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## PHILOSOPHY FOR THE COMPETENT ONLY?

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Some philosophers say that it is not appropriate to engage in philosophy per se with children because philosophy is a discipline, requiring first a course of preparation, involving perhaps the study of grammar, logic, the proper use of language, the establishment of claims, evidences, warrants and ultimately arguments that can stand up to scrutiny. In an era of accountability, this has come to be cashed out in some kind of procedure where competencies are identified, tagged and checked. Philosophy on this reading is no exception to this general requirement for all disciplines. John White, has pointed to the difference between conversations per se and philosophical conversations, arguing quite rightly that the mere organisation of children in a circle and setting them a topic for discussion cannot be called philosophy, nor does it lead them in any significant way into philosophy, but rather fosters a confusion between just general talk and the formation of a philosophical attitude (White, 2011). Indeed White is articulating the classical view extending as far back as Plato's academy that some kind of preparation for philosophy is required. A classical philosopher like Kant, for instance, pointed at the beginning of his first Critique to a set vocabulary of terms like 'sensibility', 'transcendental' and 'pure reason' 'practical reason', all of which would need to be competently controlled, if not entirely mastered, before engaging in his new transcendental philosophy of reason. Philosophers like Aristotle and Aquinas well understood the need for preparation also and while they each in different ways collected arguments like experimental samples and paraded them before listeners/ readers before arguing for one preferred solution, they assumed a certain literacy to begin with. And Matthew Lipman, in his own structured way, presented, in the philosophical materials he designed for children, a

type of path to follow in order to guide children away from mindless chatter. By means of an active community of inquiry, Lipman set out to present once again a familiar tradition of thoughts and dilemmas embedded in the tradition but opponents might say that this could result in the mere mimicry of a process by children not yet capable of engaging in the real thing, an argument well outlined in John White's latest piece.

If we call this the 'competence' position, meaning that advocates of this position argue that some measure of competence in argument construction or lexical control is prerequisite, then we can see that this view stems from the views of John Wilson, Paul Hirst and others who have argued along similar lines (Kennedy and Kennedy, 2011; Law, 2008; Wilson, 1963). The assumption of this position is that philosophy itself is a stable species with its own fixed methods and methods of elaboration, control of which marks off the 'adequate' from the 'inadequate' practice of philosophy. John White and others want to avoid commonplace ideas masquerading as philosophy and so they insist on defending the idea of philosophy as a consistent and 'precise' theoretical construct limited in its scope perhaps but defined nonetheless in its method and in the scientific support required for its maintenance. Some 'competence' theorists have taken this a step further to require not only the proper formulation of questions but also the proper formulation of solutions. They have argued for greater forms of precision, dismissing perhaps too readily elements of vagueness in the formulation of arguments as signs of immaturity or lack of mastery. Once pushed this far, the proper cognitive/ moral connection is somewhat lost sight of and philosophy appears as a rigorous cognitive science. Indeed Michael Hand, as I read him, represents this more exaggerated view, making control of a form of inquiry prerequisite to the ultimate degree:

To be competent in a form of inquiry is not just a matter of asking questions of a particular kind: it is a matter of answering questions of a particular kind by means of appropriate methods of investigation (Hand, 5)

There seem to be two main objections to this position, one based on the realities of educational practice and the other on current disputes about the nature of an academic discipline.

The first objection is animated by the experience of educators who argue that ‘competence’ is not a prerequisite for learning, even if it is taken sometimes as a measure of learning. Educators point to the realities of imprecision in the way children access and achieve control of information and attitudes. For them learning in the classroom is never an exact science because no matter how well planned their activities with children may be, no matter how logically coherent in a Herbartian sense this subject matter is presented, there is a serious imprecision in the learning achieved, hence precipitating the need for assessment and checking of learning which is the bread and butter of everyday life in the classroom. Learning involves both the precision of the ‘competence theorists’ in a certain way but also a tolerance for the imprecision and errors of learners, even extending to fuzzy ideas about method. We might refer rather unattractively to supporters of this position for the sake of brevity as ‘incompetence theorists’. ‘Incompetence’ theorists of science, for instance, are clear that basic scientific ideas must be presented in rounded-off form, perhaps in a manner that is simplified and critically distorted by the standards of the discipline so as not to frighten the child off or undermine his confidence. Teachers do this as a matter of course in order to fill the child with confidence and to give the impression that science is fun and easy. As a result, it is quite normal for children to be introduced to these hard sciences in very imprecise ways,

ways that match the science to their interest or their imaginary interest. In this way the biography of the child blends in more seamlessly with objective concerns and the skilful teacher develops the child's interest aided by this imprecision. Who does not remember a chemistry set offered as a gift at Christmas time or a Lego set or a face-painting set for make-up or a kitchen set with plastic plates and teacups? No one is suggesting that all children will, as a result of these 'toys', come to have an interest in corresponding adult activities. And yet no one objects to these toys on the basis that the chemistry set is not real chemistry or the microscope set is not real biology or the prism game not real physics. These toys do not present materials according to the proper methods and procedures of the adult science. This leads to the question about what might support philosophy in this 'toy' stage. What do beginners, even adult beginners do, when they 'toy' with ideas. Could 'toying with ideas' actually count as a propaedeutic (*propaideuein* 'to teach beforehand') to engagement in true philosophy? Murriss and Haynes describe their classroom discussions as a 'string of spaghetti' ((Haynes and Murriss, 2001, 292). The children's comments generally have 'fuzzy meanings' (Murriss, 2008,106) that distinguish them from the refined formulas of properly scientific ideas. Even if questions can be asked scientifically, they conceal other questions which only have a vague disciplinary origin and may be as much fantasy as reality, pointing perhaps to psychological or historical roots in the child's life. Sometimes circumstantial and 'incoherent' distractions open on to questions of philosophical interest about the world, as they do with all subject interests and these are difficult to predict or plan. Coping with this vagueness, Karin Murriss' advice is to use picture books in the classroom as a way of opening up this space of inquiry, an indeterminate space which points to Murriss' attempt to liberate philosophy from the perpetual search for 'right' answers (Murriss, 2000).

James Conroy has attempted to resolve the disagreement between what I am calling here the ‘competence’ theorists and the ‘incompetence’ theorists (Conroy, 2008). He advocates a return to the well tested method of presenting a history of ideas but this lands us back in the same dilemma well identified by the ‘competence’ theorists because the authentic texts of Descartes or Kant are not very accessible without proper training. The real problem is that philosophy does not deal with the management of ideas taken from other minds but, as Deleuze and Guattari explain, with the invention of *concepts*. *Concepts* are a special species that do not arise from a quandary in someone else’s head. The problem is that the adolescent (or the college student, for that matter) who tries to grapple with Aristotle or Descartes tends to respond in very formulaic ways until she relates to the problems these thinkers faced and relates these problems to her contemporary experience. Unless the problematic element has some bearing on her own creative questions and her ongoing attempts to make sense of her life, the excursion into the great thinkers does her no immediate service. If she is bright she may well develop formulaic mastery over a species of knowledge but the disappointing thing is that such an approach to philosophy has shifted her away from the territory of her own thoughts. The position of Deleuze, however, is that philosophy only arises out of one’s own internal territory or at least the dialectical process linking interior events to exterior events in the young inquiring mind. I will come shortly to Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of philosophy in their 1994 book, *What is philosophy* in order to elaborate on the second argument against the ‘competence’ theorists. But first a preliminary remark.

## I Art or Science?

The problem of vagueness or precision is not new in the history of philosophy. Obviously it is not possible here to go into too much detail on the matter but certain elements from the past

are nonetheless fruitfully glimpsed. Aristotle judged the separation of reason from experience as generally unwise because reasoning without experience leads to the eclipse of wonder. Humans should avoid reasoning without experience (*Meta* 981a 15). Wonder is what brings these features together as a puzzle, even though a person ‘feels himself ignorant for being in perplexity and wonder. Thus the philosopher is also a lover of myths since myths are made from wonders’ (*Meta* 982b 20). Perhaps for this reason, it is wise for teachers to nurture this sense of puzzlement in children (Pring, 19) for within puzzlement there is space for wonder but to do this children often need to become engaged in a process that apparently flows against the natural tide of gaining clarity about the world. Most scientists know that the more clarity one achieves, the less is their puzzlement. Only philosophers know that the greater the clarity, the greater the puzzlement.

There is the suggestion that philosophy has traditionally been understood sometimes as an art and sometimes as a science. But as an art, or *techne*, it has always been caught between basing itself on a method of precision or a method of vagueness. There are benefits to both. It could opt for more technical precision such as prevails in the building of ships. If so it could draw on the experiences of the *teknites* or wood worker, the one who manufactures boats and ships from a plan, each item identified from start to finish, each process rolled out in a predictable sequence – separate wood types required for separate parts of the vessel, oak for the gunnel, beech for the hull, for instance. Like a boat, an argument might be built up using elements that are chosen to operate in particular ways, minor premises, major premises, quantifications logically defined by their position on the square of opposition and a range of logical consequential positions represented in formal logic such as *modus ponens*, *modus tollens* etc. In such systems the management of elements in an argument is analogous to the management of elements in a ship-builder’s yard, each subject to general aesthetic rules, each

tested according to separate performance indicators along the way. Precise art of this kind comes closest to scientific method when it tries at every stage to eliminate the unintended and the unpredicted, in order to create a total system in which every inflection has its own place. We do know that the science of logic requires elaborate rigour and proper consistency under experimental conditions in the same way that scientists use a predictable method to prove the hypothesis being tested, or at least, using Popper's distinction, to prove that it has not been falsified. The problem with *techne* is that it is not always as precise as this.

In a study of Plato, David Roochnik has spoken of a form of *techne* that is not precise, a stochastic or vague form which requires judgement constantly and can never theoretically require a closed set of theoretical conditions (Roochnik). This 'vagueness' sets up a set of experimental conditions that are very similar to the way professionals behave. In the normal way, learning occurs by accommodation and adaptation. The mental schema must be adjusted in order to enable adaptation to occur. Learning enables the learner to adjust more truthfully to the world by modifying those internal thoughts and beliefs that are suddenly presented as inadequate. These changes are often deep rooted. The physician who hazards a guess as to the cause of my health problem is probably correct but he or she is constantly adjusting his or her understanding of my health condition with each passing question and test. These guesses are examples of Aristotle's view that we learn by memory upon which are built art and reasoning but they are similarly examples of Plato's stochastic *techne*. Similarly, the courtroom judge may opt to believe one set of evidences and not another but is required in an adversarial system to listen to contradictory claims. The judgement of the judge is enhanced more by experience than by method. Similarly, teachers may opt for a particular set of teaching activities that in their judgement will improve schoolroom effectiveness only to realise that for this child on this day and at this moment some different strategy is required. What teaches



them this is experience plus art and reasoning. Learners may learn by simply adding to the schema they are familiar with but they may have reached a critical moment when much of what they assumed they knew before now has to be rethought in the light of some new set of conditions.

I argue here that it belongs to the essence of philosophy to support both these forms of cognitive and moral procedure. In other words, it tolerates both the precise forms of argument generally thought to be basic in analytic philosophy and well as the more imprecise forms of thinking that are often to be seen in human judgement and observation. It is not easy to know whether teaching philosophy involves at any one time 'precise' or 'vague' forms of reasoning. Even a pragmatic stance can end up casting its concepts too robustly especially when National Curriculum pressures can beg the question of learning by immediately setting out to test a skill-set that includes a whole suite of reasoning skills, enquiry skills, creative thinking skills, evaluation skills (Winstanley, 2008, p. 92), skills which present a number of outcomes attractive to funding agencies but which also run the risk of eclipsing the vulnerability also required by learning.

So in a certain way, the ancient question about whether philosophy is a science or an art or whether it is a precise art or a vague art intervenes in the modern debate about whether philosophy can be or should be introduced in schools. Those who opt for philosophy as art respect the need for logic to develop more spontaneously and in context while those insisting on philosophy as science insist on proper method and technique from the start.

