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The Nature and Possibility of Public Philosophy

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Abstract

The article argues that there is a central problem with the concept of public philosophy, in that philosophy is partly defined by questioning reflection on its own sense, while public or popular culture characteristically relies unreflectively on its ultimate givens, and these are mutually exclusive modes of thought. The article proposes, however, that because of philosophy's reflection on and potential questioning of its own sense it has a paradoxical structure of foundational and comprehensive conflict with itself and its own procedure, and that this self-divergence allows a genuinely philosophical role for public philosophy. In the public context, acknowledged failure to understand beyond a certain point makes room for a limitation of sense that incompletely but effectively substitutes for the properly philosophical explicit and questioning reflection on the nature of sense as such and on the possibility that even what we do understand about the relevant issues fails to have sense.

Introduction

> [M]etaphysics consists of the fact that man seeks a basic orientation in his situation. But this assumes that man's situation—that is, his life—consists of a basic disorientation. . . . [M]an's situation, his life, in itself *is* disorientation, is being lost, and, therefore, metaphysics exists. (Ortega y Gasset, 1969, 27)

I begin by provisionally supporting the widespread idea that there is a central problem with the concept of public philosophy, in that what is definitive of philosophy and what is characteristic of public or popular culture are in sharp conflict with each other. I argue specifically that philosophy is defined partly by a questioning reflection on its own sense, while public culture characteristically relies unreflectively on its ultimate givens, two modes of thought that are in fact mutually exclusive. I try to show, however, that because of

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philosophy's reflection on and potential questioning of its own sense it has a paradoxical structure of foundational and comprehensive conflict with itself and so with its own procedure, and that this self-divergence allows a genuinely philosophical role for public philosophy, although it is not the same role that philosophy has in the more limited contexts that are more fully suited to it. In the public context, acknowledged failure to understand beyond a certain point makes room for a limitation of sense that, I argue, can successfully substitute for the properly philosophical explicit and questioning reflection on the nature of sense as such and on the possibility that even the questions at issue themselves and what we do understand of their answers fail to have sense.

1. A Picture of What Philosophy Is

Before we can decide questions about public philosophy, we first need a picture of what philosophy is or at least of what is relevantly essential to it. I suggest that one way to characterize philosophy is that it involves reflection on conceptual structures each as a whole, or even on our entire framework for sense as a whole, in one or another respect. For example, philosophers centrally reflect on what it is that differentiates one concept from another, and in doing so reflect on the concept itself rather than employing it, as already adequately given, to identify particulars that fall under it. So, for instance, we may try to establish what "good" means when it is used to describe moral qualities, rather than taking it as already clear what we mean by "good" and going ahead to apply that concept and decide whether or not, say, being brave or acting unselfishly are good. Again, philosophers centrally reflect on the nature and functioning of sense or meaning in general. For instance, they explore how the limits of what we can possibly mean, of how our language can successfully signify what we try to use it to signify, set limits for meaningful questions about what we can know. Or they explore how our possibilities for making sense allow only certain answers about the nature of reality to make sense at all, to have any meaning.

One picture for this kind of activity is that it involves what we might describe as stepping partly outside our categories or our sense frameworks—outside what we usually take for granted as, say, the meaning of "good," or outside what we usually assume is the way sense or meaning works and is possible. What I mean by "stepping outside" these frameworks or categories is that to investigate them we occupy, or at least try to occupy, a space that is in some sense partly independent of the sense we are investigating: otherwise we are simply presupposing, circularly, what we claim to be inquiring into. Since what we are "stepping outside" is the sense of the particular concept or issue as a whole, or even of sense in general as a whole, we are stepping partly outside any relevant sense. In other words, we are stepping outside of making sense altogether, outside of sense itself.

If this picture is accurate, philosophy involves an essential element or moment of failure of sense. As I shall discuss below, it is crucial to understanding the role of public philosophy that this kind of failure of sense is an element that is inherent in philosophical insight.

