as a serious possibility; i.e., as something that one might actually do. Basically, the very idea of going to university was *exotic*, let alone wanting to work in one. And yet, from a very early age (certainly by about 7 or 8 anyway), I'd somehow formed the idea that I wanted to be an academic. (I must have been a very strange child.) I have a vivid memory of being at primary school and everyone being asked what they wanted to be when they grew up. While the other kids were saying 'professional footballer' and such like, I said 'professor'. Bizarre. Anyway, I must be a pretty blinkered individual, since I never wavered in this ambition and somehow or other it all worked out, despite the odds being very much against me.

Note that this is just the source of me wanting to be an academic, not specifically the source of my desire to be an academic philosopher. Had I known that of all the academic disciplines, philosophy is probably one of the most difficult to succeed in, I may have opted to make life easier for myself. Trouble was, I think that somewhere along the line my vague idea about what it is that academics do evolved in such a way that it turned out to be roughly what, specifically, academic philosophers do. I liked the idea of *scholarship*, of being an expert at something scholarly and spending lots of time with dusty books and ideas. But over time the conception I had of being an academic solidified into a vision of a particular kind of scholarship – essentially, the abstract study of ideas. Since only philosophy lived up to this conception, so the die was cast:

I was going to have to be an academic philosopher.

But what really got me hooked into philosophy was encountering, when I finally made it to university, the problem of radical scepticism for the first time. I think it's a great conundrum: radical scepticism was my first philosophical love, and remains my one true philosophical love. This is why I can't seem to leave it alone – indeed, it's the topic of my latest book, which is due out next year.

***What is this Thing Called Knowledge?* and *Epistemological Disjunctivism* are written for different audiences considering one is an introduction to epistemology and the other represents original research; how different was writing one compared to the other? Which was more challenging?**

I found both of them very challenging, albeit in different ways. One might think that writing introductory texts would be easy, but in fact it's very difficult to recover the sense of naivety that one needs in order to introduce difficult problems to those who don't yet have any philosophical background to draw upon. It's all too easy to start 'preaching to the converted'. This is why I think teaching is so important to academics, particularly teaching at the introductory level. For although one's research is inevitably pitched some way above introductory teaching, getting back to basics and trying to communicate these ideas to the non-specialist is an important intellectual exercise: it reminds you why you went into philosophy in the first place, and it also helps to keep you fresh. Indeed, it's not uncommon to be teaching something elementary for the *n*th time and yet nonetheless discover something new that you'd never noticed before.

Writing *Epistemological Disjunctivism* posed a particular kind of challenge, in that I was attempting to set out a view which (at the time anyway) most people working in epistemology thought was just plain absurd. This is the idea that one's perceptual knowledge could be supported by reasons which actually entail the truth of the proposition known. The challenge was to set this position out in such a way that anyone would bother to read the book at all!

What are you working on at the moment?

I'm in the process of putting the final touches to my next monograph, entitled *Epistemic Angst: Radical Scepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing*, which all being well should appear next year as part of a series published by Princeton University Press. As the title suggests, the book is concerned with the ancient problem of radical scepticism, and it's the culmination of more than a decade of personal struggle on my part with the sceptical puzzle. The book arose out of some lectures I gave in Taiwan last year (the annual Soochow

Lectures in Philosophy, as they are known).

I've also got a bunch of other research projects on the go. An abiding concern of mine is with the nature of cognitive abilities (broadly construed, so that it includes both our innate cognitive faculties and our intellectual virtues), and their role within epistemology. In particular, I'm interested in the interplay between cognitive agency and luck as regards a range of epistemic standings, such as knowledge, understanding, rational belief, and so on. I defend a view about knowledge, for example, according to which it involves both the exercise of cognitive agency and the satisfaction of an anti-luck condition (I call this proposal *anti-luck virtue epistemology*). I'm also interested in how these debates about epistemic standing relate to the question of epistemic value. I explored a bunch of these issues in my contribution to *The Nature and Value of Knowledge* (Oxford University Press, 2010), which is a monograph I co-authored with Alan Millar and Adrian Haddock. At some point I hope to write a new monograph which offers a definitive statement of my views about epistemic value, epistemic standing, cognitive ability, and epistemic luck, but given the magnitude of the task I think this will be some distance in the future.

