

THE TYRANNY OF METHOD: A PRAGMATIC DEFENSE OF PHILOSOPHICAL PLURALISM

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Abstract: The history of philosophy is in no small measure a series of attempts to institute a fail-safe method. In response to what they take to be the scandal of disagreement (disagreement itself being judged as scandalous), a number of historically influential philosophers (e.g., Descartes, Peirce, Husserl, and Carnap) have time and again tried to craft a method for guaranteeing agreement. In light of the failure of these attempts, this tendency might be seen as remotely analogous to what is called in psychoanalytic parlance a “repetition compulsion.” In any event, historical reflections on this repeated tendency promise to be illuminating. But there is a polemical purpose animating these historical reflections. The author tries, in light of these reflections, to render plausible the suggestion that this tendency amounts to a tyranny of method and, in turn, such tyranny results in an inevitable impoverishment of philosophical thought.

THE TOPIC of my essay is best brought into focus by recalling a central figure in the history of Western philosophy.¹ This recollection is, however, far from methodologically innocent. My deliberate turn toward a pivotal moment in our intellectual history – in brief, *my turn toward history* – will provide the basis for my critique of what I am disposed to identify as the *tyranny of method*. This tyranny is not so much exercised by any particular method as by the repeated impulse to institute a philosophical method of allegedly revolutionary significance. Most often, this impulse is bound up with the hope that philosophy can transform itself into a science (an unquestionable form of certain knowledge) either by adopting the method of science itself (e.g., the efforts of C. S. Peirce to transform philosophical inquiry into something essentially akin to an experimental science) or a method unique to itself (e.g., the commitment of Edmund Husserl to reform philosophical reflection so that it could serve as an indubitable foundation for all other domains of human inquiry). This impulse seems, to me at least, to be akin to a repetition compulsion. Only by reading the history of philosophy is this repetition (even innocently conceived) evident; moreover, the possibility of this tendency being akin to a pathological (or neurotic) drive – in particular, a repetition compulsion in the Freudian sense – is also an essentially historical question. To free ourselves (insofar as this is possible) from the impulse to institute a philosophical method – or, more likely, to follow a thinker such as Kant or Hegel, Husserl or Peirce, Carnap or

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Wittgenstein, Popper or Derrida, Gadamer or Foucault, who has seemingly made a momentous contribution by devising a revolutionary method – promises to make philosophy a more humane and liberal, more expansive and relevant discourse. The enactment of such intellectual freedom – the struggle against this repetition compulsion – will involve a critical engagement with various traditions, for diverse purposes and from divergent perspectives. Such engagement has as legitimate a claim to the title of philosophy as any other, at least if the history of this discourse is taken seriously.

I may seem to be positioning myself to find under a rock only what I have myself put there. Or, to alter the metaphor, the historical pluralism to be defended at the conclusion of my presentation will appear to some to be a stowaway allowed entrance at the outset of the journey. But I am not smuggling this “cargo” on board: I am rather explicitly announcing, here and now, the identity of my companion. Part of the justification for my procedure is that there is, in my judgment, no methodologically neutral place from which to commence any inquiry (cf. Dewey *MW* 10). As inquirers, we are caught up in histories far more subtle and telling than we are disposed to acknowledge. The degree to which this is so inclines me to portray human inquirers as historical actors involved in dramatic conflicts (cf. MacIntyre 2006). This is however to jump ahead of the story. All that I wanted to do in issuing this warning about my own tactic is to underscore that I am about to tell a story. Eventually, I want to propose that the history of philosophy is one in which, time and again, an invidious distinction is drawn between story-tellers and truth-seekers (see, e.g., Blackburn). Surprisingly, the stories that the self-avowed truth-tellers present about themselves and their motives are so often taken at face value as the truth about these matters. But, as this suggests, the truth about our own stance toward truth – our own individual and also disciplinary stance – might not only escape “geometrical” demonstration but also require *narrative* validation or (more likely) re-evaluation. That is, some form of historical narration is critical for philosophical inquiry, conceived as the pursuit of truth. But, then, the story-tellers seem more often than not strongly disposed to offer narratives in which even our most secure truths are exposed as nothing but disguised fictions, in which the telling distinction between truth and fiction is explained – or narrated! – away.

Story-Telling, Truth-Seeking, and Disciplinary Conflicts. So, at this point, simply allow me to pick up the story where so many of us commence its narration in our teaching – with that central figure in the history of Western modernity, the author of the *Meditations* and the *Discourse on Method*. Though many contemporary philosophers are in effect in agreement with Peirce’s counsel regarding the value of opening the dusty folios of the medieval schoolmen (these dusty folios are to a regrettable degree still unmined resources), far more are (I suspect) in agreement with Hegel who in his *History of Philosophy* announces, upon turning from medieval thought to the inaugural figure of modern philosophy:

Philosophy in its own proper soil separates itself entirely from the philosophizing theology [of the medieval epoch] ... and places it on quite another side. Here, we may say, we are at home, and like a mariner after a long voyage in a tempestuous

sea, we may now hail the sight of land; with Descartes the culture of modern thought, the thought of modern Philosophy, really begins to appear, after a long and tedious journey on the way which has led so far. (Hegel, 1995, 217)