## II The Postmodern Turn

Moreover, the issue of vagueness versus precision might have an even more profound resonance if academic disciplines are neither stable nor perpetual. In *What is philosophy?* The French thinkers, Deleuze and Guattari, draw heavily on Nietzsche's approach to human history. It may be possible to argue with Nietzsche that a certain existential orientation towards time, a certain fracture of the historical sphere from the unhistorical sphere, may be responsible for the philosophical *concept*. There is first an experience of falling into the abyss, as it were, at a point where humans go with the flow of life without any recognition of any historical time and then there is the sudden eruption of historical categories, defining one life as different from another, one cultural setting as different from another etc., marking out one time as different from another and conveying the impression that all of human life is in fact bounded by events and circumstances. Childhood itself marks these passages from unhistory into history as children learn to experience the weight of historical particularity. Children are told what their names are, where they come from etc. and they come to identify themselves with this history. In the meantime, however, the experience of unhistory breaks through at certain existential moments and these moments stake their claim on the uniqueness of the individual, breaking it away as alienated from its own historical identity in a manner that is envious of the life of the simple cow. This rupture of the unhistorical is acutely experienced during the teenage years. So a constant battle is being waged in the life of the teenager between two experiences of uniqueness, the experience of oneself as a historically embedded identity with many features like language and culture that seem essentially attached to one's identity already in place and the existential experience of being entirely unique and unhistorically aligned with the rest of the world. And it is this experience of history/unhistory that Nietzsche argues is represented in philosophical reflection.

While these considerations are elaborated in *On the uses and disadvantages of history for life* (Nietzsche, 1983), a related perspective drawing on Nietzsche's earlier text (*The Birth of Tragedy*) is given an interesting twist by the German philosopher, Peter Sloterdijk (*Thinker on Stage: Nietzsche's Materialism*, trans. J.O. Daniel. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). Here Nietzsche is presented as a precursor of the general *reconfiguration* of all disciplines, changing them by means of some centauric magic into new hybrid instabilities – philology, for instance, exercised in the spirit of music, becoming a new brand of existential philosophy where one meditates on the events of the stage from the perspective of the chorus just off-stage. The metaphor of Greek tragedy is used to explicate the existential reality of being both on stage and reflecting on one's life. Under this dramatic force, the elements of a discipline divides into the mainline activity of living and perspectival elements sprinkled in fragments along the path. The 'dramatic self-illumination of existence', argues Sloterdijk, sets up a new set of oppositions, not the one predicated on theory and practice but the one predicated on 'enigma and transparency' (Sloterdijk, 1989, xxvi). The more visible, the less centred on the stage. In the meantime, the centauric nature of all disciplines, heralded by Nietzsche's initially unsuccessful transformation of philology into philosophy, has since become a postmodern feature of all intellectual life. This same energetic twist now plays itself out agonistically in the twenty-first century university as subjects, disciplines, schools, faculties and university chairs blend into one another and become cognitively transformed flowing onward without depositing their/ its treasures in the form of recurrent stabilities. Foucault was right to point to the current vulnerability of academic disciplines to these centauric displays as any retrenchment into traditional expressions of a discipline seem strangely powerless to deal with the instability of the system and the arbitrariness of its power plays.

Hence the primodality of this groundless ground, to which Heidegger also referred, and which may underline all academic disciplines in a postmodern setting, brings us back to a sense of the origin of philosophy itself. The border lives have relevance for young children who are constantly on the cusp of discovering something new about the world and for teenagers caught between their own instinct for uniqueness and the demands of tradition while trying to find their own place in an old world. This positive construal of the unhistorical in human experience is not necessarily reflected in Nietzsche himself who held a singularly unromantic approach to human experience. Knowledge was continually for him a two-edged sword because human lives are not necessarily happy lives, unlike the simple unhistorical lives of cows. Accordingly, an exclusively historical profile cannot define human knowledge as we know it because the unhistorical will at any second break through to present its own authentic aspect that cannot be outmanoeuvred by any Apollonian strategy.

