

PHILOSOPHY'S HUMANISTIC DYNAMISM

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Abstract

During the long humanistic intellectual history, philosophers used to be the forerunners of humanistic civilization. Nowadays, although remaining a famous discipline of Humanities, Philosophy seems not to be considered as the indubitable refuge of Humanism. In my opinion, the current academic politics does not coincide with the fulfilling of Philosophy's alleged humanistic aspirations. On the one side, philosophers' admirable academic achievements are not widely recognized. On the other side, academic philosophers themselves do not seem to be caring a lot about the public impact of their research. As a matter of fact, only a few academic philosophers made the cultural impact of Philosophy their constant academic concern. One of the most famous philosophers, who really made a subject out of their concern about the future of Philosophy, was Richard Rorty. Although I am not eager to accept Rorty's pessimism regarding Philosophy's role in expanding the territories of scientific knowledge, I am totally convinced that Rorty's ideas concerning the cultural mission of Philosophy are well worth considering, provided that one has strong feelings about Philosophy's place in human civilization. My own contribution rests on my analysis on the crisis of Philosophy's strategic role in the leadership of Humanities. What I propose, is the reconsidering of the value of philosophical texts themselves, old and new ones. If Philosophy is to play a role in the rebirth of Humanities, philosophers may have to reconsider the value of the tradition of philosophical writing itself, instead of their obsession with ideas alone. We may have to re-establish the spontaneous productivity of philosophical expression, as the means of the re-entering of Philosophy in the path of humanistic excellence.

Keywords: Rorty, culture, text, future, philosophical tradition

Introduction

The last fifteen years or so, a lot of research concerns several aspects of globalization. The consequences of globalized communication for the overall status of thought are serious enough. The civilization of knowledge - formatting for the sake of communication, seems to be irreversible, to the detriment of the satisfaction with reading and joyful knowledge. If this is so, then it is not surprising that Humanities are suffering the loss of their credibility as former well established disciplines, the task of which has always been the research on the meaningfulness of human life.

In this dangerous crossroad for Humanities, the role of Philosophy could be proved critical, provided that philosophers trust their only means to create meaning, that means verbal philosophical expression. Philosophical reason, without doubt, is a high-order operation of the human mind, which establishes by itself a reasonable order in the human world. Nevertheless, reason is mute without its wording. The philosophical wording is extremely innovative, throughout Philosophy's long history. For this reason, I consider philosophical expression, whatever its endless forms, as a unique achievement of human civilization. This is not to be forgotten.

Without doubt, philosophical reasoning is useful in so many ways. Nowadays, for example, philosophers say intriguing things in the context of discussing contemporary issues. Nevertheless, philosophy's strongest argument about the necessity of the existence of

philosophical thought, lies, in my opinion, in the philosophical tradition. Not because there are solutions for contemporary problems to be found in the past, but because it is through referring to the long tradition of philosophical writing that philosophy is going to regain its vital spontaneity.

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The spontaneity of the manifold philosophical verbiage conserved the philosophical tradition of centuries. The philosophical tradition, I think, is the only convincing anti-proposal to the contemporary anarchy of the civilizational meaning. What I am proposing, is to return to the history of Philosophy, in order to discover again and again the philosophical texts of the past and, together with the texts, to rediscover the spirit of referring to Philosophy as the main representative of a viable and diachronic civilization. In my opinion, the civilization of writing and studying philosophical texts, is comparable and equally vital for human beings as the civilization of art.

Contemporary philosophy is rich in exuberant suggestions. P. Kitcher, echoing J. Dewey's views, says that this is what the role of philosophy really is: '...the philosopher's first task is to recognize the appropriate questions that arise for his contemporaries.'¹ What is the value of those suggestions, though, both from the point of view of the philosophical status of thought, and regarding their practical usefulness? In a word: who listens philosophers today? A spontaneous reply might be: 'many people'. What I honestly mean, is this: who listens carefully to philosophers rather, than the politicians or the journalists? Most probably their colleagues, and, most importantly, the ones who have an ideological affiliation between each other. Nevertheless, Philosophy has all the credentials necessary for a scientific discipline, which is something that no one else has, of those uttering public speech on issues of an overall anthropological, moral, political and social interest.

R. Dworkin, a popular contemporary philosopher, who died recently, in one of his interviews in the BBC, three years ago, defended the view that everyone must be convinced about the legitimacy of gay marriages. All people, he said, have to accept the idea of those marriages. In addition, according to Dworkin, it is a responsibility of the State to convince everyone, because the State allegedly fights superstition.

Dworkin made another suggestion, as well. He defended the view that the University criteria for the acceptability of students, have to be academic as well as non-academic ones. Among the second ones, one has to enumerate the predisposition to study, and the eagerness of the students to find a work related to the subject matter of their studies. The journalist of the BBC, who had that conversation with Dworkin, was not convinced by the arguments of the eminent Professor of Philosophy. He rather made contrary suggestions.

