



Jonathan Barnes, Myles Fredric Burnyeat, Raymond Geuss, Barry Stroud

Modes of philosophizing

A round table debate

Should philosophy have something to say to non-philosophers? Should philosophy be pursued only by those trained in philosophy? Should academic teachers of philosophy consider themselves philosophers in virtue of the fact that they teach philosophy? And should analytic philosophers deny that continental philosophers are philosophers at all, or acknowledge that they represent different modes of philosophizing? *Cogito* poses some big questions to four prominent British and US philosophers.

Cogito: Do you think that philosophy as pursued by philosophers has something to say which is, or should be, of some relevance to the way non-philosophers think about the world and their life? Is it desirable that philosophers make an effort to make those aspects of philosophy which are relevant in this way available to non-philosophers?

Jonathan Barnes: Put the question as broadly as that, and the answer can only be: Yes. In any event, strange though it may seem, quite a number of non-philosophers have some sort of interest in philosophical issues. My brother, for example, is much possessed by death, and he likes me to tell him what this or that philosopher has said about the subject.

Still, I suspect that what you want to ask is something more like this: Have philosophers, *qua* philosophers, anything to say which might bear upon the non-philosophical concerns of non-philosophers? Well, I'm afraid that the answer to that is rather boring: "Yes — but not very much".

After all, how much do a philosopher's philosophical concerns impinge upon his own non-philosophical concerns? Some bits don't impinge in the slightest — philosophy of mathematics, say, and in general (most) philosophy of science. Some bits look as though they ought to impinge but in fact scarcely do — aesthetics, for example. (At least, nothing I've ever read on the philosophy of music has had, or could conceivably have, the slightest effect on my opera-going.) Or again, epistemology. No doubt any decent philosopher who has a smattering of epistemology will be fairly sceptical in his ordinary life — sceptical in the common or garden sense of the word. But then any decent rational being will be fairly sceptical.

But surely, you will cry, moral philosophy must impinge on Real Life? After all, we do ethics — as Aristotle says — in order to become good, don't we? And surely logic must impinge? Isn't it the science of reasoning? And don't we all want to reason as sharply as we can? — Well, glance about at our colleagues. There's Professor W, who has written some brilliant pieces on

ethics: Is he more honourable in his philandering than my neighbour Bernard? And there's Professor D, the most competent logician of the age: Are his practical reasonings better regulated than those of my neighbour Brian? The answers are: No, and No. Moreover, I incline strongly to think that ethics, as it's done by philosophers, is more likely to confuse than to enlighten non-philosophers, and that logic, as it's done by logicians, tends to produce logic-choppers rather than reasoners.

No doubt I'm a crusty old cynic. In any case, I don't believe that professional philosophy has much to offer non-philosophers on non-philosophical matters. Why should it have?

Of course, some philosophers *do* like to think that aspects of their professional studies have or should have a relevance to Real Life; and some of them *do* like to address the Common Man. They do it, I hope, for the money — and good luck to them. But far more often than not the results are pretty horrible.

Myles Burnyeat: On 24 April 1993 I took part in a popular weekly BBC radio programme, entitled *Ad Lib.*, chaired by Robert Robinson, in which people in *odd* professions talked about what they did. Once upon a time, when I was a young fellow at University College London, the BBC would regularly broadcast interesting philosophical talks by the likes of Gilbert Ryle, David Pears, and Bernard Williams, and publish them subsequently in a wonderful weekly journal (sadly, now defunct) called *The Listener*, which would appear on the newsstands alongside the *Economist*, *Spectator*, and *New Statesman*. Then we were mainstream, not an odd profession. But now the BBC had reclassified us as an oddity, worthy of Robert Robinson's splendidly acerbic attention alongside two varieties of psychotherapist (broadcast in alternate weeks, lest they fall into a quarrel), lighthouse keepers, and other queer folk. We did not complain. For a moment, queer as we might be, we had the attention of the whole country.