I'm also interested in the practical ramifications of my epistemology, particularly with regard to cognitive science and education. On the former front, I've been trying to work out the epistemological implications of extended cognition, which is an influential research programme in cognitive science. In short, this is the idea that one's cognitive processes can extend beyond one's skull to incorporate features of the world, such as instruments or other agents. I've written a bunch of articles on this topic, with many more in the pipeline – it's a very exciting new field. On the latter front, I've been increasingly interested in issues with regard to the epistemology of education, such as the role of cognitive abilities (and the intellectual virtues in particular) in educational development, and I've been writing a lot on this topic recently too.

What is your opinion on the specialisation of modern philosophy, such that nowadays the philosopher might find himself constrained to one technical subfield within philosophy?

Some degree of specialisation is inevitable, particularly early on in one's career when one is mastering one's sub-field. And certainly, as I noted above, the intellectual ideal of the philosopher as polymath which characterised the early modern period is simply not feasible any more. Nonetheless, I think it's important that philosophers, at least once established anyway, try to stretch themselves, not just to the extent of engaging with other sub-fields in the discipline, but also by trying to keep abreast of important developments outside of philosophy. The best philosophers of mind usually have a good grip on

contemporary cognitive science, for example. More generally, and as we saw Sellars noting above, the best philosophers tend to be citizens of the broader community of ideas, and not just specialists in their particular sub-field.

Do you see a clear divide between academic philosophy and what people think of as philosophy in the wider world? And if so, do you see a way that gap could be bridged?

There is, unfortunately, a huge mismatch between what the general public think academic philosophers do, and what they in fact do. This is very much to our disadvantage, since in my experience when one gets the chance to explain philosophical ideas to the uninitiated they are usually intrigued (often in spite of themselves!). I think that there is an intellectual thirst out there for the kind of critical discussion of ideas that philosophy offers, but unfortunately it is often not to philosophers that people look in order to quench this thirst. This is why it's so important that academic philosophers do all that they can to explain to the wider public what it is that they do.

One thing that I have found very encouraging in recent years has been the reception we have received for our work in Edinburgh developing Massive Open Online Courses (or 'MOOCs', as they are known). As the name suggests, these are completely free online courses which are designed for a large global audience. We launched our first MOOC on 'Introduction to Philosophy' at the start of 2013, and it was a phenomenal success, gaining over 100,000 enrolments in its first run and generating well over 500,000 posts on the course discussion boards. This MOOC now runs twice a year and has a gratifyingly diverse demographic profile, taking in people of all ages and backgrounds, and from places throughout the globe. Closer to home, we've also been able to use the MOOC as a way of promoting philosophy within secondary schools (we've committed to assisting any school that uses the MOOC, such as by a visit to the school to meet the students if that's feasible). We are about to launch our new MOOC, entitled 'Philosophy and the Sciences'. Each segment of this course will be co-taught by a philosopher and a scientist based at the University of Edinburgh. Looking further ahead, we have tentative plans for further MOOCs, such as one on 'Philosophy, Science and Religion'.

This MOOC initiative has been led by the philosophical research centre that I run here in Edinburgh, which is called *Eidyn*. (See www.eidyn.org for more details. 'Eidyn', by the way, is the ancient name for Edinburgh.) Although *Eidyn* is first and foremost a research centre, it also takes the dissemination of philosophical research very seriously, and so strives to reach not just a broad audience outside of the academy, but also particular groups of people who might not otherwise become engaged with philosophy. I think that this

is a very important part of what contemporary academic philosophy ought to be about. For while there should always be a place in the academy for ‘pure’ research – i.e., for the development of new ideas, whatever their practical implications – there’s no reason why this goal should be detrimental to the promotion of academic ideas beyond the university. For example, one of *Eidyn*’s current ‘outreach’ projects (led by one of my colleagues, Dr Elinor Mason) involves giving presentations to staff at nurseries and primary schools about how gender stereotyping works, and offering practical strategies to avoid it. I think this is a great example of how contemporary academic research (in this case not just in philosophy, but across a number of subject areas) can positively contribute to peoples’ lives.

What’s your advice to students interested in becoming philosophers, or struggling with philosophy at the moment?

My own view is that everyone should be encouraged to do some philosophy at some point. Indeed, I think it’s important that schoolchildren, particularly primary schoolchildren, are introduced to philosophical ideas – all the research suggests that this will substantially enhance their educational development. (On this score, see *Eidyn*’s ‘Philosophy in Schools’ initiative, which is a core part of its outreach activities: <http://eidyn.ppls.ed.ac.uk/outreach>.)

