

Cultivating Dialectical Imagination

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Philosophy

☞ I found myself so daunted by the task of saying what is characteristic of philosophical writing, as distinct from writing in other disciplines, that I turned to some of my colleagues for help. Their responses—which may say more about the philosophical circles in which I travel than about philosophical writing as such—tended to emphasize the virtues of “argument”: virtues like “precision,” “clarity,” and “rigor.” (I take it that precision and clarity are primarily matters of making things explicit—of saying exactly what one means, no more and no less. And I take it that rigor is primarily a matter of attending to, and respecting, what does and what does not follow logically from what.) And while I, too, pride myself on my commitment to these virtues, I found these responses disappointing for various reasons, including not only their myopic vision but also their arrogance and transparent falsity. Surely philosophers do not have a monopoly on the topic-neutral virtues of precision, clarity, and rigor. Think, to take just a few examples, of legal writing, or of much writing in the natural and social sciences. Some philosophical writing seems to me far inferior with respect to these virtues to much writing in these and other fields: indeed some philosophical writing seems to me not even to aspire to these virtues. And while the failure to do so is often, perhaps even usually, a defect, I do not think it always a defect. If one of the points of philosophical writing is to provoke philosophical thought—whatever exactly that is—and if philosophical thought is sometimes better provoked by cryptic or paradoxical remarks like those of Heraclitus or the later Wittgenstein, then there should be room within our conceptions of good philo-

sophical writing for cryptic and paradoxical remarks, perhaps even for treatises composed largely or entirely of such remarks. One might, however, reasonably resist saying this—let alone teaching it—in a First-Year Writing Seminar.

Should philosophers then settle in teaching freshmen, or undergraduates in general, for precision, clarity, and rigor? Or at least for fostering these ideals? I think not. For exclusive attention to precision, clarity, and rigor can both inhibit imagination and encourage reductive habits of mind that may impede philosophical insight. It is no use objecting that emphasizing precision, clarity, and rigor need not have these effects. For the point here is not about what follows logically from what; the point is that emphasizing precision, clarity, and rigor—especially as ends and not simply as means—can and in many cases does have these effects. But truths, if I may speak of such things, may be messy or paradoxical, and there is little reason to suppose that they will always be susceptible of capture, or of communication to others, in clear and precise language. So vagueness and indirection may in some cases serve truth-respecting and/or communicative functions. Plato, for example, may have chosen to write dialogues, rather than treatises, for pedagogical reasons. He may, for example, have written aporetic dialogues in order to induce philosophically fertile confusion in his readers. Or he may have thought it important for readers to draw their own conclusions. Or, even if there were specific conclusions he wanted his readers to draw, he may have thought it more effective if they drew these conclusions for themselves. Think, for example, of F. M. Cornford's suggestion that Plato omitted any reference to Forms in the *Theaetetus* because he wanted his readers to see for themselves how impossible it was to solve certain problems without the Forms. One need not accept Cornford's view in this particular case to see that it points to a possible and philosophically respectable motivation for one sort of refusal to state one's view as clearly and precisely, or as explicitly, as possible (Cornford 1935, 28).

One might still object to preaching this in an undergraduate writing class, if only for self-interested reasons. Who wants, week after week, to try to understand, and to write helpful comments on, fifteen or so *Will to Power* or *Philosophical Investigations* wanna-bes? It is one thing to have to puzzle endlessly over Nietzsche or Wittgenstein, and quite another to have to puzzle endlessly over fifteen or more undergraduate imitations. So the question is: is there any way to cultivate philosophical imagination and insight without undue sacrifice of precision, clarity, and rigor?

I think there is, if we adopt a different conception of what is characteristic of—even if not peculiar to—philosophical writing. (By “characteristic” here, I mean what helps to make philosophical writing philosophical.) It is not, I think, an accident that so many great philosophers chose to write dialogues—either