Problem: among that "we", among the ten or so "odd" persons present in the studio, one was different, and different in a way that Robert Robinson persistently failed to understand. Robinson kept assuming that we each had our own philosophy. Most of us knew we had no such thing. We had dedicated our lives to teaching. Teaching the thoughts of the great philosophers of the past and those of the most prominent philosophers of the present. The exception was Michael Dummett. He has (I use the present tense deliberately) his own philosophy in the traditional sense of an original system of thought. But its focus is the philosophy of language, which has everything to do with how we talk, little or nothing to do with what we say when we do talk, still less with how we should live.

This is not because Dummett does not care. *Frege: The Philosophy of Language* is renowned, not only for its rigorous and highly original exposition of the thought of his philosophical hero, and not only for the author's independent development of his own philosophy of language in dialogue with Frege, but also for its brief preface, in which Dummett reveals his shock on discovering, when he visited the Frege archives, the racism of his respected interlocutor. The reason the book had been late to the press was the years Dummett had spent practically combating racism at home in Britain. This was a case, a legitimate case, in which practice and theory remained apart.

Returning to the original question, as put above, we should distinguish (a) "is of some relevance to non-philosophers", (b) "its relevance can be grasped by

non-philosophers". The first is easier to illustrate than the second. And both depend both on which philosophers you look at and which non-philosophers you canvass. What I can say is that when, many years ago in 1987, I did the opening "Plato" slot for Brian Magee's highly successful TV series *The Great Philosophers* (the videos are still on sale), my mailbag came from all over the country and from all types of person. One has only to look at the Penguin translations of Plato omnipresent in the better British bookshops to appreciate that he at least, of the Greek philosophers, continues to speak to a wide audience in our totally different modern world.

A much more important example for British readers is Elizabeth Anscombe's famous radio talk "Does Modern Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth?" The controversy that ensued in the pages of *The Listener* went on for months, involving both "professional philosophers" and "non-philosophers". It was truly a national debate. At a more strenuously intellectual level, think of the lengthy essays in legal philosophy that Ronnie Dworkin used to write regularly in the *New York Review of Books*.

So I do believe that philosophy has *some* things to say which are (and can, if appropriately presented, be perceived to be) of relevance to non-philosophers. But it would be ridiculous to think that this is or should be true of everything that philosophers produce. Philosophy did not come into the world to change it, but — before aspiring to change it for the better — to understand it. Which must include understanding those features of the world that no one can change.

It is desirable that *all* aspects of philosophy are made available to non-philosophers, but it takes a certain kind of talent which it is no fault to lack. And also no fault to possess. I say this because I am sometimes criticized since, on occasion, I deliver my thoughts to popular newsstand magazines rather than to professional journals. My latest venture in this mode, published in the *London Review of Books*, is designed to make available to the general reader how much less we specialists know about Pythagoras than we used to do. It also contains one new idea designed to shock and surprise the specialists. Why should I not communicate in this way?

Raymond Geuss: Politicians often use relatively abstract concepts such as "democracy", "freedom", "human rights", "welfare", "market", "equality", "the international community", "sovereignty", "terrorist", "justice", "modernization", "the rule of law", and secularism, in trying to justify particular courses of action. Many of these concepts are internally complex; many are ambiguous and have a variety of different meanings. The use of many of these concepts is historically integrated into forms of argument in which theoretical, descriptive, interpretative and evaluative claims are inextricably mixed. Thus, in the contemporary world, "democracy" is not generally used as a merely empirical term to pick out a set of observable institutions, but refers both to a range of particular political institutions (multi-party electoral systems on the French, the British, or the American models) and at the same time gives to those arrangements a particular aspirational interpretation (elections of this kind purportedly give "the people" "power" over their collective life). The use of the term "democracy" (and related terms) is clearly not evaluatively neutral; to call something "undemocratic" in early twenty-first century Europe is not merely to describe it in a certain way but to criticize it.