Of his own journey, René Descartes his *Discours de la Méthode* (1637) informed his readers: “I consider myself very fortunate to have found myself, from my early youth, on certain paths which led me to considerations and maxims out of which I have constructed a method which, I think, enables me gradually to increase my knowledge and to raise it little by little to the highest point which the mediocrity of my mind and the short span of my life will allow it to reach” (Descartes, 1998, 28). Method would compensate for mediocrity and, in a sense, even for finitude (above all else, the finitude of any individual’s life and also the limitations of that person’s experience). It is far from insignificant that Descartes took the institution of this method to be the inauguration of a tradition. At the risk of being a champion of the obvious, let me stress that one of the principal architects in early modernity of anti-traditionalism is , as it turns out, actually not opposed to tradition as such (at least, any tradition rooted in the reforms he sought to institute in the practices of inquiry). The tradition of anti-traditionalism, however, tends to assume an unqualified stance toward its mortal foe. Even so, Descartes himself is explicit about the importance of an intergenerational community for the work of human inquiry:

having come across a path which seems to me such that, by following it, one must inevitably find one’s goal [the truth], provided one is not prevented either by the shortness of life or the lack of experiments, I judged that there was no better remedy against these two obstacles than faithfully to communicate to the public all the little I had found and to urge good minds to try to go beyond this in contributing, each according to his inclination and his capacity, to the experiments which must be made, and communicating also to the public everything they learned; so that, the last beginning where their predecessors had left off, and thereby linking the lives and labours of many, we might all together go much further than each man could individually. (Ibid. 79).

Tradition, derived from the Latin word *traditio* (meaning the activity of handing on or handing down), is both an ongoing process and a cumulative result. It is the process whereby one generation hands to the next what the earlier generation has itself inherited or discovered on its own. Tradition is also the consolidated result of this ongoing process (cf. Pieper).

The Cartesian project marks, then, a seemingly radical break with past intellectual traditions and a robust hope in the grandeur of a future one. Retrospectively, Descartes was an anti-traditionalist. He deliberately broke with the traditions of learning characteristic of the schools of his time. Prospectively, he was a traditionalist in the sense that he hoped to inaugurate a tradition of discovery and invention in which individual rationality (methodically exercised) and experimental results, methodically (hence, *publicly*) communicated would insure the inevitable growth of human knowledge (cf. Peters on reason as a tradition). Like Francis Bacon, Descartes imagined that the indefinite prolongation of our physical existence

was, in principle, a far from groundless fantasy. In other words, the fathers of modernity dreamed of the possibility of conquering death: These scientific visionaries at the inauguration of the modern epoch dreamt of the possible conquest of physical death, the indefinite prolongation of our earthly existence, thereby suggesting modern science might be, in its unbridled dreams of human power over natural processes, something akin to science fiction.

But let us turn back to the question of method, the dream of instituting a set of procedures by which steady progress is insured and human error all but eradicated (rather than the dream of conquering death). Early in the *Discours*, Descartes asserts, somewhat disingenuously, “my intention is not to teach here a method which everyone must follow if he is to conduct his reason correctly, but only to demonstrate how I have tried to conduct my own” (Ibid, 29). In his judgment, the tradition that would flow from his discovery of the path to truth, however, stands in marked contrast to the tradition enshrined in the universities, one in which the wisdom of the ancients, especially the teachings of Aristotle, are revered. “I am convinced,” he confessed, “that the most devoted of those who now follow Aristotle would think themselves happy if they had as much knowledge of nature as he had, even if it were a condition that they would never have more. They are like the ivy that does not seek to climb higher than the trees which support it, and which even often comes down again after reaching the top; for it seems to me that those people come down again, that is to say, become in some way less learned than if they abstained from study ...” (Ibid, 85). In sum, the schools tend to be sites of stupefaction. The assessment of his education at one of the finest universities in Europe, offered at the outset of his *Discours*, is unquestionably a harsh critique of established practices. Near its center is the conviction that reverence for the ancients spells, at best, an arrest of learning and, more likely, retrogression. One must deploy one’s own reason without undue deference for traditional authorities, no matter how widely revered and institutionally sanctified these authorities are (cf. Hegel).

Another point regarding the Cartesian approach must be highlighted. A moral judgment ultimately helps to underwrite Descartes’ harsh assessment of institutional learning. The fashion of philosophizing dominating the universities “is most convenient for those who have mediocre minds.” The obscurity encouraged by this fashion enables the schoolmen “to speak about all things as boldly as if they really knew them, and to maintain everything they say against the subtlest and most skillful, without anyone being able to convince them of their error” (Ibid, 85). He forcefully adds, in effect invoking the figure of Socrates: “if they wish to talk about all things, and to acquire the reputation of being learned, they will achieve this more easily by contenting themselves with verisimilitudes, which can be found without much trouble in all kinds of matters, than by seeking the truth, which is revealed only little by little and in a few matters, and which, when other matters arise, obliges one to confess frankly one’s ignorance” (Ibid, 86). For Descartes no less than Socrates, then, the advance of inquiry is predicated on the confession of ignorance (what Peirce, as anti-Cartesian a philosopher as any we are able to identify, would call a “contrite fallibilism”). The show of learning must be exposed for what it is – vainglorious

pretension – and the substance of discovery must be attained by the only means possible – conscientious adherence to an ultimately infallible method.