explicit ones (like those of Plato and Hume) or implicit ones (like those of Descartes and Wittgenstein). For it seems to me that what is most characteristic of philosophical writing—at least of good philosophical writing—is its dialectical nature. I am using the term “dialectical” here in a broad sense, to refer to the way in which philosophical views are typically developed in opposition or response to one another. Sometimes the oppositions are resolved, as for example in Hegelian synthesis; sometimes they are not, as, for example, in the sort of dialogical writing that Bahktin distinguishes from dialectical writing in this narrower Hegelian sense (Bahktin 1973, 22). But in any case, philosophical views are typically articulated—not simply in presenting them to others but even in the author’s own mind—in response to other views, sometimes to sharply opposed views, sometimes only to subtly different ones. This means that understanding the views to which one responds plays an important role in one’s own philosophical development. And this, I assume, is why understanding the history of philosophy is so often viewed—correctly I think—as central to the philosophical enterprise as such. It may also explain why Laura Ruetsche, one of the colleagues I polled about the distinctive characteristics of philosophical writing, responded by saying that philosophers spend more time telling you what their point is *not* than telling you what it *is*. I think she meant this partly in jest. But I took her to be on to something deep—namely, that it is partly by determining what their views are *not* that philosophers determine what their views *are*.

One might object here that this sort of progressive articulation of views, in response to other views, is common in many fields. And this is no doubt true. Think, for example, of the history of science, or of literary theory. Consider, for a concrete example, the way in which Bahktin articulates his view, in response to the views of his predecessors, in the first chapter of *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. Still, however, there seems to me to be one mode of such progressive articulation that is more characteristic of philosophy (even if not peculiar to it) than of other fields—namely, articulation of one’s own views in response to imagined views, views that have not (so far as the author knows) been held by any actual interlocutor.

The ability to imagine plausible objections and plausible alternatives to one’s own proposed views is essential (even if not peculiar) to good philosophical thought and writing. Indeed, it is partly because it is not peculiar to philosophy that it is so useful: although a lawyer, for example, needs in the end to respond only to the arguments actually raised by her opponent, her ability to do so is greatly improved by her ability to imagine and so to anticipate the various sorts of arguments, especially the improbable ones, that her opponent *might*

raise. And this sort of imagination is something I think we can seek to cultivate—without undue sacrifice of precision, clarity, and rigor—in undergraduates. Moreover, this sort of imagination is something we need to cultivate in undergraduates, since it tends to be relatively new to them. While they are often able to report some actual person's actual view and to say what they themselves actually think is wrong with it, they are much less often able to imagine objections that someone else, with a different and perhaps only imagined point of view, might raise against their own views. They are sometimes able to appreciate such objections when they are pointed out, and even, in some cases, to imagine what sort of objection a specific sort of opponent might raise. They are, for example, reasonably accomplished at anticipating and preparing replies to the sorts of practical objections their own parents might raise against their various behaviors. But except for those who have participated in something like debate, they seem to me less able to anticipate the sorts of objections—especially more theoretical ones—that might be raised by less familiar interlocutors. Yet this ability is crucial to their ability to develop their own views and to modify them in light of their perceived inadequacies. For one hopes in modifying a view in response to one objection not to fall prey to other possible ones.

How, then, can we seek to cultivate such dialectical imagination? One way is to provide students with models to study. It is useful to walk students slowly through a text like Descartes's *Meditations*, asking them at various points whose voice a particular claim is in—Descartes's or his imaginary interlocutor's—and then asking them to identify the devices the author uses to signal in whose voice a particular claim is. Many students do not even understand this question. I have often had students reply, "What do you *mean* 'In whose voice?'" Even explicit dialogues pose a challenge here. For students often falsely assume that anything a particular character says is in that character's own voice. But characters often represent the views of others before attacking these views, or use the views of others as foils for presenting their own views. So it is instructive to ask students to distinguish among the claims of a particular character that are in the character's own voice and which are not. Learning to recognize these distinctions in the work of others is a step toward learning to signal them clearly and precisely in one's own work, which is crucial to good philosophical writing, especially given the way in which the articulation of philosophical views so often proceeds by way of response to other views. So exercises of this sort allow one to cultivate appreciation of the dialectical situation while simultaneously demanding precision, clarity, and rigor—rigor, too, because one can always point out when a particular interlocutor's precise conclusion does not follow from his clearly and precisely articulated premises. Note, however, that clarity, precision,

and rigor function here primarily as *means* to what really matters—namely, to understanding the dialectical situation and thence communicating it (either directly or indirectly) *to* others.