In some individual cases it is not necessary to have a very clear or extensive understanding of the concepts used in a particular political argument in order

to evaluate the policies they are invoked to support. Thus, when George W. Bush claimed at various points to be invading Iraq in order to bring "democracy" to the Middle East, it did not require complex conceptual analysis, historical knowledge, or any form of philosophical theorizing, merely common sense and attention to the information that would be provided by any moderately good newspaper, to see that there was no reasonable sense of the term "democracy", complex and obscure as the meanings of that term are, in which bringing "democracy" to Iraq had anything to do with the decision to invade; the decision was pretty clearly motivated by American concerns about the promotion of its own interests in increasing its control of a geo-politically important region. It also required no special philosophical knowledge to see that the most likely outcome of this policy was going to be one that would be horrible for Iraqis (and others), and not conducive to peace and stability in the world.

Sometimes, then, philosophical analysis is not a necessary precondition to coming to a reasoned political judgment. But in other cases, minimal conceptual clarity may be essential to having any grasp of the question under discussion at all. Thus, some have claimed that a "free market" will necessarily under-provide in certain areas of human welfare; others think that individual human rights sets limits on what the sovereign state may do to its citizens. Some people think social justice requires the use of procedures that in some sense treat everyone "as equals"; others that justice must track merit, or natural human rights, or provide an equal level of welfare (or of agency) for everyone. It is not clear how one would even begin to come to some reasoned view about these issues without understanding concepts such as "free market", "justice", "rights".

Perhaps a preternaturally intelligent agent could, in principle, analyse the semantic components of our political concepts on the basis of current usage alone. This issue, however, is not worth arguing about because, *as a matter of fact*, for finite cognitive agents like us, to understand any of the basic concepts in politics is to understand their history, and, if one thinks there is a close connection between politics and ethics, the same is true of our moral concepts. This includes but is not restricted to their history as objects of philosophical reflection, that is, to what philosophers have said about them. In particular it must include their real history, that is, to understand political concepts one must understand the real contexts of human action in which they have arisen and have functioned, and the way in which they have changed in response to changing social, economic, and political events.

The questions one must ask include such things as: How have "free markets" actually worked? What actions have been necessary to set them up and maintain them in existence? Has this had any effect on the concept (and theory) of the "free market"? In what exact sense is a "free market" "free"? Under what actual circumstances has "freedom" established itself as a central political and moral value? What could be meant by a "human right" and where does the concept come from and what is its actual use? When do people appeal to "human rights", and when is that appeal likely to be successful? At what point and under what circumstances do people begin to speak of "the international community", what do they mean by this, what kind of normative status do they seem to grant it, and why?

Although it is highly desirable to study the meaning, use, and history of these central concepts in their real historical context, it is also important not to exaggerate the potential positive effects of attaining knowledge. Being

philosophically clear about concepts, theories, and arguments, even if this were to be combined with an understanding of the actual causal processes that govern the political world, is probably of great value to most human individuals. But political and social change depends on institutional actions that are by and large outside the control of individuals. The path from the individual enlightenment which philosophy, as it is now constituted, provides to any kind of improved political practice is at best rocky, circuitous, and uncertain.

Barry Stroud: I think the primary goal of philosophy is understanding of the world or life or whatever might be of interest to a thinking person. If non-philosophers could have access to a particular philosopher's way of understanding things it could perhaps be illuminating and helpful and so relevant to the way they think about things. Philosophers should try to make their work as accessible to everyone as they can. But I do not think it is desirable for philosophers to try to ³apply² their philosophical understanding and to issue recipes or directives about how to live or how to understand things.

Cogito: Should philosophy be pursued only by those trained in philosophy? Are there clear criteria that have to be observed and respected by anyone outside the academic institutions who wants to claim that he/she is engaged in doing philosophy?

JB: I answer the question by a counter-question: "Should mathematics only be done by those who are trained in mathematics?" Well, I won't legislate on the matter; but it's pretty evident that if you've not trained in mathematics, then you're likely to make an unholy botch of things — unless you're one of those rare natural geniuses. The same goes for philosophy. Are there any clear criteria? None that are clear to me.