There are powerful objections to the idea that we can look at our sense framework or our conceptual structures each as an independent whole, and even to the meaningfulness of this idea (for example, Davidson, 1984). Just on the face of it, it seems clear that if we did manage to make what we say independent of what we usually understand by sense and meaning, we would not know what we were saying! There are also, however, prominent defenses of both this idea's meaningfulness and possibility (for example, Derrida, 1981, 6; Nagel, 1979). Again just on the face of it, it does seem to make sense that we need to be able to account for our meanings and for the possibility of there being such a thing as meaning at all. For example, it seems clearly meaningful to ask what makes meaning itself different from other elements of the world, or how (and if) what we collectively and in general call "meanings" can successfully connect with the things of the world they supposedly refer to or express, or to ask how what we call "meaning" emerged in the first place if the world began as inanimate matter. And in asking these questions we are reflecting on sense or meaning as a whole. We are then in a sense looking at it from outside all of it.

In fact, that philosophy inherently aims at a vantage point on sense as a whole and so goes beyond it is more or less explicit in the mainstreams of both the analytic and the continental traditions of philosophy. In the analytic tradition, the early Wittgenstein, for example, famously argues that philosophy's business is to attempt to describe the world and sense as a whole, but that since our attempts to describe sense as a whole depend on a pre-existing grasp of at least elements of that same sense, in making these attempts we are essentially repeating ourselves. As a result, our attempts to grasp sense as a whole turn out to add nothing, and so to be empty of sense. They must therefore be discarded. But this process is not useless; it has allowed us to see what the nature of the problem is, what it is like to try to grasp sense as a whole. While our attempts turn out not to have sense and must be discarded, then, they must be discarded like a ladder that has successfully served its purpose and taken us to a vantage point from which we can see more clearly and fully than we did before (1961, 74, prop. 6.54). A related idea is present in Wittgenstein's later work and also characterizes the kind of conceptual analysis, widely practiced in contemporary analytic philosophy and often in the history of philosophy, that establishes the boundaries of meaningful concept usage: "The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up

against the limits of language. These bumps make us see the value of the discovery" (1958, 48e, no. 119).

In the continental tradition of philosophy, Karl Jaspers argues that, in exploring the fundamental questions of philosophy, while "we have used words and concepts which had their original meaning for definite things in the world; now however they are used to go beyond the limits and are not to be understood in their original sense;" as a result, "Through reason I catch sight of something which is only communicable in the form of contradiction and paradox. Here a rational a-logic arises, a true reason which reaches its goal through the shattering of the logic of the understanding" (1997, 111-112). Similarly, Jacques Derrida explains that, "I try to write the question: (what is) meaning to say? Therefore it is necessary [in order not circularly to pre-judge what meaning involves] . . . that writing literally mean nothing" (1981, 14, my insertion).

There are traditional objections, too, to the idea that admitting an element of incoherence into a logical structure can do anything but eliminate the sense of that structure altogether. It is a commonplace in Western logic, for example, that the acceptance of a self-contradiction explodes into the acceptance of any statement whatever (see, for example, Haack, 1978, 22, 202). First, however, there is a growing literature that defends the contextualized legitimacy of contradiction in both formal and informal contexts (for example, Bremer, 2005; Johnstone, 1978, 45; Priest, 2001). It is, then, no longer uncontroversially accepted that logical inconsistency is necessarily illegitimate and unmanageable. Second, we can understand intuitively that our reflecting on the nature of sense is compatible with and in fact requires us to consider the possibility that the terms of our current reflection themselves may turn out not to make sense.[1] The well-known self-reflexive paradoxes, like the Liar's Paradox, then, in which statements refer to themselves in the way that a statement like "this statement does not make sense" does, and so both affirm and deny themselves, are not simply a fringe phenomenon, but expressions of a structure fundamental to philosophical thought.[2]

I have argued that reflection on sense as such involves a departure from sense. Since it is sense itself that requires this departure (it *makes sense* that a reflection on sense cannot simply presuppose what it reflects on), this departure from sense is ultimately part of the functioning of sense itself. Consequently, sense is partly constituted by something like a varying from itself, or not entirely coinciding with itself. As a result, our awareness too, whose contents and substance consist at least to a large extent in meanings or instances of sense, is partly constituted as something that does not entirely coincide with itself.

It follows that philosophy, which fundamentally or ultimately consists in this self-diverging reflection on sense, is a dimension, and even the deepest dimension, of all awareness.