That said, being a professional philosopher – which basically means being an academic philosopher – is obviously not for everyone. Becoming an academic is difficult whatever your subject, since there is inevitably a very high academic hurdle to clear. Becoming an academic philosopher is particularly hard, since there are relatively few of us and yet there are quite a lot of people who would like to join our ranks. But if you’re serious about philosophy, then that in itself shouldn’t put you off. If you’ve got the academic ability, the love of the subject, and the drive to do well, then this is a goal that’s realistically worth aiming for.

One thing that concerns me a great deal, and which I fear puts a lot of people off becoming an academic philosopher, is how homogenous the members of our discipline are. As someone from a working-class background, I felt like a bit of a ‘square peg in a round hole’ early on, since academia is such an upper middle-class profession. And note that I’m a white male, which is a grouping which is massively *over*-represented in professional philosophy. Since no one sector of the population has the monopoly on philosophical ability, we need to change our demographic profile so that we are more representative of the wider public.

One thing that has noticeably changed over the last few years is that there is now a broad consensus that we need to do more to attract women to academic

philosophy. Philosophy is one of the worst-performing subject areas when it comes to gender diversity. At undergraduate level, one tends to find a roughly equal male-female split in enrolment numbers, at least initially, though the proportion of women taking philosophy gradually drops as you get to post-graduate level, and it is at a woefully low proportion by the time you get to permanent faculty. It's not hard to see why. To take two examples: undergraduate philosophy curricula often consist of reading lists which exclusively feature 'Great Dead White Men', and until recently it was simply the norm to have entire conferences without a single woman on the programme, as if they didn't exist. There are a lot of things we need to change about the profession to make it more welcoming to women, and I think we need to make these changes as a matter of urgency.

We can't stop there though, since we also need to confront philosophy's difficulties with ethnic and class diversity. Take the class issue, for example. I think philosophy has a particular problem on this score because it is not a subject which is traditionally taught in state secondary schools. Moreover, since doing a PhD in philosophy effectively commits one to being an academic philosopher, it is not as if one can feasibly undertake doctoral study in philosophy while keeping one's career options open. Finally, pursuing an academic career in any arts and humanities subject will almost certainly require some degree of financial hardship – e.g., struggling with inadequate PhD scholarships or with poorly paid short-term academic contracts. Putting all this together, it is hardly any wonder that there is such a disincentive to undertake this kind of career path unless one has some sort of financial safety net in play. And yet, just as philosophical debate is impoverished if all the viewpoints are male, the same applies if they are all from the same social and ethnic background. Getting philosophy into schools, and trying to create more scholarships for philosophy PhD students, are two practical things that we can do to improve this situation. But it should be admitted that these are relatively small initiatives when compared with the size of the problem we face. (And I haven't even got on to the issue of ethnic diversity here.)

So for any women out there who are considering an academic career in philosophy but who are put off by certain features of the contemporary philosophical culture, I would say: please bear with us – things are changing, and changing fast, and the more women we can bring into the profession the quicker this change will happen. I would also say the same to students, male or female, who are put off by the disappointing class and ethnic profile of contemporary philosophy. The difference here is that, alas, I don't think that this is going to change quite so quickly, much as I wish that it would.

The *BJUP* team is extremely grateful to Professor Pritchard for taking the time to answer our questions in such detail, and particularly for speaking at the BUPS Spring Conference 2014.

Interview: Jennifer Saul

University of Sheffield

What is philosophy? What do you think of as its role?

I'm terrible at answering this kind of question, because what I love most about philosophy is the way that it helps us to see puzzles and problems where we might not have noticed them before. That's what I'm personally always drawn to. One effect of that is that I'm never happy with any definition – and this is at least as true for definitions of 'philosophy' as anything else.

What was your first exposure to philosophy? How did things progress from then?

I was very lucky to have a teacher at my secondary school who had nearly finished a PhD in philosophy many years before, and who taught a philosophy class every year. What drew me to him and his class was actually his sense of humour. I remember being extremely angry at first when we were reading the *Republic*. Initially I couldn't get past my horror at the censorship. And then there was a moment when I remember everything suddenly shifted and I saw the point of really taking seriously ideas that I had previously dismissed completely. It was tremendously exciting, and from then on I was hooked. (My parents tell me, though, that I obsessed over tiny nuances of linguistic formulation in Sunday comics. For some reason they take this to have been a clear indicator of a future in philosophy.)