MB: It is clear already by Plotinus' day that there is a canonical list, with Thales as the first. Let that list stand, let ancient proto-scientists such as Thales be included, and let Aristotle *not* be marginalized on the grounds that he wrote much more on (what he and we call) physics than on metaphysics or ethics. And let ostracism be the penalty for anyone who denies that Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (one of his greatest, most original treatises) counts as philosophy.

Several great philosophers were not trained in philosophy: Thales, Socrates, Wittgenstein. Descartes would wish (wrongly) to be added to the list. Was Plato trained in philosophy? The only answer to the question is as unhelpful as the question. Was C.S. Pierce so trained, was Spinoza? Who cares?

Regarding the second part of the question: fortunately, not. See Edward Craig on "Philosophy and Philosophies". See also the two founders of the Patras philosophy curriculum, trained in altogether disparate traditions, united in founding a coherent philosophical education for their students. Then imagine submitting tomorrow to a contemporary publisher in the English-speaking world either *The Critique of Pure Reason* or *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Rejection guaranteed.

RG: On what grounds is it reasonable to say that someone *should not* do X, e.g. *should not* study philosophy? In contemporary Western European societies people are, by and large, assumed to be free to engage in any activity not explicitly forbidden, and in general for an activity to be forbidden it is thought to be necessary to show that it is in some way harmful. No one else is harmed

if I paint an uninteresting picture, and if an aesthetically obtuse person buys my painting, *caveat emptor*. On the other hand, if the building I construct falls down, indeterminately many people at some later time may well suffer, and a surgical error can be fatal to a person who is in no position to make an informed antecedent judgment about the skill of someone who offers to perform a certain operation. This gives a clear sense to the "should" in "surgery should be performed only by those with appropriate medical training". The "should" here depends on two distinct features of this situation, first that bad surgery imposes material harm on others, and second that by giving prospective surgeons medical training one can reduce the risk that they will perform poorly. The second feature is as important as the first. If medical training really had no effect on surgical results, there would be no grounds for requiring it. So is studying philosophy really like performing surgery or practicing as a civil engineer?

It is tempting to follow Plato and think that damage to the human soul or mind or spirit is just as much a form of "material harm" as having a building fall on one, having the wrong leg amputated or being on an airplane that crashes. Similarly one might think that if my soul is damaged, I thereby actively harm all those others with whom I interact. So the untrained philosopher is just as dangerous to the public as the untrained surgeon. Even if one agrees with the beginning of this line of argument, the inference that only those trained in philosophy should pursue philosophy will not automatically follow. To get that conclusion one would still need strong reason to believe that "training" in philosophy — meaning by "training" formal academic qualification — was like medical training in relevant respects, in other words that if you did have such training you would be more likely to benefit the soul and if you lacked it you would be more likely to damage it. That seems implausible.

It is, in any case, wrong to think of philosophy as a body of sacred doctrine or of professional academic philosophers as high priests guarding access to esoteric knowledge that will bring salvation. Or as surgeons, experts in a skill whose incorrect practice will inflict deadly harm on innocents. Who or what gives us the right to permit or prohibit people from thinking, speaking, or writing about issues they find of gripping significance?

Perhaps "should" in the original question is not to be construed as meaning "ought to be permitted" but as meaning "is advisable". So to say "philosophy should be pursued only by those with formal training in the subject" does not mean that we should prohibit those without training from reading or publishing works of philosophy, but merely that it is inadvisable. Perhaps the idea is that philosophy is now so technical that no one without special training could conceivably understand it. So "trained" philosophers can give those who are not trained the good advice not to waste their time in the self-defeating pursuit of an understanding that will always elude them. What advice is "good" advice (i.e. helpful to the person on the receiving end) is highly dependent on context. In certain contexts, people with particular formal training may well be in a position to give those without that training very useful advice, but what would have to be true about the world for it to be the case that no untrained person could ever usefully think about any philosophical question?