Descartes distilled the essence of his method into four rules or maxims. A method is, after all, an articulation or codification of rules. In Descartes' case, an expansive list of very specific rules is counterproductive (just as a state is, according to Descartes in his *Discours*, better ruled when it has only a few laws, since these laws are far more likely to be strictly observed, so too the conduct of inquiry is best undertaken under the guidance of a compact set of methodological guidelines). At the innermost center of Descartes' methodological innovation, then, is a short list of highly general rules thought by him to be especially useful in directing the mind in its search for truth. A rough paraphrase of his four rules for directing the mind to truth might serve here as a useful reminder of the Cartesian method. The first and most (in)famous of these rules is the methodological injunction to institute procedures of universal doubt, treating as completely false what is minimally dubious. The second is to divide difficulties "inside as many parts as possible," dealing with each one in an intensely focused manner. The third is to proceed in an orderly manner, the fourth to make enumerations so complete and summaries so inclusive as to insure that nothing has been left out. Of course, not everyone concurred. Indeed, Leibniz sneeringly responded to Descartes' proposal by translating it to mean: "Take what you need, and do what you should, and you will get what you want."

Giambattista Vico was another early critic of Descartes (cf. Berlin; MacIntyre; Miner). In his judgment, Descartes had done what those who have become tyrants have always been wont to do. They come to power by proclaiming the cause of freedom. But once they are assured of power, they become worse tyrants than their original oppressors" (*Seconda riposte*; Miner, 2002, 17). Moreover, the freedom promised turns out to be power increasingly diminished, since so much of the learning inquirers need to carry out their projects has been effectively jettisoned by Descartes (above all, the historical learning to which Vico had devoted so much of his intellectual life). So Vico suggests specifically regarding Descartes: "Young simpletons readily fall under his spell because the long labor of much reading is tiresome, and it is a great pleasure to the mind to learn so much so quickly." The sort of wide, deep learning to which Vico had devoted his life is, thus, effectively discredited by the Cartesian valorization of the individual mind. The disparaging sense of "scholastic" (or "academic") is, moreover, established – at least, solidified – by the Cartesian impulse to seek for objective truth by disciplined recourse to the infallible intuitions of the individual mind. In reference to Descartes at least, the turn toward the subject is not a turn away from objectivity; it is rather a turn toward the only source from which indubitable truth might be methodically derived by a series of incontestable intuitions. At least provisionally, the authority of memory no less than that of the senses is effectively discredited by Descartes' rigorous application of universal doubt; and it is not certain whether he is able to recover fully a sufficiently reliable form of human recollection, one adequate for the task of inquiry. But his individualism is linked to his intuitionism and, in turn, his intuitionism is a form of rationalism in which the power of *raison* (the capacity to see the logical connections

and discern the essential features of even any imaginable object) is allowed to eclipse the seemingly more humble powers of perceiving, remembering, and imagining.

For Vico and philosophers closer to our own time, however, the role of memory cannot be gainsaid. The Cartesian argument from radical doubt itself presupposes the relative stability of the pivotal terms on which this provisionally skeptical argument depends (not least of all the stability of the meaning of the word “doubt”). The meaning of that word itself is completely dependent on the reliability of memory, the capacity of the utterer or thinker to mean by *doubt* at one moment what that individual meant at earlier stages in the process of doubting. That is, the logical force of the argument depends entirely on the semantic stability of the rudimentary terms used to formulate this argument (cf. Kenny). Indeed, the work of reflection (including philosophical reflection) is, in the judgment of some thinkers, intimately bound up with that of recollection, reflection always being in some measure a form of recollection (Cf. Verene). “The work of the philosopher,” Wittgenstein goes so far as to suggest, “consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose” (Wittgenstein, 1958, #127). What has been *my* purpose in assembling these reminders of Descartes’ aspirations and, in addition, the harsh assessment of two other important figures in Western philosophy? It is to reflect on the nature of philosophy itself.

Toward this end, it is instructive to interpret philosophical controversies, even the most intense and protracted ones, as family quarrels. The shared assumptions underlying so many significant disagreements turn out to be, more often than not, of more far-reaching and deep-cutting significance than the manifest disagreements themselves. For example, consider the dispute between British empiricism and Continental rationalism (and even Kant’s ingenious synthesis of their conflicting claims). In general, the degree to which the disputing parties adhere to overlapping positions, even common presuppositions, establishes their kinship. Indeed, disagreement seems virtually to require kinship. Since significant disagreement presupposes shared commitments, all philosophical quarrels are, at bottom, family squabbles, though the contestants might be only quite distantly related to one another. Moreover, the quarrel might reach a level of such acrimony that the impulse to disown the other becomes irresistible. The identity of the philosopher is bound up, historically and presently, with the tendency to denounce others as sophists, that is, to banish not so much the poets as our philosophical rivals from the republic of philosophy (cf. Smith). Of course, we are not banishing our philosophical rivals, since the act of banishment effectively means that those banished do not count – for us, at least – *as* philosophers. But the presumed authority to reject *in toto* a philosophical other – someone who does philosophy in such a markedly different manner from the way that we do that we cannot (or will not) recognize their contributions to philosophy, indeed, their utterances *as* philosophy – is at once understandable (though not necessarily indefensible) and potentially debilitating. One has only to think of the whole dismissal of Jacques Derrida by certain segments of professional philosophers, a philosopher who has read more widely deeply than many departments of philosophy. Or one has only to think of the studied ignorance of Willard van Orman Quine by other professional philosophers.

There is a dilemma here. On the one hand, intellectual conscience demands that something can be done so ineptly or so fraudulently that it fails to count as philosophy. On the other hand, “contrite fallibilism” requires us to acknowledge not only the possibility that we do not know what we are doing but also the likelihood that we might be mistaken about the value and significance of what we (often by our own admission) find baffling or even incomprehensible. Not everything or anything can count as philosophy. But, then, should it be the case that only those things which conform strictly to the patterns and paradigms of one’s own tradition or perspective deserve to be accorded the status of philosophy?