A more active exercise that I find useful is to ask students to defend views they do not hold, sometimes even views with which they strongly disagree. This is useful because most of them, except for those who have been involved in something like debate, find this difficult. One way to do this is to take a student's paragraph (or short paper) with an identifiable thesis, and then to ask the student to write a second paragraph (or short paper) attacking the thesis, and later a third paragraph (or short paper) defending the thesis against the second's attack. (I mention both paragraphs and papers here because I typically begin the term by asking students to master paragraph structure before moving on to short papers, so I do this first with paragraphs then eventually with short papers.) This task presupposes that the paragraph has an identifiable thesis, so one exercise I do early on is to ask students to prepare two copies of their paragraphs—one with the thesis statement underlined and one without underlining. I then divide them into pairs and ask them to give their unmarked copies to their partners. I then ask each student to underline what he or she takes to be the thesis statement of his or her partner's paragraph. Finally, I ask them to compare notes to see if their partners have correctly identified the statements that they themselves have underlined. If not, I ask them to discuss with their partners why the partners identified different statements instead, and then to rewrite in ways designed to avoid the sorts of misunderstanding exhibited by their partners.

A similar method, which has the additional advantage of facilitating class discussion, is to ask each member of the class to identify his or her position on the issue we are discussing by sitting in a designated part of the room—for example, those taking a liberal feminist position on pornography on one side of the table and those taking a radical feminist position on the other. (I also tell them that they can move to different seats at any point if they change their minds during the course of discussion. The idea of this is to encourage open-mindedness together with a sense that it is perfectly acceptable to change one's mind.) I find that this facilitates discussion, perhaps because students feel that they are not alone but have identifiable allies, perhaps because they feel more inclined to defend a view with which they are visibly identified. When discussion lags, as it rarely does when I proceed this way, I can always call on a student who, in virtue of her location, ought to have something to say in response to a point made by the other side. But this is rarely necessary, as a team spirit tends to develop among the various groups, with members coming to one another's assistance in the discussion. I then record who is sitting where, and ask them to write a defense of a view they in fact opposed. (I tell them this after the discus-

sion, so as to prevent deceptive seating, and they usually groan when I do this.) Later, I ask each student to write a reply to his own defense of the view he originally opposed, the idea being for students to learn what it takes to rebut alternatives to their own views in the course of defending their own views. I use this method because I believe that the most successful attacks on a target view are those borne out of appreciation of—or even better out of temptation toward—whatever it is that moves proponents of the target view. And I believe that the most successful defenses of one's own views are those that appreciate and accommodate as far as possible the driving forces behind one's opponents' views.

It is, of course, true that cultivating appreciation of views opposed to one's own can lead to ambivalence of a sort that may muddy one's own mind and hence one's own writing. But this is not necessarily a bad thing. It encourages students to recognize the complexity of issues and to resist superficial solutions to deep problems. It encourages intellectual integrity. It even encourages a kind of rigor—namely, not claiming to have shown or supported more than one has in fact supported or shown. Moreover, such ambivalence is often philosophically fertile: many important philosophical developments are the fruit of someone's seeking to do justice to each of two (or more) allegedly competing intuitions and refusing to secure one neatly at the expense of the other. Think, for example, of Kant's "Copernican revolution" and the way in which he sought to synthesize aspects of the rationalist and empiricist traditions that had previously been viewed as irreconcilable. The result was hardly crystal clear; but it was a great (and highly influential) achievement.

I do not mean to advocate encouraging undergraduates—or even graduates—to model their writing on works like Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, though I might consider letting a precocious student start with Descartes's *Meditations*. Stage-appropriate models are important, as I learned with one of my graduate students some years ago. This particular student was a great admirer of the relatively mature work of several eminent philosophers, and he seemed to me to be modeling his work (perhaps unconsciously) on work these philosophers had done in their forties and early fifties. As a result, he tended to make ambitious claims he was not yet prepared or entitled to make. I decided eventually to share my diagnosis with him and to prescribe that he read a number of works that these mature philosophers had written when they had been (like him) in their twenties. I handed him a reading list of such works. He soon began to do the sort of work I had been encouraging him to do, with a view to doing the sort of work he eventually wanted to do, and he later remarked how instructive this reading exercise had been for him. I often ask graduate students who are struggling with writing to do something like this: I ask them to think explicitly about whose writing they admire and why, with a view to helping them find appropriate mod-

els. With undergraduates, who are less familiar with philosophical works, I prefer to provide them with a few good models and to encourage them to think explicitly about what makes a model good (as well as about how even it might be improved). Models are important, especially with weaker students, many of whom claim that comments about their work are not enough. And once again, stage-appropriate models are important; I've found that many students benefit more from seeing a solid student paper of a sort they can reasonably hope to write than from seeing a professional piece or even too exceptional a piece of student writing, either of which can be demoralizing if it is presented as model for them.

Genre- and scale-appropriate models are also important. I once taught a freshman writing seminar in which we read a series of short stories, each of which raised issues of moral and/or legal responsibility. We discussed each story in class, both with a view to the issues involved and with a view to the question of whether positions about such issues might not be more effectively conveyed by means of narratives like those we had read than by means of more straightforward argument. The problem was that the students were writing primarily expository and argumentative pieces but were reading primarily narrative ones. When one of the students requested that I provide them with short models of expository/argumentative writing, I found a treasure in the volumes that collect Stephen Jay Gould's columns from *Natural History*. The pieces were just the right length, superbly organized (typically, for example, making one key and clearly identifiable point per paragraph), masterfully argued (always raising, and dealing clearly and concisely with, objections), and sublimely written (their rare uses of the passive voice, for example, all clearly motivated). Still, however, some students despaired of having such lofty models and I had to supplement my use of Gould with the use of anonymous student papers.

One reason for encouraging more advanced students to come up with their own models—and for providing less advanced students with multiple models—is to discourage the imagination-inhibiting idea that there is one uniquely correct way to do things. This idea tends, no doubt, to be more prevalent among freshmen, who have often been brought up on purportedly exceptionless rules, like “never use the first person” (which, incidentally, often makes it more difficult to identify whose voice a particular claim is in). So I prefer to speak in terms of guidelines rather than rules, and I try to get students to focus on the various pros and cons—for there are usually both—of doing things a particular way in a particular instance. For example, while I generally think it is easier to read a piece that contains a clear statement of its thesis at the outset—largely because it is easier to evaluate the relevance of particular claims as one proceeds—there are cases in which I think it is worth sacrificing this advantage in the interests of

dramatic and/or pedagogical effect. This is one sort of choice that I often struggle with in my own work, and I find that speaking openly with students about such struggles of my own—sometimes by showing them radically different drafts of bits of my own work—is an effective device for opening their minds to alternative ways of doing things. It also cultivates an atmosphere of mutuality.

Talking about such choices as if they might be reasonably resolved in a number of ways has other benefits as well. It can help to remove one of the primary sources of writer's block—namely, the idea that there is a single best way to do things. It is also a good way to open students' minds to the potential benefits of radical revision. For I find that students are too often wedded to what they start with, and tend to think of revision simply as a matter of changing a few words—or adding a sentence or two—here and there. So I ask them early on to practice radically restructuring both paragraphs and sentences. Students find it much more difficult to do this with sentences than with paragraphs, and I am still looking for a good method to help them restructure sentences: I would welcome suggestions here.¹ With paragraphs, I ask them to write several different paragraphs, each with the same content but a different structure, and then to evaluate the various paragraphs for relative effectiveness. And I encourage them to think in terms of costs and benefits, so as to discourage the idea that the choice between one paragraph and another is always clear-cut. I have not tried anything like this with whole papers yet, but writing this piece has given me an idea I would like to try in the future. I would like to ask students to write two radically different pieces, each intended to convey the same view—one a dialogue and one a straightforward argumentative piece. It would be interesting, also, to see if it were easier for students to “translate” in one direction rather than another—i.e., from dialogue to straightforward argument or vice versa. And it would be interesting to see if starting with the dialogue and then moving to straightforward argument resulted in dialectically more interesting argumentative papers. I suspect it would. If so, asking students to move from dialogues to argumentative pieces would be another way to cultivate dialectical imagination.