BS: I think of philosophy as a difficult intellectual endeavour. You have to learn how to do it, and it takes a lot of practice. Only those who know how to do it are really engaged in philosophy. It is possible to do serious philosophy outside an academic institution (many of the great philosophers of the past did it). But nowadays it is virtually impossible to earn a living and support oneself

outside an academic institution while doing philosophy. It is a very good thing that there are universities where philosophy can be done.

Cogito: Should academic teachers of philosophy consider themselves philosophers in virtue of the fact that they teach philosophy? Or should we reserve the title of a philosopher only for Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Wittgenstein, and the like?

JB: The fact that you teach philosophy doesn't show that you are a philosopher. (Though if teachers of philosophy want to call themselves philosophers, I can't say that I shall feel very upset. They can call themselves greengrocers for all that I care.) Most teachers of philosophy, I suppose, spend most of their time explaining to their pupils what other people have said. That's what most teachers of most subjects do most of the time.

But of course, most teachers of philosophy also do some philosophizing — and I doubt if they could teach well if they didn't. I don't reserve the name of philosopher to Plato and Aristotle and the like — any more than I reserve the name of poet to Homer and Shakespeare and the like. Field Marshals are soldiers, and so are privates; and there are many more privates than Field Marshals. So it is in philosophy — except that with soldiering it's the privates who are at the sharp end.

MB: The ambiguity is unavoidable. Let it be. What else can I say I am when asked: "What do you do?" Are we sure that absolutely every ancient philosopher had original thoughts of their own? On the contrary, some would have felt insulted by the very suggestion that they were innovators.

BS: Whether an academic teacher of philosophy should be thought of as a philosopher or not depends on whether he or she actually engages in the subject and tries to get somewhere in it rather than just telling others about it. A very good tennis coach or teacher of algebra need not be a tennis player or a mathematician. But I see no reason to deny that anyone who engages in philosophy with serious philosophical interests counts as a philosopher. It does not mean that their efforts bear comparison with the works of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, et al, any more than the products of the weekend watercolourist should be placed next to those of Raphael, Titian, or Picasso.

Cogito: "Although the history of philosophy — despite what many historians like to say — is no more a part of philosophy than the history of mathematics is a part of mathematics, nonetheless you can't do anything much in the history of a subject without having some sort of acquaintance with the subject itself." (J. Barnes)¹ Do you agree?

JB: For once, I find myself wholly in agreement.

MB: No, because it depends on which aspect of the subject you are concerned with. There is precious little philosophy in Burkert's revolutionary work on Pythagoreanism, or Kassel's wonderful edition of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, none at all in Janacek's pioneering works on Sextus Empiricus, Kayser's deflationary reviews of Brandwood and Ledger on Platonic stylometry, or Harlfinger's exemplary studies of the Aristotelian manuscript tradition. Examples could be multiplied, for there are many, many ways in which non-philosophical skills can and do contribute to fruitful studies in the history of philosophy. And history-of-philosophy skills themselves can go badly wrong if they are not disciplined, as appropriate, by pertinent contributions from classical philology,

modern symbolic logic, transformational grammar, contemporary literary criticism, and so on and so forth.

BS: Yes, I agree. I don't think you can understand and give an account of the history of certain ways of thinking without understanding very well what those ways of thinking are and how they were understood at the time. The history of philosophy should not be understood as a description of a succession of doctrines.

Cogito: What about the reverse? Can one do anything much in philosophy without having some sort of acquaintance with its history?

JB: Well, of course you *can* do philosophy without having any acquaintance with its history. (Otherwise how could poor old Thales ever have got started?) Equally of course, if a contemporary philosopher hasn't the slightest acquaintance with the history of the subject (the sort of acquaintance you might get by riffing the pages of Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*), then he's likely to re-invent the wheel (and more likely to reinvent long-exploded errors). But I strongly urge would-be philosophers not to try to be historians. History is a difficult and a mind-consuming discipline: if you devote yourself to it with any serious application, you won't have time or energy to do philosophy as well.

Here's a moral story (which is also true). In the 1930s a young Italian philosopher was working on the theory of categories. When he's nearly finished his dissertation he thought that he'd better have a quick look at Aristotle's *Categories* to give his work a little historical background. He found that Aristotle's *Categories* was a peculiarly interesting and perplexing work. He also found that the Greek text of the work was in anything but a satisfactory condition. So he set himself to edit the Greek text. He then found that the Latin translations of the work had a thitherto unrecognized importance for the textual tradition. So he decided to edit the Latin translations — of which there were a vast number of manuscripts. And so it went on. To be sure, the textual and historical work which he did was epoch-making; but he always regretted — or so he told me — that he had never published a word of philosophy.

Some historians of philosophy appear to think — though they never actually state — that the history of a subject must somehow be a less noble occupation than the subject of which it is the history; and I suspect that it's because they don't want to be thought of as "mere historians" that they discover an intimate relation between philosophy and the history of philosophy. "I'm a historian of philosophy; so I'm a philosopher, so *that's* OK."

Myself, I'm happy to be a mere historian, and I don't think that puts me in a league below that of my philosophical colleagues. The history of mathematics isn't a lower form of intellectual life than mathematics: it's a different form of intellectual life. The history of astrology isn't a lower form of intellectual life than astrology...

MB: Obviously, Yes. It happens every day today, alas, and did (less often) in the distant and nearer past: (a) Wittgenstein, (b) David Lewis, (c) Socrates! Not to mention Augustine's inability to read, because of his rather feeble knowledge of Greek, most of the important philosophical history that preceded him. For example, the *De Trinitate* shows him aware that in Plato's *Meno* Socrates put certain questions to the slave in an experiment designed to prove

that knowledge, properly speaking, comes from recollection of what one knew before birth, but unaware of what those questions were. He has read *about* the *Meno*, in the lucid Latin of Cicero's *Tusculans*, but he didn't find a translation of the original dialogue.

BS: I believe philosophy is so difficult that one needs all the help one can get. Understanding the sources of one's problems and their history can contribute greatly to one's understanding. Many philosophers would disagree and say they just want to solve certain problems or give an account of a certain aspect of the world. But they do not thereby sufficiently appreciate that their problems have the shape they have because of what has gone before. Even philosophers who dismiss or denigrate history are *in* history, just as their problems and their ways of thinking about them are.

Cogito: Many philosophers nowadays work in particular areas of philosophy without taking an active interest, or without being interested at all in others. To make it clearer, philosophers working on ethics or political philosophy often do not concern themselves with, or even express an aversion to, areas of philosophy such as philosophy of logic or language, and the other way around. What do you think about this compartmentalization of philosophy?

JB: I lament the specialization of the subject; but I suppose that in practice it's unavoidable — who could hope to keep up with the whole of the philosophical literature which comes streaming from the printing-shops? I castigate compartmentalization: a specialist who never looks beyond the frontiers of his speciality is not only a dull dog — he's also a silly goose. How, for example, could anyone hope to do anything serious in metaphysics without keeping half an eye on epistemology? Or in political philosophy without a glance at ethics? Or in anything at all without doing some logic?

And unlike specialization, compartmentalization isn't inevitable. In fact, it's easily avoided. I think that any academic philosopher ought to be capable of giving an undergraduate course in pretty well any branch of philosophy; and I think that a wise philosophy department would encourage — or perhaps even bribe — its members to teach at least one course a year outside their specialities. In fact, I think something like that is fairly normal in America. It is — or was — absolutely normal in Oxford. It's virtually unknown in France. (That is surely is one of several reasons for the unhappy state of philosophy in the land of *les philosophes*. Another reason is the lip-service paid to projects which are *plurifacultaire* and *multidisciplinaire* — but that's another story.)

MB: When I was an undergraduate at Cambridge, my first philosophy tutor gave me a single page list of the books and articles I should read during my first year as a student of philosophy, as opposed to the student of classics, which I had previously been. That was, as I could see in retrospect later, pretty well a complete list of works suitable for my stage as a student coming into philosophy from classics.