As for Dworkin's idea concerning University criteria, there is a critical question to be posed indeed. What could probably be the measure for someone's predisposition to study? This is a philosophical question, which is to be answered by philosophical reasoning. Philosophers, in general, give arguments to defend their views. This is the kind of philosophy which prevails nowadays.

No doubt, philosophers have never stopped to revoke eminent ideas from Philosophy's long past. Today, philosophers are particularly attracted to Kant, the philosophers of Pragmatism and Wittgenstein. They strive to find new ideas, in order to enter in a serious dialogue with those eminent philosophical figures. Nevertheless, the question that truly matters, is the following. What is the future of Philosophy going to be like?

Several attempts have been made, in order for this question to be answered. For example, few years ago two collections of papers have been edited regarding the future of Philosophy. The first one is edited by Oliver Leeman, in 1998, and the second one by Brian

¹ Philip Kitcher, 'Philosophy inside out.' *Metaphilosophy* 42 (3) (2011), 252.

Leiter, in 2004. The first volume is entitled “The future of Philosophy”, and the title of the second one is “The future for Philosophy”.² Nevertheless, Richard Rorty, the great apostate of the analytic revolution, was the first analytic philosopher to pose the question regarding the future of Philosophy. When referring to the reception of his famous “The philosophy and the mirror of nature”, Rorty said: ‘Though disliked by most of my fellow philosophy professors, this book had enough success among non-philosophers to give me a self-confidence I had previously lacked.’³

Rorty’s iconoclastic ideas and the way he used to talk about them was enough for him to become extremely loved and extremely hated.⁴ According to Jonathan Rée: ‘...with the possible exception of Rorty himself, no one can have been surprised that *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* lost him the sympathy of nearly every pukka philosopher in the English-reading world.’

The philosophical establishment had stigmatized Rorty. Professional philosophers obey to the rules of the academic politics of ideas, and either they compromise with the dominant philosophical ideology, or they are taking the side of the rival. Regarding analytic philosophy, I am fond of Aaron Preston’s well founded view:

...it is (and always has been) a mistake to regard analytic philosophy as a philosophical school, movement, or tradition, and that, instead, it is (and always has been) a purely social entity unified by what are called interactional memes, maintained at high frequency by conformist transmission.⁵

J. Cottingham, also, writes as follows:

...we often seem determined to situate ourselves in a narrow anglophone world that is exclusively or very largely focused on the latest ‘cutting edge’ theories advanced by our contemporaries, either supposedly out of the blue, or through debate with other current theorists, or those of the recent past.⁶

Most Philosophy professors are being concurred with the ideology of the academic politics of Philosophy together with the philosophy of the academic political ideology. If this is so, then it is not difficult to explain the disregarding of philosophical thought nowadays. Famous philosophers have their own faithful followers, but the public impact of their discourse is the same as that of other publicly speaking persons, like journalists, politicians or others. M. Bunge describes the current situation well enough:

Philosophy is far from being dead but, in my opinion, it is stagnant. In fact, few if any radically new and correct philosophical ideas, let alone systems, are being proposed. Gone are the days of exciting new and grand philosophical ideas that spilled over into other disciplines or even the public--for better or for worse. Today most philosophers teach, analyze, comment on, or embellish other scholars' ideas. Others play frivolous if ingenious academic games. ...⁷

Honestly, I wonder if this is the best Philosophy can do, after 2.500 years of the philosophical tradition, and while it is being taught more than any other academic subject, both in Secondary Schools and Universities around the world. I am not saying that philosophers today seized to have either original ideas or convincing arguments. Besides, this

² For a rather optimistic view regarding Philosophy’s future, if seen in close relation with science, see John Searle, ‘The Future of Philosophy.’ *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, 354 (1999), 2069 – 2080.

³ Richard Rorty, ‘Trotsky and the Wild Orchids.’ In *Philosophy and Social Hope*, (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 12.

⁴ Jonathan Rée, ‘Strenuous Unbelief.’ *London Review of Books*, 20 (20) (1998), 7.

⁵ Aaron Preston, ‘Conformism in Analytic Philosophy: On Shaping Philosophical Boundaries and Prejudices.’ *The Monist*, 88 (2) (2005), 292.

⁶ John Cottingham, ‘What is Humane Philosophy and Why is it at Risk?’ In *Conceptions of Philosophy*, edited by A.O’Hare, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 235.

⁷ Mario Bunge, ‘Philosophy in Crisis.’ op. cit., 29.

is something philosophers always did, starting from Socrates, who was extremely apt to the argumentative philosophizing.

Nevertheless, we would not have known anything, or almost, about Socrates, if it were not for Plato who wrote down Socrates' dialogues, and made Socrates', as well as his own philosophy, readable. