

WILL PHILOSOPHY IN THE XXIst CENTURY BE LESS SILLY THAN IT HAS BEEN IN THE XXth CENTURY ?

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Bernard Williams once said that within the contemporary philosophical production only 2% was worth reading, the rest being of very poor quality or mere bullshit. Harry Frankfurt, Max Black and a number of other respectable philosophers have pronounced similar scornful judgements. The most recent with which I came across is Galen Strawson's characterisation of the XXth century as the "silliest of all centuries in philosophy". Such sweeping and aristocratic sounding pronouncements are of course themselves silly, but there is some truth in them.

Silliness in philosophy has three main causes. Contrary to Cicero who thought that there is nothing so absurd but some philosopher has said it, I do not think that philosophers say more stupid things than ordinary people, but they probably do not say less stupid things either. Foolishness, as good sense according to Descartes, is well shared. Silliness in philosophy is then first simply an arithmetical factor of the number of philosophers or people purporting to do philosophy at a certain time. Now one of the striking features of philosophy in the XXth century is how much it has become a part of mass culture. There were probably not more than 1000 professional philosophers at the 1900 Paris world congress of philosophy. The American Philosophical Association has today more than 10 000 tenured members, and there are probably twice as much in Europe (in the universities) and as much in the rest of the world. The number of people who have encountered philosophy in the academic curriculum has increased enormously, to say nothing about countries which, like France, have been teaching philosophy in the secondary

education for two centuries. There were not more than 20 professional philosophy journals in 1900; today this number has probably been multiplied by 10 or 20. Philosophy is everywhere, in the *media*, on the *internet*, in forums, and it even went to power with Marxism. Like university education and rock music philosophy is in the XXth century a mass phenomenon. Hence more silliness. Let us call this *Arithmetical silliness*.

A second cause of silliness comes from the standardisation of philosophical culture. The more philosophy is a popular subject, the more widespread its statements are, hence the less original and intelligent they appear to be. In the XXth century this phenomenon has been increased not only through the professionalisation of the discipline and the expansion of universities, but also through the tendency of philosophers to form collective enterprises and to join schools of thought. Philosophy has always, from Antiquity to the Medieval and to Modern times, been very much a matter of schools. The XXth century has been no exception, but the schools have become international: logical positivism and analytic philosophy, phenomenology, marxism, even post-modernism, have been movements which started in one country or two but soon spread all over the world. Schools produce orthodoxies and stereotypes, they favour certain codes and styles, at the expense of originality and individual thinking. But this does not mean that the individual thinker as such is necessarily original and creative, hence free from stupidity. On the contrary, when a certain sort of culture – be it philosophical or other – becomes standardised and massified, it creates in many individuals a reaction against this standardisation, whereby these individuals find themselves much above the crowd and very different. Let us call this *Standardised Silliness*.

The third cause of philosophical silliness is thus a product of the two others: a number of people, out of dislike of the massification of culture and of philosophy, pretend to renew contact with True Thought. They conceive of themselves as genuine philosophers and opposed to the stupid followers of philosophical schools and fashions, and intend to stay with the *happy few*. The paradox is that in so doing

they create a philosophical school like all others, with its stereotypes, standards, etc, hence with its own silliness. In other words the pretension to be wiser and more thoughtful than others creates its own brand of stupidity. Let us call this phenomenon *Distinguished (or Noble) Silliness*. In literature, Flaubert, Valéry and Musil have described this turn very well. Nietzsche, in my view, and his philosophical descent in the XXth century, was a perfect example of this attitude, although he had the excuse of not being the first. To name one among so many phenomena of this sort in XXth philosophy, Heidegger and Heideggerianism is a case at point. Another example is the recent fashion of coming back to philosophy as a (mere) “spiritual exercise” in the manner of (some of) the philosophers of Antiquity. The Philosopher stays away from the world, contemplating its folly, but he is no less a fool than the rest of the world. The reason why I find Distinguished Silliness so silly is that it pretends precisely not to be silly. But metastupidity is stupidity enough.

I do not think that we can really get rid of foolishness, silliness or stupidity [the varieties should be detailed, but it is not the place to do it here] in philosophy as elsewhere, either in its first or in its second form, arithmetical and standardised, and I predict that the XXIth century will be no exception. (In this sense silliness is a truly democratic phenomenon). But we could try, modestly, to avoid at least Distinguished Silliness. A good way to do this is to renounce the image of the philosopher as a Giant of Thought, as an Individual Creator standing in perfect isolation from the Rest of Humanity and from his own peers. In this respect, the schoolman’s attitude can be a good antidote, and there is something obviously healthy in collective work in philosophy. One of the mottos of logical positivism and of analytic philosophy is that philosophy, although it is not a science, can in some respect adopt certain of the (good) habits of the scientists: to try to be clear, open to criticism, to put forward statements which are testable, etc., by contrast to so many attempts by “Continental” philosophers to be deep-sounding and obscure

for obscurity's sake (and in reality in order to immunise their strategies from criticisms, see Popper). Analytic philosophers, however, can be aloof too, and sure of their superiority. The schoolman's attitude can also, it is well known, lead to scholasticism, and neither phenomenology nor analytic philosophy can really pretend not have avoided these defects. But I find a philosophical culture which says from the start: "Not everyone is a genius" much better than the both popular and so-called spirited and post-Romantic attitude of the Philosopher as an Exceptional Thinker. So I believe that there is some good, after all, in a limited dose of disciplined scholasticism. Let us call this *philosophical modesty*.

A corollary of this attitude is that the philosopher who sees philosophy more as a collective than an individual enterprise does not try to build a system, nor to answer systematically the so-called Big Questions, at least not in their usual forms: What is Being? Are we free? etc. Philosophers should be interested, rather, by smaller questions. "Small" philosophy questions, such as, for instance whether there are negative facts, or what is the meaning of a conditional "if" statement, are not mere "technical" or "logical" questions, for they are connected, by implication, to much bigger ones (for instance the question of the meaning of conditional statements is connected to the issue of the nature of laws, of possibility and necessity, of belief, inference, etc.). Modesty is not incompatible with ambition. A philosophical *bonzaï* is often preferable to big oaks. Another consequence of this attitude is that philosophers should try to resist their recent infatuation for ethics. A main characteristic of the contemporary "ethics boom" in philosophy is that it comes with the idea that philosophy should limit itself to ethical matters, leaving theoretical matters to science. Philosophy is thus reduced to a vague wisdom, completely cut from its theoretical basis. But as Franz Brentano noted a long time ago, there can be no good ethics if there no good theoretical philosophy.

Another corollary of modesty in philosophy is that its practitioners respect common sense and science, and have an instinctive contempt for immoderate philosophical intuition and transcendental *Geschwätz*. Like Leibniz, who attacked

Descartes's pretentious talk of his own "idée claires et distinctes", they also respect logic, sound rules of thinking and argument.

There can be an abuse of logic too, as when a philosopher masquerades as an "exact thinker" (I have always found the idea of a Society for Exact Philosophy suspect) by trying to make his philosophy scientific. Nevertheless, logic helps a great deal in laying down what is said and what are the consequences. The modest philosopher is a partisan of what Peirce called "critical commonsensism". The modest philosopher also tries to avoid the traditional temptation to become involved in political matters, and especially to believe that his work will automatically have effects on the fate of society or mankind. The good attitude in this respect, it seems to me, was Bertrand Russell's. He took part in discussion of public issues, but he did not believe that his work as a logician or an epistemologist had any connections with his political commitments.

It would be mere wishful thinking to assume that philosophy in the XXIst century will follow the paths of Modesty instead of those of Distinguished Silliness. It is not difficult to predict that in the XXIst century, philosophy will continue to be a fairly technical subject. As I suggested, I do not find this a bad thing: on the whole, academic philosophy, in spite of all its defects, has produced more good philosophy in the past than the lay culture of the spirited high brow intellectuals, of which the French philosophical culture is a paradigm. It is not difficult either to predict that XXIst philosophy will continue to be dominated by issues and problems coming from science. Philosophy in the future will have to steer away between two rocks: scientism, devotion to science and belief that it has all the answers on the one hand, and aristocratic aloofness on the other.

The main difficulty, for XXIst century philosophy will be to attempt to keep its status as a humanistic discipline, based on a reflective knowledge of its past and on a sense of its place within culture as a whole, and at the same time to be as well innovative and technical in the sense in which scientific disciplines can be. In a

large part, this challenge at reconciling the “two cultures”, that of humanism and that of science, will depend upon how philosophy will be able to keep its place within the university curriculum. From the Medieval period, the universities have been the main vector of philosophical work. At the end of the XXth century, the Academic ideal that gave rise to the Humboldtian model of the German universities in the previous century, and which inspired most academic systems in the world, has suffered a lot from the spreading of knowledge through the media, from the increased insertion of academic life within the society as a whole. It is probably impossible today to come back to universities which would be sanctuaries of learning and research, isolated from the rest of the world within a Pure Realm of Truth, and we can predict that the age of mass universities is not going to end. What would be the place of philosophy within it? I do not know. But the fact that I propose to philosophy to follow the path of modesty does not imply that its place should itself be modest.

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