An example of just how tricky this can be should help, though not an example concerned with distinguishing philosophy from what is undeserving of this title but one focusing on an analysis of an ever timely topic. Has Harry Frankfurt in his widely read and (from an unscientific survey) deeply respected *On Bullshit* saved us from bullshit, contributed to bullshit, both, or neither? Nonsense must be identified as such and bullshit must not be allowed to pass unchallenged, but the concluding sentence of Frankfurt’s essay (albeit an essay packaged and marketed as a book) should be recalled here:

As conscious beings, we exist only in response to other things, and we cannot know ourselves at all without knowing them. Moreover, there is nothing in theory, and certainly nothing in experience, to support the extraordinary judgment that it is the truth about ourselves that it is easiest for a person to know. Facts about ourselves are not peculiarly solid and resistant to skeptical dissolution. Our natures are, indeed, elusively insubstantial – notoriously less stable and less inherent than the natures of other things. And insofar as this is the case, sincerity itself is bullshit. (Frankfurt, 2005, 66-67).

Frankfurt has set out sincerely to offer a useful analysis of what he takes to be a prevalent phenomenon in (arguably, a defining characteristic of) the contemporary scene. But he is too sincere – here as well as everywhere else, too honest – to resist noting a possible implication of his own probing analysis. On *Bullshit* just might be yet another example of what it attempts to expose. This is so since the identification of bullshit depends on the detection of insincerity, but such detection in our own case is far from “the easiest [thing] for a person to know.”

History is full of irony, intellectual history certainly no less than its other branches. Take the example of the actual development of analytic philosophy in the twentieth century. And let us begin by taking A. J. Ayer’s history of this development as presented in *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*. Chapter 1 is entitled “The Revolt against Hegel.” A decade after the publication of Ayer’s history, however, Robert Brandom’s *Making It Explicit* (1994) would appear. Brandom is only one of a significant number of analytically trained philosophers who take Hegel with the utmost seriousness. Indeed, while the opening decade of the twentieth century marked the revolt against Hegel, the concluding one witnessed *within* analytic philosophy itself the return, with a vengeance, of this alleged obscurantist. To borrow an expression crafted for another purpose, the vitality of

great philosophers exhibits itself nowhere more dramatically than in the irrepressible power of these authors to bury, time and again, their undertakers (Gilson, 306).

Some philosophers however contend that the best way to understand analytic philosophy is in terms of its methodological character. This approach to philosophy involves, they insist, nothing more (but also nothing less) than a conscientious commitment to a particular way of doing philosophy. Analytic philosophers do not necessarily share substantive conclusions (one could as easily be an anti-realist as a realist, a reductive materialist as a mind-body dualist); however, they do inevitably agree, in practice, how the business of philosophy is to be conducted. At the very least, they take their task to encompass conceptual clarification and rigorous argumentation. Obscurity masquerading as profundity is to be exposed as such – as obscurity, not profundity. As such philosophers are disposed to portray themselves, they possess the courage and candor of the child in the fairy tale who regarding the emperor's new clothes are unembarrassed to pronounce that the monarch is in fact naked. This seems to be to be often an accurate self-portrayal. But the ease and confidence with which so many invoke this image as a self-image are, in my judgment, suspect. That is, the unqualified assurance with which they ascribe such simple courage to themselves is an invitation to raise an eyebrow.

At what price is such an overriding preoccupation with clarification and argumentation purchased? How do the commitments to clarity and probity actually operate in philosophy? Rather polemically, then, I want to suggest that the demand for clarity and the demand for evidence have been so fiercely inscribed in the philosophical psyches of some individuals (have become such defining facets of a punitive voice in the inner forum of their philosophical conscience) that other intellectual values stand little chance of staking a claim or making a difference (values such human salience or enhanced understanding about substantive matters beyond the simplest cases).

Consider two examples, the first being R. A. Sharpe's *Philosophy of Music: An Introduction*, the second Akeel Bilrami's *Resentment & Self-Knowledge*. In the Introduction to this informative and insightful study of music, Sharpe confesses: "as my own philosophical life nears its end I have become increasingly disenchanted with the tradition of philosophical analysis, not because few analyses have been successfully completed but because, when the concepts are interesting, they cannot be" (emphasis added). Since he is trained in this tradition, he takes pains immediately to explain what he means, to clarify the operative meaning of his pivotal expression: "philosophical analysis is the programme that attempts to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of a concept like 'knowledge' or 'truth' or [most relevant to the study he is introducing] 'work of art.'". Sharpe is fully aware of the likely reaction to his avowed disenchantment: "For many philosophers, conceptual analysis is their *raison d'être* and to challenge it is to challenge something deeply lodged within their philosophical ideology" (cf. Colapietro). But he also makes explicit where he stands as a philosopher: "To reject the programme of analysis is not to object to the tradition of analytic philosophy. This book [*Philosophy of Music*] is in that tradition. I am interested in positions that can be stated clearly and defended by argument" (Sharpe, 2004, 7). What he goes on

to say is also worthy of our attention: “Ideally, I want to know what the world must be like if a philosophical claim is to be true. Otherwise, I do not think philosophy is an intellectual discipline and [if it is not such a discipline] there is no reason to practice it” (Ibid, 7-8). To repeat, Sharpe wants to know what the world must be like for a philosophical claim to be true.

Allow me to say that a philosopher trained in the pragmatist, phenomenological, hermeneutic, or other traditions is likely to suppose there is something odd (perhaps exceedingly odd) in Sharpe’s insistence regarding what the world *must be* like (“Ideally, I want to know what the world must be like if a philosophical claim is to be true”). Is not our task to determine what philosophical utterances must sound like if our experience of the world is accorded its full weight and disruptive disclosures? What form and character must philosophical claims be like if the world *is* what it discloses itself to be in our experience or (for those who incline in the opposite direction of the empiricist orientation) to our Reason?

In any event, part of the *practical* significance of Sharpe’s continuing identification with the analytic tradition is his ability to dismiss out of hand, apparently in good philosophical conscience, the work of not only Arthur Schopenhauer but also Susanne K. Langer (Ibid, 8): “This [identification] means,” he informs us, “that the ideas of some writers on music find no place here, writers such as Arthur Schopenhauer and Susanne Langer.” He carries a moment to confess that he cannot make sense out of Schopenhauer’s claim that music is the image of the will itself, but does not deign to say another word why the work of Langer is, from an analytic perspective, so woefully deficient as to merit wholesale neglect. It is actually hard for me to imagine why an analytically trained philosopher would not find Langer, who took such exquisite care to define terms and to marshal evidence, a kindred spirit.

Very quickly, allow me to touch upon the other example. Chapter One of Bilrami’s *Self-Knowledge and Resentment* opens with a confession of its own: “A philosopher ... often fondly hopes, but in all likelihood vainly, that some non-philosophers might also read his book.” But, perhaps given his title, the author wants to avoid misleading the non-philosophers among his readers: Should such readers take up this book, “I must warn against disappointing two natural expectations they might have.” “First is the expectation that a book about self-knowledge will be about knowledge of something we call a ‘self.’” If this is the expectation of a reader, that individual will be disappointed. For the exclusive focus of this painstaking study is rather “our own states of mind,” narrowly considered (that is, only the more “canonical” states of mind, mainly beliefs and desires, “not the entire range of intentional states”). “Second, there is bound to be the expectation that a book on the subject of self-knowledge of our intentional states of mind will focus on particularly interesting states of mind ...” (Bilrami, 2006, 1). If this is the expectation of a reader, however, that individual will again be disappointed. In his defense, Akeel Bilgrami stresses, “there are often very interesting reasons for why we must sometimes spend a lot of time on the uninteresting aspects of a subject. A good deal of philosophy is defined by this mildly paradoxical *method*” (Ibid, 2; emphasis added). We take inherently interesting questions and, as a result of the methods deployed to address

these questions, we transform them into humanly uninteresting questions (at least, ones very few outside of philosophy have much patience with or interest in). Indeed, cultivated interest in seemingly uninteresting (at least, commonplace) phenomena seems to be integral to this and, indeed, other styles of philosophizing (cf. Peirce). This is not altogether inappropriate or unjustifiable, given the insights to be obtained from painstaking consideration of what are, properly understood, as preliminary matters. This however approaches the paradoxical, if not the absurd, when undeniable ingenuity is exhibited in defending what all sane persons would never dream of denying, of reclaiming what only the mad have lost (cf. Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*) – that there is a world, that there are minds other than my own, that you and I effectively know countless things. Puzzling about such puzzles can be illuminating, but the insights derived from our engagement with such insights should then be used to probe more deeply substantial questions possessing undeniable human salience.

So, for me at least, the question is not the one posed by Sharpe (What must the world be like if philosophical questions are to be true?). It is rather: What must philosophy be – better, what might philosophy sound like - if it is a response to the interesting features of our actual world, as these features are disclosed in our encounters with the world? One presumes that it would be like the definitive intonations of such singular voices as Plato and Aristotle, Augustine and Thomas, Descartes and Vico, Locke and Leibniz, Kant and Hegel, Davidson and Cavell, James and Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger, Searle and Derrida. It would also sound like Sharpe and Bilgrami. These two authors are not only ingenious and subtle; they are also insightful and, indeed, interesting. What makes them so is that they (especially Sharpe) have given themselves over to their subject matter, immersed themselves in the concrete particulars of human experience (cf. Hegel).

I quoted above Sharpe's observation that to question the analytic approach is "to challenge something deeply lodged within ... [the] philosophical *ideology*" (emphasis added) of individuals trained in this particular tradition. This seems to me just right, perhaps expressed more fully than he realized. One of the best characterizations of ideology with which I am familiar is the one offered by David McLellan at the conclusion of his monograph on this topic: *Ideology*

... is best viewed not as a separate system of signs and symbols that could ever be contrasted with – and eventually replaced by – another [system], e.g., science of some sort. Ideology is rather an aspect of every system of signs and symbols in so far as they are implicated in an asymmetrical distribution of power and resources. And of which system is this not the case? (McLellan, 1986, 83).

If this is true (and I take it to be so), then philosophical discourse inevitably possesses an ideological aspect. It is caught up in trivial and momentous, obvious and covert, ways in the operations of power at various levels, not least of all the disciplinary and more locally institutional levels (also the immediately interpersonal level). In a sense, the focus of my concern in this essay is the reasonable, fair, and humane exercise of power within the discourse of philosophy, how we as self-conscious

participants in an ongoing endeavor must be not only attuned to the ideological aspects of our own discourse but also attentive to the political fallout of our distinctive modes of philosophical engagement (cf. Bernstein 1991).