2. Philosophy and the Public

This picture of philosophy is in keeping with both of two possibly opposed ideas about the relation between philosophy and the general public. (That this picture makes room for both of them helps to confirm its correctness, since both of these ideas have reasonable grounds.) On the one hand, it endorses the widespread idea that philosophy deals with matters of concern to all human beings and, further, that it is the expression of a level of thought that, in one way or another, is present in all human lives. On the other hand, it also makes sense of the idea, also widespread, that most people are not capable of or motivated to engage in the level of thought in which philosophy consists. Since, on the picture I am proposing, philosophy is not continuous with everyday sense but involves a violation of it, pursuing it means departing radically from our customary procedures of sense-making, and consequently unsettling our sense of reality and of ourselves. Even though this departure from sense is part of us, it is so in a way that conflicts fundamentally with how we are when we are not reflecting on sense. When fundamental questions become relevant to us, then, engaging with them is not an activity that is essentially continuous with although more demanding than our customary sense-making practices, but instead deeply unsettles them. Consequently, though the fundamental questions may be part of us and therefore spontaneously motivating, exercising that part of us requires a departure from ourselves that is extremely challenging both intellectually and emotionally. Differently expressed, the part of us in which philosophical depth consists is that part which is equally a departure from being a part of us. There are therefore understandable difficulties with entering into its exercise.

Even if this were the whole truth (and I argue that it is an important part of the truth), this is not to say philosophy belongs to the academic or highbrow worlds. If it belongs to an elite, it is a different kind of elite that cuts across all sorts of customary status distinctions. The capacity for departing from and unsettling sense and ourselves that makes the difference is mostly independent of both cultural sophistication and, in fact, intelligence. Neither sophistication nor intelligent thought necessarily require stepping outside the conventions (whether, respectively, of culture or thought), and in fact typically require taking the relevant conventions for granted and relying on them. And people of very limited intellect and no refinement can experience existential crises and insights, while highly intelligent people can be philosophically blind.

Both apparently opposed ideas, that philosophy comes naturally in some way to everyone and, on the other hand, that it is inaccessible to the vast majority of people, have the support of everyday experience. It is evident that most people ask the fundamental philosophical questions at some point in their lives (for example, what is the point of it all? Is any real knowledge possible, given how often and unpredictably we make mistakes?), and often ask them at those times as real, pressing questions. It is also seems to be the case, however, that most people either give up on the questions, which, perhaps, simply lose their pressing nature over time, or they find answers that are not philosophical, that do not address the nature of sense itself, and that are consequently couched in terms the possible questionableness of whose sense is not a concern.

It seems at least anecdotally evident that for most people the philosophical level of thought is not a live option, and often simply not an option of which they are intellectually or emotionally capable. It requires a willingness to forgo the kinds of certainties and stabilities of meaning and sense that define intellectual competence in everyday life and in most professional or technical fields. From that point of view, it is often understandably experienced as an absurd proposal: to think in a way that blatantly neglects and even rejects what life-long experience tells us is competence in thinking through issues. (For example, students often complain that philosophy is circular, or that it offers no definitive or reliable answers.) In addition, as I have argued, from this point of view philosophical thought is deeply emotionally unsettling. In short, there is no particular reason from the viewpoint of everyday, unreflective consciousness why people should be motivated to undertake a task that is threatening, arduous, and highly questionable as to prospects for offering helpful results and even as to its meaningfulness. More, even apart from the intellectual and emotional demands of philosophical thought, most people typically have demanding life preoccupations and no time or apparent reason to have interest in pursuing anything so unrelated to their resulting intuitive concerns.

While these considerations are anecdotal, they also seem palpably true, given how most people in Western cultures live their lives, and also how most people evidently find it appropriate to live out their opinions: assertively, not particularly articulately, and without seeing the point of extended, impersonal debate about them. This is not to mention the—arguably well and deeply grounded—commitments of other cultures, and also many Western subcultures, where arduous thought is not even a candidate for offering answers to life's questions.

Even Plato's Socratic dialogues, the historically outstanding examples of the practice of public philosophy, seem to endorse this side of the picture, given their typical outcomes not

only in the discussants' failure to find remotely satisfactory answers to the questions they pursue, but also in Socrates' frequent failure to communicate the nature and value of the kind of inquiry he has been proposing.

If this is the whole story, then it seems that all public philosophy can hope to do is to speak to those relatively few hearers or readers who are emotionally and intellectually capable of "stepping outside" sense itself and are motivated to do so, while the vast majority of its audience, although perhaps intrigued by the aesthetics and challenge of logical puzzles and the subtle thought that produces and attempts to solve them, will not register the properly philosophical dimensions, the reworking of sense as such, in what is being said.

But my proposal is that, while there is a sharp difference in what is registered by the philosophical minority and the non-philosophical majority, the important difference here is not between fundamental reflection (or "stepping outside sense") and no or only sporadic and accidental fundamental reflection, but between engaged and unengaged fundamental reflection. Differently expressed, the difference is between engaged non-self-coincidence and unengaged non-self-coincidence.

As I have argued, those who cannot engage in or explicitly exercise their own non-self-coincidence cannot *engage* in philosophy, which is essentially that exercise of non-self-coincidence. Instead, when they encounter philosophy they necessarily translate it into something else, a view or theory or ideology the sense of whose fundamentals is definitively given. The resulting insights can be deep in the sense that they acknowledge serious and difficult human concerns. But they are not deep in the further, foundational sense that belongs to philosophy, in that they include perspective on the nature and conditions of their own sense itself and, as a result, on the nature of relevant reality as such, since that is part of what sense is the sense *of*.

One example of the difference is that the non-philosophically deep are concerned with the grave needs and commitments of others; the philosophically deep are concerned with relating to others as who they essentially are. From the non-philosophical standpoint, a person's being does not mean anything other than the sum or whole of her/his qualities. While it is possible to hold this position philosophically, that depends on being able to consider the distinction between being and the sum of properties a mistake, in contrast with not being able to recognize it as an option at all.

It is possible, however, and this seems confirmed by common experience of public reception of philosophy, that many of the readers and hearers I am calling non-philosophical

also recognize that they are in fact making a translation, that they are re-explaining what has been said in terms that may not precisely capture it: that they are making a kind of best approximation of something perhaps not fully grasped. In this respect, they do connect with the non-self-coincidence or partial failure of the sense of what is said. Those unengaged in their non-self-coincidence, then, do understand philosophy, but they do so by recognizing that they likely do not understand something fundamental to it, that something fundamental has escaped them. (In contrast, those engaged in their own non-self-coincidence can recognize and explore the tension within sense itself: they can recognize not simply that they fail to understand, but that understanding itself has become different, in some sense no longer self-coincident.) Non-philosophical readers or hearers, that is, understand philosophy indirectly or tangentially: they make contact with it, but what they are making with is not explicit for them.

Philosophy is what it is because of its depth, because of its stepping outside itself to investigate its own bases. Public philosophy, then, cannot be less deep than other philosophy and still be philosophy at all. I suggest, however, that it works by being both indirectly and much less completely explained. The reflection on the boundaries between sense and loss of sense needs to be intimated, but the details and subtleties of the work with those boundaries need to be left out, because these details occur at the level of explicit reflection on sense as such that people unengaged with their own non-self-coincidence cannot get to.

Consequently, it is public philosophy's job, first, to express its themes in such a way that their sense is conveyed, but with most of the difficulty avoided. Since, however, these are difficulties with the sense of what *is* conveyed, they can only be avoided by being disguised. The form of expression must manage to bypass what is nonetheless the ongoing presence of these difficulties. It might, for example, be quietly simplistic and vague in their respect while being clear in showing how the result that resolves them gives helpful insights into the initial issue.

Second, public philosophy must convey that something peculiarly difficult, something that remains enigmatic, is involved that has not been expressed but is essential to what the reader or hearer has grasped. That is, it must convey that the sense that has been grasped is part of something more that renders it, while in some way importantly right, still tentative, and for reasons that are themselves hard to express, so that exactly what about the relevant sense they make tentative cannot be clearly and securely captured. This non-specificity preserves an approximation of the questionableness of the relevant sense itself. The reader

or hearer is then aware that something questionable remains in their own grasp of what has been said.

For example, in a popular philosophical presentation of Leibniz's proof of the existence of God, Jeff McLaughlin explains that "in order for something to be perfect, it is necessary that that entity must also exist. . . . In other words, if God did not exist, we could imagine a greater being, namely one that *did* exist" (2005, 7). He clarifies this through the more everyday point that an imaginary world "would be less than perfect *for me* for even though my life is better in it . . . I don't exist in that world because there is no world to exist in" (6). On the one hand, McLaughlin says only enough about the concept of perfection to convey the sense of the argument, and he does so by explaining it in intuitive, everyday terms. He does not dwell on the difficulties of the concept, which would require discussing issues like different degrees of reality or, as in Descartes' version of the argument, different types of reality, like formal and objective reality. That level of discussion would take us entirely outside the range of familiar concepts into a realm of meanings that need to be learned entirely in their own context, because they are specialized for talking about sense and reality in their own right, and are consequently literally meaningless in the context of the world of things we ordinarily discuss. In addition to not dwelling on the difficulties of the concept itself, the everyday parallel McLaughlin gives is sufficiently satisfying that for the reader who does not naturally reflect on the sense of concepts the need to explore those further difficulties does not seem urgent. That there is *some* sense to the argument seems clear (while, for the philosophical reader, it remains open that, although its terms appear to have sense, they may turn out not to have had any sense at all, because they are so detached from the world of ordinary things the sense of which they are ultimately supposed to help account for). In these ways, McLaughlin disguises the difficulties with the sense of what he is saying.

On the other hand, the concept of perfection is naturally very elusive for the common sense of our time. Students introduced to this kind of material for the first time invariably dismiss the arguments because of what they see as the vagueness of concepts like "perfection." In making an argument with *this* concept at least partly plausible, then, elusive as this concept naturally is for our culture's sensibilities, McLaughlin also succeeds in keeping open the awareness that something enigmatic is inherent in the sense of what is being said and so in the sense the reader grasps.

If I may take a second example from a popular philosophical article on *House, M.D.* and Zen rhetoric that I co-authored, the authors point out that to "make sense of our lives as a whole . . . we'd have to be able to step outside of our lives and see them as a whole," but

"all our ways of making sense are parts *of* our lives, so that if we could step outside our lives, we'd of course also step outside all our ways of making sense! The result is that the idea of making sense of our lives as a whole literally doesn't make any sense" (2010, 300). Nonetheless, the authors continue, "to make sense of our lives and the things that happen in them, we *need* to be able to get a grip on them, to make sense of them, as a whole. As a result, the Zen tradition advises us to go right ahead and step outside of sense itself, altogether. The standpoint that would allow us to get a perspective on our lives and sense as a whole is the standpoint, or starting point, of *not* making sense" (301). The authors describe the paradox of reflecting on sense, but do not dwell on it or try to give an account of it. Instead, they focus on the ways in which it appears to be parallel to non-paradoxical analogues: they treat the state of not making sense as a standpoint or a "place" comparable to what we usually think of as standpoints, that is, to particular ways of *making* sense. That appearance of equivalence to our usual understanding of standpoints then allows them to proceed without entering into the complexities of the ways in which the sense of their own subsequent statements is potentially transformed or violated. Here is that parallel treatment again: "Only by not thinking and acting in sensible or "fitting" or appropriate ways can we *arrive at* sense and sensible action" (301). Not making sense is treated here as the state prior to making sense, and so as comparable with it in being intelligible as an identifiable state. In these ways, again, the authors disguise the difficulties with the sense of what they are saying. But because it is a blatant paradox they are treating in this way, its enigmatic character, the elusiveness of its sense, again also remains alive for the reader.