### III Deleuze and Guattari

If philosophy is ‘the art of making concepts’ as Deleuze and Guattari maintain, then there is no contradiction between a process where initial vapours crystallise into concepts and where apparently finished concepts evaporate in turn into mist. And if we are talking about concepts that have a certain finished form already, then it is both true that philosophy has helped in their formation and is continuing to undermine them constantly. The primordality of this groundless ground of knowledge, especially when extended to include not only concepts but fields of concepts known as academic disciplines shaped by their own contours and methods, is further invoked by Deleuze and Guattari’s reference to a primordial plane of immanence.

This plane is neither fully conscious nor is it entirely unconscious. It seems in some ways to refer to the tradition in so far as this tradition has been absorbed and embedded in a community as well as the very imperfect grasp which an individual has made of it:

Illusions arise from the plane itself, like vapors from a pond, like pre-Socratic exhalations given off by transformations of the elements that are always at work on the plane'

(Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, 49)

Perhaps to clarify matters, Deleuze and Guattari move to classify the vapours arising from the plane of immanence in three ways. These three modes of expression interact with one another and find their home in the same plane of immanence from which all thought arises and yet each mode is marked by a specific character.

In science, the vapours appear as *functions* and functions tend to offer a linear profile, much as the structure of argument tends to be linear. Logic follows this linear model, the sequencing of arguments presenting a historical rhetoric. The ideas of science, however, are historical functions. Functions derive their power from the axioms that are assumed at the outset and so functions can be presented 'as propositions in discursive systems' (117) or as 'states of affairs in a system of reference' (127). The advantage of scientific thinking is that it presents a well defined evidence base and its strict method of exploration expresses a historical species of thought. In art, by contrast, vapours appear as *fabulations*, or sketches or tracings that appear imaginatively in the mind of the artist and are then communicated by some performative means. The ideas of art are rarely linear and yet they do open new worlds and make an attempt to open an insight into reality itself. Every work of art is, our authors say, a monument which rather than referring to a commemoration of a past event, represents

‘a bloc of present sensations that owe their preservation only to themselves’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 167). Art is capable of returning us to the first steps of human becoming because it enables the viewer, the reader, the listener to melt into the origins of ‘man’s nonhuman becoming’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 173). Art enables this vaporous pre-human existence to manifest itself as a sudden interruption into the historical sense. Last there are *concepts* but concepts cannot eschew the link with the ontogenesis of the person by means of what our writers call ‘*insistance*’. The art of making concepts involves insistence on their stability and on their truth, a type of ontological investment in the truth of the concept, even though in reality these stabilities are soon undermined and often forgotten. In this way to be engaged philosophically with ideas means to be engaged in the art of making concepts and this involves the paradox of solidification and vaporisation at the same time. We must *be* the ideas we hold and *hold* the ideas we are or, in other words, *we must be what we know and know what we are*. In concept making, being and knowing go together but this does not happen either in art or in science, since in art it is the reality of the world that appears and not the artist while in science arguably neither the being of the scientist nor the reality of the world are permitted to appear.

And yet vapours follow a certain path (Deleuze and Guattari, 17). A moment of being in relation to a ‘calm and restful world’ is suddenly broken up by a singular event, a revelation of some kind. For our writers this event has the character of possibility: it presents a possible new world. The economy of the self immediately adjusts to accommodate itself to this new element (Piaget) and with it to the possibility of existing in a new world. As an example of this type, Nietzsche describes the experience of falling in love, while in Sartre’s early work, Roquentin stands in front of the root of the tree in *La nausée*, experiencing the nauseous sense of his own consciousness. Some of these experiences can be anything but pleasant.

Others can be liberating and life-changing. All learning should be of this latter kind, although we know it is not. Being attacked by a group of Chelsea supporters is likely to be an acutely negative learning experience. Once this new event is introduced into life's experience, the economy of the self sets to work to find a place for it and it can sometimes be accommodated within the existing view of the world. Most times, however, the change required is of such significance that the self can never be the same again and a new world economy is established where the new event plays a significant role. One hopes that many positive learning moments would have this effect – a sudden insight bringing about a complete change in the way the learner looks at things- an art course that opens up art galleries, a religious experience that might lead to prayer, an experience of drama or literature that might begin the habit of theatre-going, an understanding of how some mechanism works that leads to some craft hobby, an explanation of some complex scientific theory that leads to an interest in laboratory research. The 'otherness' of this experience soon disappears within the economy of the self, becoming part of the identity and being of the learner and it can play a significant role in altering its direction and meaning. Deleuze and Guattari make much of the fact that the concept 'speaks the event, not the essence of the thing' and by so doing they invoke the importance of time in characterising experience in much the same way Nietzsche invoked the importance of time in his exploration of the historical and the unhistorical.