In another sense, however, the focus of my concern is what I announced at the outset – method. Since my concern is with the pedagogical as well as philosophical implications of our fixation on method, it is inseparable from my concern with ideology. Philosophy has been, as much as anything else, *a quest for a method* whereby we would be able to resolve rationally² the disagreements and conflicts that define the history of this discipline or discourse. Whether these disagreements and conflicts are internal to philosophy or whether they are symptomatic of broader and deeper cultural impasses is itself a matter of philosophical dispute (cf. Dewey *LW* 1, 186). On the one hand, there are those of us who devote ourselves to strictly philosophical questions that might be of no interest to anyone but philosophers or, more likely, a subset of intellectuals trained in the severe discipline of a more or less insular tradition of philosophical reflection. It is not untoward to mention in this connection those questions which would never have occurred to us had we not read this or that philosopher (“I do not think the world or the sciences would ever have suggested to me,” G. E. Moore confesses in “An Autobiography,” “any philosophical problems. What has suggested philosophical problems to me is the things which other philosophers have said about the world or the sciences”). On the other hand, there returns, time and again, the hope among some of us that there is a significant overlap between humanly significant questions and philosophically *interesting* ones.

In *A Pluralistic Universe*, William James asserts: “In a subject like philosophy it is really fatal to lose connexion with the open air of human nature, and to think in terms of shop-tradition only” (James, 1977, 13). “Such are the rules of the professorial game – they think and write from each other and for each other and to each other. With the exclusion of the open air all true perspective gets lost, extremes and oddities count as much as sanities, and command the same attention, and if by chance anyone writes popularly and about results only, with his mind directly focused on the subject,” that author is almost certainly going to be condemned for being “literary.”

But James is to some extent part of the problem as well as a resource for reframing our understanding of philosophy. Philosophical professionalism, like all other forms, “can go to abusive extremes. The end is after all more than the way, in most human things, and forms and methods may easily frustrate their own purpose” (Ibid, 12)

Though he originally introduced pragmatism simply and modestly in the form of a maxim, even Peirce came to characterize pragmatism as a method. In doing so, he (like James) was unwittingly revealing the extent to which the pragmatist revolt against the Cartesian position was a family quarrel. In a letter to his close friend and, in some respects, philosophical ally James, Peirce once wrote in a letter (March 9,

² Much of the dispute is generated by contrasting visions of human reason, ranging from strict logical necessity to much “looser” conceptions of the appropriate or effective forms of rational resolution.

1909): “The only thing I have ever striven to do in philosophy has been to analyze sundry concepts with exactitude; and to do this it is necessary to use terms with strict scientific precision.” He however bemoaned the way words tended to be used by philosophers, not least of all, his correspondent along with a thinker with whom James at the time had become enthralled. “But that being my only claim to consideration [to have analyzed sundry concepts with exactitude and, in that service, to have used philosophical terms with precision], and it being a deeper conviction with me that philosophy is either a science or is balderdash, and that a man who seeks to use the terms of his science without anxious care to use them with strict accuracy, it is not very grateful [gratifying] to my feelings to be classed along with a Bergson who seems to be doing his prettiest to muddle all distinctions” (Perry, 1935, 438). James’ compliment is, in short, taken by Peirce to be an insult, for reasons Peirce apparently feels that James should have realized. Lest there be any doubt about the matter, Peirce emphatically writes: “For my part, I think philosophy is, or ought to be, an exact science, and not a kaleidoscopic dream” (ibid.). In a late, important statement of his position, vis-à-vis James, Schiller, and others who have identified themselves with the movement tracing its origin to his earlier essays, Peirce insists: “pragmatism is, in itself, no doctrine of metaphysics, no attempt to determine any truth of things. It is merely a method of ascertaining the meanings of hard words and of abstract concepts” (CP 5.464). He comes shortly to qualify this characterization: pragmatism is “a method of ascertaining the meanings, not of all ideas, but only of what I call ‘intellectual concepts,’ that is to say, of those [concepts] upon the structure of which, arguments concerning objective facts may hinge” (CP 5.467).

In “What Pragmatism Means,” James himself introduces pragmatism, first, as a method and, only thereafter, as a theory of truth in a sense involving only a special application of the pragmatic method to a traditional philosophical question. “The pragmatic method is,” he insists, “primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that would otherwise be interminable” (James, 1907, p. 28).

Richard J. Bernstein slyly observes: “Most contemporary philosophers have been in revolt against the Cartesian framework. Descartes is frequently called the father of modern philosophy. If we are to judge by philosophy during the past hundred years, this title can best be understood in a Freudian sense. It is a common characteristic of many contemporary philosophers [as indeed it was a decisive tendency of even early modern ones] that they have sought to overthrow and dethrone the father” (Bernstein, 1971, 5).

Descartes, Kant, Peirce, Husserl, and countless other philosophers are scandalized by the sheer fact of philosophical disagreement and, in response, they propose a method by which these disagreements would be rationally resolved or, in some instances, dissolved. The impulse to institute the method by which philosophical controversies might be, once and for all, resolved is a strong one, even (*especially*) when it steals into the walls of the city under the cloak of anarchy (when it presents itself as anti-method or the rejection of methodism altogether).