What's your advice to students interested in becoming philosophers, or struggling with philosophy at the moment?

With a lot of subjects it's very worrying to be confused – things are supposed to be clear and if they're not clear it's a problem. Philosophy isn't like this – if you're not confused at least a lot of the time, I'd say you're doing it wrong. Philosophy simply is hard and puzzling, and if you do it well you will often

feel puzzled. Once you embrace this, it can be wonderful. But before that it can be very disconcerting.

Your recent book *Lying, Misleading, and the Role of What is Said* links ethics with the philosophy of language. Could you give us an overview of what it is about?

In recent years there have been very intense debates in philosophy of language over the notion of what is said (and other related notions). My initial thought was to see if I could shed some light on these debates by considering an area in which ordinary people really seem to care about this notion – the distinction between lying and merely misleading. Famously, Bill Clinton carefully said “there is no sexual relationship” when asked about Monica Lewinsky, hoping to succeed in misleading his audience without lying. The reason this utterance wasn’t a lie was because it didn’t say anything false. Ordinary speakers readily recognize the notion of saying involved in this kind of judgment, and they assign it significance (though whether they think it gets Clinton off the hook *morally* varies). My thought was to see what notion of saying is involved in these ordinary judgments that we make so easily. As it turned out, none of the current notions in the literature can do the work needed for the lying/misleading distinction, so I ended up having to sketch one of my own.

Along the way, I became really interested in the moral status of the distinction: whether it actually is, as it seems to many of us, better to avoid lying by merely misleading. To my surprise, I became convinced that (except in very special circumstances) it isn’t, leading to the conclusion that if you’re going to deceive anyway, you may as well just go ahead and lie.

In the final chapter, I apply all this to interesting cases, including a (very) detailed look at key Clinton utterances and the wonderful Jesuit Doctrine of Mental Reservation. (This doctrine allows a priest to avoid lying when asked if he’s a priest by saying ‘no, I am not a priest’ while silently adding mentally ‘*of Apollo*’.) This turned out to be the most enjoyable part of the book to write.

Do you feel that philosophy has historically missed a trick in becoming more specialised and less synoptic?

I think specialization is inevitable and not in itself bad. But I also think a lot of the most exciting philosophy comes from encounters between these specialisations. Really wonderful things happen when someone like Sally Haslanger, originally trained as an analytic metaphysician, turns her attention to issues of gender and race. Each of these specialized areas (metaphysics, gender, race) has tremendous riches to draw on that they wouldn’t have if there weren’t traditions of specialization. But bringing these areas together yields something

new, and often even more illuminating.

Speaking from my own experience: I trained as a very traditional philosopher of language, doing propositional attitude semantics. But spending time in a deeply pluralist department at Sheffield (talking to e.g. Peirce and Hegel scholars) has made me a much better philosopher. It's not just that it makes me think about different areas of philosophy – it's that it makes me think in new ways even about philosophy of language. I think my work is far more interesting than it would have been if I'd just been talking to specialists. (Though I also think I need my specialist training to do the work that I'm doing.)

Feminism is mostly thought about as a social/political movement, and feminist thinking as sociological or political. What do you think feminism and analytic philosophy have to offer one another?

I never really understand why people think there's any kind of a tension here. Key ideas of feminism are actually philosophical ideas – questioning the public/private distinction; interrogating the relationship between freedom and social conditioning; examining the role of biases in our language and our thought, and so on. And philosophy has already benefited enormously from feminist thought. A lot of now quite mainstream ideas in philosophy – like those underpinning social epistemology – have some of their most important roots in feminism.

As well as being involved with the *Feminist Philosophers* blog, you cowrote a report about women in philosophy in the UK. Could you summarise your findings?

What we found is that women are approximately 24% of professional philosophers in the UK. This is the sort of percentage we normally see in the sciences and engineering, not in the humanities, which tend to be near parity. This is also much like what we see in every country that's been studied: women, in every such country, are 17–30% of full-time working philosophers. Some studies show that the percentage of women in philosophy is even worse than in maths.

We also found another pattern common to every country studied: women and men begin in approximately equal numbers, and then the percentage of women drops at each point at which it's easy for women to leave the field.

As students of any gender, what can we do to improve the situation for women in philosophy?