Still the main way—one might say the “generic” way—to cultivate dialectical imagination is to provoke students to engage in dialectic for themselves.² And the first, and perhaps most important, step is in the classroom. For while novices may be able to appreciate dialectical interplay as it appears on the written page, especially if you give them pieces by authors who are responding directly to one another, written dialectic is less likely to come alive for them if they have not already participated in it first hand. The best remedy is to draw them into dialectical discussion with themselves and with each other. And one good

way to do this is to guide them, in a Socratic way, in developing hypothetical examples of their own, examples that are designed either to defend or to defeat particular points. This is an excellent way to cultivate dialectical imagination while simultaneously encouraging precision and rigor. For asking them to develop their own hypothetical examples affords freer play to their imagination than does asking them to produce actual or historical examples. But the license to invent their own examples is not *carte blanche*: they must produce examples with the relevant features.

This sort of task is typically new to undergraduates; the closest they are likely to have come to it is in seeking to design just the right sort of scientific experiment to test a given hypothesis (which is a useful analogy to get them going). So I find that it works best in class dialogue, where I can guide the discussion. A typical exchange goes something like this. I set out a view and ask for a counterexample to it. Often there are several false starts and I probe the class about why the proposed counterexamples do not work, sometimes giving them hints. Eventually someone proposes something that is in the right ballpark but not quite on the mark. I ask other members of the class what is right and what is wrong with the proposal, and try to get them (sometimes with hints from myself) to modify it so as to get it right. I find that students can really get into this sort of exercise when it is carried out in a friendly playful way—as if, for example, they were playing a game like *Twenty Questions*.³

This sort of immediate guidance and feedback is something you must provide: textbooks cannot do this job. (It may in fact have been Socrates' appreciation of this that led him to eschew writing.) You can, of course, provide some of this in written comments on your students' work. And you can invite students to do it for one another by asking them to write comments on one another's work, which is something I frequently ask them to do in order to prepare them for the more difficult task—and eventual goal—of commenting on their own work. But there is no better introduction to philosophy than the immediate give and take of dialogue with your students. So, although I am generally wary of letting students know what I think on an issue they are supposed to be thinking through themselves, I have found that asking them to engage in debate with me—sometimes even by asking them to comment on bits of my work—is a way of drawing them into dialogue not only with me but with the broader philosophical community as well. By situating myself for them in a debate with my peers (or predecessors) I can draw them, through their debate with me, into debate with my peers (or predecessors). This serves, I think, to bring the activity of philosophy alive to them in a way in which simply reading texts—as if philosophy is something that goes on “out there”—does not.

Philosophy is an activity; it is something you do. One of the greatest ob-

stacles to novice philosophizing is the common conception of college papers as glorified reports—reports about someone else’s views. Although a few philosophically inclined students can pick up the idea of how to do philosophy simply by reading written examples of it, most students need to be goaded out of reporting philosophy and guided into doing it. This requires dialectical interaction with others—both with skilled interlocutors and with their peers. Then, having learned how to argue with live interlocutors, they should find it easier to argue with dead (or imaginary) ones: to think of their own objections to Descartes, for example, and to imagine how Descartes (or an imaginary interlocutor sympathetic to his view) might respond to such objections. Finally, having mastered this, they should be well on the way to acquiring the benefit that the Cynic Antisthenes is reported to have said he acquired from philosophy—namely, the ability to converse with himself (Laertius 1925). There is an additional—and discipline-neutral—benefit here as well. For this should move students closer to the ideal to which I think all writers should aspire—namely, the ability to comment on one’s own work *as if* it were the work of another.

I once had a freshman who struggled all term, both with philosophical ideas and with their written expression. But I felt that I had made great progress when, toward the end of the term, she said, as if light had suddenly dawned upon the whole, “Why, philosophy is just like one big conversation, isn’t it?” I am sure, by the way, that this student had never read—nor even heard of—Richard Rorty. I am also sure that she had little idea just how true this is of philosophy’s distinctive “disciplinary culture.” I have often heard people from other fields remark with curiosity on the percentage of time that philosophy colloquia typically award to commentary and discussion. I have also heard philosophers who have participated in colloquia in other fields muse that others seem to regard the sorts of questions philosophers routinely ask of one another as hostile or unacceptably impolite. Such remarks and musings seem to me to reflect the way in which philosophy, perhaps more than any other discipline, is fundamentally dialectical. It proceeds largely by way of discussion (both written and oral) with other philosophers (live, dead, and imaginary) and ultimately with ourselves. The task of teaching philosophy is thus one of initiating students into the practices of such discussion, the task of making them participants and not simply observers.