When a couple of years later I began teaching at University College London, we all, whatever our specialties, joined in seminars on the latest important book by, for example, Strawson, Hare, or Shoemaker. There was a whole series of central books we had not only read, but much more important, had debated together. Those days, sadly, have gone. We are all impoverished. It is no good asking, "What can we do about it?", because the institutional pressures under which university staff now work impose a scientific model on which specialization is the norm. Let us not deceive ourselves, however, that this is a

uniquely modern corruption of the academic enterprise.

Under the ashes of Mount Vesuvius there has been discovered a vast library of Epicurean literature. One typical pattern of this literature is the following: Philodemus, when writing papyrus such and such, answers (or, in some rather interesting cases, he merely drafts his answers) to X's critique of Y's criticism of Z's defence of A's demolition of B's attack on Epicurus' claim that... No sane person can get to care about how to complete the chain of cross-reference. The fault, needless to say, does not lie in Epicurus' philosophy, but in the intense academic specialization that genuinely original thought is liable, under certain conditions, to attract to itself.

RG: It is hard to see how the default position for most people in the modern world could be anything other than one which holds that it is in general a good thing to know more rather than to know less (about things in general and about any particular issue). This is the case, although, of course, it is also true that in particular circumstances it is sometimes better not to know various things. A true, but random, or irrelevant, or unrepresentative observation may well divert my attention from something important, destroy my concentration, or send me off on a wild goose chase. The question is not whether a moral philosopher should or should not be interested in logic. Of course, in an ideal world moral philosophers would pay close attention to what all other philosophers said and wrote. They would also pay close attention to advances in biology, new forms of legislation, world history, economic theory, cosmology, and literature. We do not live in such an ideal world and so for us the real question is: given the limitations on human time and attention, what is the most useful thing for a philosopher who has a primary interest, say in political philosophy, to study? Is it more useful to study logic than economic history? To say that we know that this is the case *a priori*, by virtue of the fact that logic "belongs" to philosophy and economics does not, is to fetishize disciplinary boundaries that have no absolute standing.

BS: My answer here is roughly the same as my answer to question 3, but not for reason of history. The way problems are posed, and what is thought necessary to solve them, is influenced by many factors, including what has been said and perhaps widely accepted in other areas or on other problems. Exclusive compartmentalization leaves philosophers unaware of this or insufficiently impressed by it, to the detriment of the subject.

Cogito: During the last decades there has been a debate, sometimes quite polemical, between the so-called "analytical" and "continental" philosophers. Should one say that the representatives of the one or the other tradition are not philosophers at all, or do they represent different modes of philosophizing?

JB: Now there's a question... I can't think it matters a rap whether all these people are called philosophers or not, and I can't give very much sense to the phrase "mode of philosophizing". But there surely are different traditions — if a tradition is defined in terms of a sequence of heroes. Frege, Russell, Austin, Davidson...; Hegel, Heidegger, Sartre, Derrida... There are a few cross-dressers: Husserl, Wittgenstein...; and some Smart Alecs like to allude knowingly, or more often unknowingly, to heroes of the other tradition. (There are also, of course, more than two traditions: I've met some Thomists.)

So what? Well, most philosophers who belong to the so-called analytical tradition are pretty poor philosophers. (Most academics who do anything are pretty poor at doing it; and philosophy, or so it seems to me, is a subject in

which it is peculiarly difficult to do decent stuff. A modestly competent historian may produce a modestly good history book; a modestly competent philosopher has no reason to publish his modest thoughts.) But there's a big difference between the analyticals and the continentals: what distinguishes the continental tradition is that *all* its members are pretty hopeless at philosophy. Myself, I've read scarcely a hundred continental pages. I can't see how any rational being could bear to read more; and the only question which the continental tradition raises is sociological or psychological: How are so many apparently intelligent young people charmed into taking the twaddle seriously?

When Richard Robinson expressed a desire to become a philosopher, Ross — his boss — sent him off to Germany to study under Heidegger. When he retired, he gave me his copy of *Sein und Zeit*; it was underscored and annotated, and I asked him what he had learnt from Heidegger. He replied: "He taught me how to ski".