Finally, in a philosophical magazine article on whether humans and other animals can be friends, Stephen Clark points out that to answer this question we first need to ask about the meaning of friendship itself (2008, 13). That is, before we apply the concept, we need to reflect on it in its own right. But then, having drawn our attention to the concept itself and our uncertainty about its sense, and after considering some traditional ideas about what is essential to it, Clark actually side-steps negotiating among these ideas and coming to a decision about friendship's general sense, and instead offers a particular feature of our everyday understanding of the concept as a possibly fruitful entry point to answering his initial question. "It is worth asking," he writes, "whether our common sense . . . has any grounds for saying that animals can't manage what we manage in terms of basic emotions" (15). The result is a thought-provoking explanation of why our relationships with other animals share many important features with what we think of as friendships among ourselves, an explanation that proceeds without having to engage with the difficulties of establishing the sense of the concept itself. Clark has nonetheless, however, drawn our attention to the relevance and uncertainty of the underlying concept by his initial discussion of it. In addition, the idea of people-like friendships with other animals is sufficiently

questionable in our culture that a plausible case for it automatically puts in question our usual relevant ways of making sense. The author, then, has disguised the difficulties with the underlying sense of his discussion while keeping alive an awareness of the elusiveness of that sense.

Perhaps the most obvious way for public philosophers to disguise the deeper difficulties, and the one that is probably most common, is to simplify, leaving out most of the relevant arguments and all of those that involve more subtle considerations. But this must not go so far that it eliminates the elusive, inherently enigmatic dimensions of the issues. Much of what is done as popular philosophy that relies on this kind of simplification seems to me to fail in this respect.

Public philosophy, then, is for those who can register that the limits of sense (or at least of given sense) play a role in achieved sense, but who cannot register this explicitly and as such. They can explicitly recognize that understanding fails, but not that this failure is part of the functioning of sense and understanding themselves. In being unable to "step outside" sense, they also cannot explore the character and details of the functioning of sense, at least not while recognizing what they are doing as precisely that, an exploration of sense itself. Even though this explicit recognition is limited, however, it nonetheless accurately captures the deep significance of the failure of understanding, because it experiences this failure as somehow inherent in or essential to what has been grasped, even if it is obscure exactly how it is so.

3. Philosophy in the Classroom and Public Philosophy

This account of public philosophy has consequences for teaching philosophy in the classroom, because philosophy in the classroom often *is* in fact public philosophy. There is typically no selection process for philosophy students that has to do with the nature of philosophy, except as philosophy is popularly understood; and this, I have argued, specifically excludes philosophy's self-understanding. Philosophy at least in the introductory classroom is therefore in fact dealing with the audience for public philosophy. Consequently, when it is taught as philosophy proper there, it is mis-practiced. It is then taught in the light of false expectations as to possible outcomes for most of the students, and so is not designed to achieve its own appropriate goals with respect to those students. Since it engages in fully explicit reflection on the nature of relevant sense itself, where it should be making for incomplete though successful understanding or, differently expressed, partial misunderstanding tempered by a sense of the inherent limitations of human understanding in these deep contexts, it can only

produce complete misunderstanding. It also then leads these students firmly away from and so obscures what philosophy might genuinely offer them.

Philosophy in the classroom, then, needs the kind of disguise that is proper to public philosophy, both to make accessible at all what in the public context is its necessarily partly inexplicit import, and to protect the students from the possible harm resulting from too much but still insufficient understanding about deeply unsettling issues.

It is possible to offer both disguised and full philosophy in concert, since they do really both point successfully, although in different ways, to the same thing at the same level of depth. Consequently, the non-philosophical students can be truthfully reassured that what they grasp in the disguised form is all they need to work with, and that the accessible suggestions of resolution it offers also apply to the more unmanageably unsettling features of the more fully philosophical presentation. And since this is true, the philosophical students can draw on the disguised version both for overview and for the reassurance that they, too, are likely to need.

But in the context of our contemporary educational and professional systems, the line we draw between public philosophy and professional philosophy is largely a misrepresentation of the reality. To a very great extent, philosophy in the classroom really is public philosophy, and our reflections on public philosophy should therefore also guide our understanding of the situation in the philosophy classroom.[3]

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Notes

[1] I have defended the legitimacy and manageability of this conception of sense as incorporating failure of sense at length elsewhere (for example, Barris, 2009, 2012).

[2] For extended discussions of the general philosophical relevance of these paradoxes, see, for example, Livingston (2012), Priest (2002).

[3] I thank the journal's issue editor for very helpfully suggesting ways in which I could present the argument more fully and clearly.