Our writers explain this by saying that '[t]he plane of composition of art and the plane of immanence of philosophy can slip into each other to the degree that parts of one may be occupied by entities of the other' (Deleuze and Guattari, 66). One example of this is the way that complex and abstract concepts in philosophy can be represented often better by images and poetry than by dialectical argument. So, for example, the myth of Er, which Plato borrows from his tradition, becomes the vehicle for a reflection on the nature of justice and

the quality of political leadership he had come across. This and other stories broaden the appeal of logic and ‘work’ for apparently ‘no reason’ but this may be because as stories they work with the ambivalence of concepts. They respect their imprecision as well as their clarity. This is evidence for the claim that ‘[p]henomenology needs art as logic needs science...’ (p. 149) for phenomenology recognises that philosophical engagement is not a time for clearing up the confusions of adult language or sorting out the antinomies of reason but a time for encouraging the learner to confront the reality of a verbalised world. By undergoing this process, learners then put words on experiences that are always somewhat vague, separating out experiences, learning from the accounts of others, learning to ‘insist’ on a perspective. These features belong to the art of creating concepts, concepts which rise like vapours from the plane of immanence to assume a shape and a form that conceals their murky origins. Children come through conceptual confusions in a philosophical sense provided they are encouraged by the teacher to do so. More refinements can enable learners to polish claims and to structure arguments. But to introduce polished claims too soon or to convey the impression that only polished claims count would ignore the important lessons of the vapour trails and the vaporous interludes through which the best of ideas must pass.

For these reasons my guess is that philosophers rightly object to any purely instrumentalist reduction of their art, saying that rationality cannot be reduced to the paradigm of mathematics and geometry (Smith, 2011, p. 362) that philosophers deal with a broader concept of rationality that extends beyond the purely logical to include context-based inferences, illative as well as focal senses (Polanyi), metaphorical as well as strictly logical meanings and certain forms of narrative inquiry. The damage has been done when the value of wonder itself is replaced as a learning objective (where does it appear now?) on the grounds that no time is available for nebulous, vaporous aspirations of this kind. For this



reason, it is difficult to imagine how philosophy might be validly construed in the service of any set of pre-established competences. It is always tempting to make it the instrument of some wider campaign to improve literacy and numeracy, for instance, or serve as a helper in forging a more equal society? If we want to know why our children or teenagers do not think, why some have lost the gift of originality, why some in a murderous rage model themselves on fictions like Batman or the Joker, then we must look to the ways we have ensnared them in a totalised transparent thought system where only clarity counts. In exam-dominated educational subcultures this thoughtless intensification means giving priority to the instrument, promoting mastery of course syllabi, studying not only exam questions with great attention but the marking schemes which open them up to full transparency. But the current challenge, as Peter Sloterdijk's version of Nietzsche has remarked, is not the divide between theory and practice but rather the challenge to support enigma once more in a culture of total transparency.

In concept making a reflexive loop is essential but not essential to an artist or a scientist, both of whom may be 'interested' in what they produce but not in a position to 'insist' upon it. As a result, a concept is a particular species, a Protean reality mingling being and knowing and committing the philosopher to the change within the self that is identified as 'learning'. It forms and unforms. It becomes definite and indefinite. It is solid and vaporous at the same time and this means in practice that when an idea is understood philosophically as a concept, its contours are probably in the process of being adjusted and potentially undermined. This feature picks up on the postmodern trend to identify authentic philosophical discipline as a process lived in the interval between the historical and the unhistorical, to refer once again to Nietzsche's distinction. But it also refers back to our current dispute between 'competence'

and ‘incompetence’ theorists, both of which are correct as part of a broader package, neither of which is valid on its own.

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