I think a lot of the most important things to do for women in philosophy are also quite simply good things to do for philosophy. The top one of these is sim-

ply to engage in philosophical discussion as a way of advancing understanding, rather than attempting to *win*. The best way to do that is to make sure you hear from as many voices as possible, and that that you really *listen* to them – that you work together to refine and improve ideas, even those you don't agree with. Critical discussion is important, but it needn't be about destroying. It can be about finding weaknesses and then building up and improving. The gladiatorial style of philosophy is actually terrible for the subject.

A part of having these good, constructive discussions is to notice if someone's trying to speak, or if their point is being attributed to someone else. You can say 'hey, Jane looks like she wants to say something'; or 'isn't that what Betty was arguing?'

And of course, you should always speak up if you see people being dismissive of women, or of others who are not well-represented in philosophy. I hear from lots of students who have been quite put off the subject by casually sexist or racist comments, sometimes from their fellow students. The others in the room are undoubtedly appalled, but it's very hard to take that extra step of saying something. And yet it can make a huge difference.

And again, all this simply makes the discussion a better one – better for everyone, and better for philosophy.

What would you like to see change in philosophy in the next five, ten, or twenty years?

I'd like philosophers to be a much more diverse bunch. Frankly, I'm sick of talking to room after room of exclusively white people. We're losing out on a lot of talent, and we're missing out on a lot of important perspectives. I recently saw a quote from Angela Davis that shocked me in its simple undeniability. She was pointing out that if we want to understand freedom we really need to be hearing from philosophers who come from the social groups that have most been *denied* freedom. And the same point will hold true over and over again, for so many areas. The philosophers who are most read and most taken seriously have come almost exclusively from a narrow and especially privileged subset of society. Why on earth should we think the experience of these people best situates them to reflect on all the issues that philosophers reflect on? So my hope would be to see a more diverse profession. And I'd be really excited to see what this more diverse profession comes up with. I think our understanding will advance immensely.

Your profile on the University of Sheffield’s website lists your “proudest accomplishment” as having been a consultant on a zombie movie script. Do you have a zombie survival plan?

Sadly no, that’s not my field of expertise. The film’s zombie-slayer was to be a woman in philosophy, which is why I was consulted. But I myself would undoubtedly be one of the first to go!

What are you working on at the moment?

Right now I’m working on politically manipulative speech. I’m especially interested in the case of dogwhistles – utterances whose apparent content is (at least to some people) very different from a further message that’s communicated surreptitiously. One kind of dogwhistle exploits something akin to ambiguity to address two audiences. A classic case of this from the US abortion opponents declaring their opposition to Dred Scott, a famous pro-slavery Supreme Court decision. To most people, this will seem irrelevant and a little strange (since few defend slavery nowadays), but to their fellow anti-abortion activists it’s a conventional signal of agreement. Another kind of dogwhistle works wholly outside of the audience’s awareness. A classic case here would be a political advertisement with absolutely no linguistic content about race, but accompanied by images suggesting black criminality. These turn out to be very effective at activating pre-existing racial attitudes without audiences even realizing it. And if they become aware of the racial messages, the ads cease to be effective. Philosophers have so far not studied dogwhistles much at all, but I think there’s a lot of rich and important material here.

The *BJUP* team is extremely grateful to Professor Saul for taking the time to answer our questions in such detail.

Issue 7(2)
Spring Conference 2014

*Subjective Certainty
and the Cartesian Project*

Fergus Peace

*Is Bruce Ackerman's Neutrality
Principle Susceptible to Hegel's Empty
Formalism Objection?*

Carl-Otto Frietsch

*Have you Heard the one
about the Gentle Norm-Breaker?*

Collis Tahzib

*What is the Relation
between Conditional and
Unconditional Hospitality?*

Joseph Palasz

*Critically Assess Nagel's
Defence of the Claim that
"... the World is not our World,
even Potentially"*

Madeleine Hyde

*'City in Words':
Hermeneutic analysis
of Plato's Republic*

Lukas Clark-Memler

*Wittgenstein, Heidegger,
Vagueness, and the
Sorites Paradox*

Jonathan P. Martindale

Interviews

Philosophy Bro

Miranda Fricker

Bob Hale

Angie Hobbs

Duncan Pritchard

Jennifer Saul



Journal of the British Undergraduate Philosophy Society

(Print) ISSN 1748-9393
(Online) ISSN 2051-5359