I don't think there's been much of a debate between members of the two traditions, though they often toss a little mud at one another. I don't see how there could be a debate (astronomers don't debate with astrologists).

MB: I merely cite Bernard Williams' comment: "The labels involve a cross-classification between the methodological and the geographical: it is like classifying cars as Japanese and front-wheel drive".

RG: Whether "analytic"/"continental" is an illuminating or well-formed dichotomy is less important than the general recognition that for as long as there have been philosophers, they have always disagreed with one another radically on a wide variety of important issues. In this they differ from scientists or mathematicians. Lack of consensus, if not active intellectual hostility, is the natural state for any body of philosophers. This seems to be a fact of life about the way humans respond to certain basic features of the human condition, and it seems more reasonable to accept this and try to understand why it is the case and what its implications might be than to try to fit philosophy into a mould derived from religion (the universal consensus of all orthodox believers) or from a certain conception of "strict science" (all biologists agree that the whale is a mammal, not a fish).

BS: There are many ways of thinking about and writing philosophy. There is no point in legislating what counts and what doesn't. This does not mean that everything that a person who is a philosopher writes should be regarded as philosophy. What matters are the philosophical consequences.

Cogito: Throughout the history of philosophy philosophers have used different forms of expressing their views such as dialogues, letters, poems, questions and answers, commentaries, aphorisms. It seems that we have long stopped experimenting in this area and most philosophers choose to write articles and books of a standard form. Does this standardization involve a loss?

JB: It's not easy to write philosophical dialogues, or poems, or aphorisms. It's not easy to write. And that — rather than standardization — is the real loss. Few living philosophers can write — or at any rate, few English-writing philosophers can write English. One or two of them try, usually with nauseating results. Most don't even try — and don't even know they're not trying. They produce sentences which might have come from the pen of a tax inspector or an accountant.

Perhaps some people think it doesn't really matter: after all, badly written philosophy may be just as good, *qua* philosophy, as well written philosophy. But I think it *does* matter — at least, it matters to me. When did I last read a new book of philosophy and wish that there were still another chapter to go? When did I last read an article in a philosophy journal and smile at a witticism or relish a well-turned phrase? (Last week, actually — but that was exceptional.) Why do I prefer reading a novel, or a history, or a biography, or the side of the Shredded Wheat packet to reading something in the subject which in principle is closest to my heart?

What's to be done? Nothing, nothing at all.

MB: Yes indeed. All the ponderousness of the academic style weighs down upon the reader unless they are professionally engaged in that very field. Compare my remarks above on writing for non-professional journals that pop up on the newsstand. Yet Wittgenstein's highly unacademic style is not *that* long ago, and Quine writes a highly non-standard, mannerist English prose. See also Jane Heal on the role of dialogues with imaginary speakers in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.² And one exception remains where true originality can appear: the commentary. I have already cited the example of Dummett. But many professional philosophers will be able to think of a commentary on Wittgenstein, or on Spinoza, or on Kant, or on Aristotle's *Ethics*, which was crucial for their subsequent, adult development.

RG: Academic philosophers should not give themselves too much importance. People are not going to stop expressing philosophical views in letters, or dialogues, or aphorisms just because this will not get them employment in a department of philosophy.

BS: Poems and aphorisms do not seem to me appropriate forms for carrying out philosophical work, even if they might be used to express or summarize certain philosophical conceptions developed by other means. Dialogue is a very good way to write philosophy, but it is difficult to do convincingly. I don't see much loss in trying to write philosophy in clear, connected, sharply focused prose. I wish more philosophers would try it.

¹ J. Barnes, "Bagpipe music", *Topoi* 25, 2006, 17–20.

² In: Timothy Smiley, ed., *Philosophical Dialogues: Plato, Hume, Wittgenstein* (British Academy 1995)

Published 2008-05-09

Original in English

Contribution by Cogito (Greece)

First published in Cogito (Greece) (Greek version)

© Cogito (Greece)

© Eurozine