Philosophy is indisputably a tangle of traditions in which a fixation on method has threatened to become, with the ascendancy of any single tradition, a form of tyranny. Monarchs do not have to be beheaded, regicide is not requisite, at least if

those who are in control of the realm cede what is after all a fantastic, unsustainable claim – exclusive possession of legitimate authority. Disciplinary self-knowledge thus demands historical self-interrogation. This does not reduce philosophy to its history though the various attempts to do so (most notably, Hegel's) can be extremely illuminating to those who reject this reduction. It does make familiarity with the history of philosophy integral to the practice of philosophy. So, I am disposed to answer Quine's quip with Smith's smite. Willard von Orman Quine famously quipped: people go into philosophy for one of two reasons – some are interested in the history of philosophy and some in philosophy. John E. Smith pointedly observed that every philosopher is preoccupied with the history of their discipline, although this preoccupation extends in some cases beyond the last two issues of the journals *Mind* or *The Journal of Philosophy*. What then am I practically recommending to my colleagues but above all to students here and elsewhere? An historical approach in which (among other topics) the perennial fixation on philosophical method is both historically contextualized and critically assessed. Such an approach does not beg the question of whether this or that method is superior, or the question whether the quest for a method is always an unfortunate abridgment of philosophical imagination. What such an approach *does* insure is that no tradition will have, in advance of inquiry, an unearned presumption in favor of its methodological superiority. Moreover, it insinuates a genuine doubt (rather than a merely paper one) that the fixation on instituting a method is as innocent or unobjectionable as it appears. While the aims of inquiry might be antecedently defined (that is, the aims of inquiry are set in advance of undertaking the task itself), the aims of query might emerge in the course of the endeavor itself. The necessity of holding open the question of the meaning of an endeavor – of refusing to presume too hastily or confidently that we have in advance of engaging in the endeavor itself an adequate understanding of its innermost character – would seem to be a necessity especially congenial to the philosophical mind. Not only philosophy but also psychoanalysis and education illustrate this point. Can we in a psychoanalytic exchange work toward deconstructing our impoverished and impoverishing certainties regarding what is normal or healthy, thereby allowing for unimagined (apart from such deconstruction, unimaginable) possibilities to seduce us? Can we make the task of education to be, in part, an effective interrogation of the defining goals of that process itself? Can we suspend even just provisionally our presumption to know what we, as philosophers, are about? Can we engage in the task of philosophizing itself without the assurance of knowing in advance of engagement whether we are going or, even more radically, what we are doing? If we cannot provisionally suspend this presumption, what does *that* say about us as philosophers?

For me, the operative term is, hence, tradition, not method (cf. Feyerabend). Since many of the most important philosophical traditions define themselves in terms of methodological innovations, and since I take such methodological self-understanding to be of undeniable significance, I do not suppose that it is permissible (much less wise) to ignore either the question of method or the centrality of this question as it actually took hold in the most important traditions of philosophical discourse. Even so, Husserl no less than Wittgenstein, Peirce no less than Carnap,

James no less than Gadamer, have more to teach us than method. The paths they have traveled are still ones affording us views of stunning vistas and, in all likelihood, opening onto to still undiscovered byways. Moreover, their manner of keeping records of their sojourns over the land of thought (cf. Wittgenstein) are in most instances immensely instructive still. To alter the metaphor somewhat, their cartographical innovations are even more valuable than their detailed maps of what, until their explorations, were uncharted terrain. Even so, their insights are not reducible to either their first-order methods or (as Peirce was fond of saying) their method of methods, that is, their method for devising and refining methods. They reveal as much as anything else that genius is indispensable, imagination is vital, and any method can compensate for mediocrity only to a very modest degree.

Conclusion: To return to a question posed above, what would philosophical utterances sound like if they are articulated as responses to the humanly interesting features of our actual world, as these features are disclosed in our encounters with the world (cf. Cavell)? Because of the various impulses and interests animating philosophers, they would sound quite different from the dismissive intonations of such a large segment of professional philosophers. I very much doubt that the tone of ridicule would be nearly as audible as it tends to be in our professional discourses, especially when the rhetoric of ridicule is in the service of banishment. They might sound childlike, on occasion even childish, but the harshly punitive intonations of condemnation and dismissal would likely be less audible in philosophy discourse.

The study of philosophy should reveal itself as a multifarious discourse in some of the luminous shapes it has actually assumed in our tangled histories and, in addition, this study should reveal the shapes of these histories, above all, as aids in carrying forward the work of philosophy. In this regard, philosophy is more like history and literature than science, though I do not want to draw too sharp a distinction between scientific investigations and humanistic pursuits (Isaiah Berlin). History and historiography have histories as do natural languages and the diverse literatures rooted in these diverse languages. Just as an historian who is ignorant of Herodotus and Thucydides would be suspect, so to a philosopher who had no more or less intimate acquaintance with Plato and Aristotle, Descartes and Spinoza, Locke and Hume, Kant and Hegel, Peirce and James, Wittgenstein and Quine, Heidegger and Sartre. James with his characteristic eloquence writes:

Philosophy is a queer pursuit, reckoned, as it sometimes is, to be the most sublime, and sometimes to be the most trivial, of human preoccupations. ... Be it trivial or sublime, philosophy is as indestructible a human function as art is. Men always have attempted and always will attempt to make their minds dwell in a more reasonable world, just as they always have sought and always will seek to make their cities and their homes more beautiful. The thinker philosophizes as the lover loves. Even were the consequences not only useless, but hurtful, he must obey his impulse ... (Perry, 1935, 378)

This impulse is, as James seems to imply here, often obsessional. It can be ennobling even if it is in its origin or operation less than inherently noble, for this impulse can

prompt us, time and again, to question our presumptions to know, in a word, our knowingness. Indeed, nothing undermines our efforts to know more effectively than our knowingness.

The impulse to excommunicate some rival whom we are unwilling even to recognize as such is bound up with the confidence of having hit upon a method by which to distinguish truth from error, meaning from nonsense, even philosophy from sophistry or balderdash or, of course, bullshit. While Descartes has contributed greatly to buttressing such confidence, Vico has (long before Nietzsche and Foucault) painstakingly constructed genealogies wherein such claims regarding method are seen in a distinctively human light. There is certainly no small irony in the fact that Vico himself (much like Peirce several centuries later) was engaged in crafting an anti-Cartesian method, but a method nonetheless. Even so, he saw in Descartes a tyrant who would free us from the burden of having to read the ancients: he desecrated such self-avowed freedom as self-inflicted slavery.

Allow me, then, to conclude with yet another example of a contemporary philosopher whom I tend to admire for his clarity and rigor. In a review of an English translation of Martin Heidegger's *Beitrage* ("Enquivering") in *The New Republic*, October 30, 2000, 43-48), Simon Blackburn draws an invidious distinction between analytic and Continental philosophy. He observes:

Analytic philosophy is sometimes contrasted unfavorably with 'Continental' philosophy, because of its supposed lack of political and moral weight. ... What I think is true is that analytical philosophy is profoundly mistrustful of sustaining myths, including the primal story. We resist the pipes of Pan, because we care about truth. (Blackburn, 2000, 48)

He goes on to assert: "The love of truth above fog is a commitment that anybody who deserves to be called a philosopher has to make ..." I recall this implicit narrative regarding contemporary philosophy principally for two reasons. First, I want to propose that this is just that – a story with a rather comically (or crudely) conceived *dramatis personae* (those who love truth versus those who love fog). Second, I want to insinuate a doubt. Can it be the case that anyone who offers such a manifestly polemical narration of contemporary philosophy (and does so without any apparent self-consciousness or sense of the possibility of ironic implication in self-obfuscating discourse) has resisted the pipes of Pan, has truly avoiding the subtle seductions of a sustaining myth? Whatever my doubts are regarding Cartesian doubt, I have no doubt about the salutary effects of a tempered skepticism. Frankfurt's attempt to draw a categorically sharp distinction between bullshit and its opposites almost inevitably boomerang (as his concluding paragraph virtually acknowledges), suggesting that, as a historical actor implicated in a complex drama, the best he can offer are revisable and situated judgments regarding the status of another's claims or arguments. By leveling the charge against others, he opens himself eventually to being the target of his own charge. The extent to which he can evade the charge is a matter to be ascertained by critical attention to the salient details, not by the purity of self-ascribed intentions or motives. Likewise, Blackburn's polemical account of

contemporary philosophy inevitably exposes itself to the charge of being a sustaining myth perpetuated by a certain segment of predominantly Anglophone philosophers (cf. Magee). Certainly, the self-ascription of the purest motives to *us*, and the ascription of base ones to *them*, ought in itself to engender suspicion.

One does not need a method to guard oneself against the possibility of such self-deception. Indeed, the presumption of having in one's possession a singularly effective method or simply having been trained in a uniquely self-critical manner (having been the beneficiary of a method or tradition in itself sufficient to protect oneself from accrediting bullshit or dancing to the pipes of Pan) – this very presumption – renders us especially prone to such self-deception.

Anti-traditionalism is, as we have already noted, itself a tradition, though one which as effectively disguised its character and status as such, especially to its own champions. The methodological dust in their eyes appears to preclude them from seeing the traditional character of their defining commitments. The more vociferous forms of philosophical denunciation, especially ones castigating others for perpetuating fog, are themselves, more often than not, instances of obfuscation. The most sincere analysis of bullshit might³ fail, lapsing, in some respects, into its own unsuspected insincerity. A historical approach to philosophical questions would – at least, *might* – help us see this. It might also alert us to the virtual inevitability of turning this approach itself into another example of the tyranny of method. There is, in the end, no place outside of the swamp of history (also the sweep of history), wherein as often as not we extricate one foot from the devouring muck only to have the other one sink deeper into the bog (cf. James 1979, 127). Despite this inescapable condition, we manage – however haltingly and imperfectly – to clarify somewhat the meaning of our terms, to construct telling arguments, to counter seemingly devastating counterexamples, to construct disclosive narratives, and to accomplish much else. Historical actors caught up in unfolding dramas are hardly ever simply unwitting dupes. While much happens behind their backs, not everything does. Indeed, their very competencies and excellences are more than anything what tends to land such actors in perplexing and perilous predicaments. In time, their successes tend to be more perilous and perplexing than their failures and frustrations. Retracing their steps – reconstructing the series of entangled actions and events by which they have been thrust into such predicaments – can prove to be *a* way of going on, in some case even a way of going forward. It is a path we ineluctably are invited to travel. As such, it tempts us to elevate just this way of proceeding into the method of philosophizing. However strong this compulsion, however seductive this temptation, they are best resisted – deconstructed, clarified, interrogated, re-narrated, and confronted by the resources available to us from a variety of traditions.

³ Given what Frankfurt argues at the conclusion of *On Bullshit*, it might be that it must fail, that is, a reasonable interpretation of his painstaking analysis is that protestations regarding our own sincerity our always suspect, perhaps the treatment of this topic necessarily (to some degree) an unwitting exemplification of it.

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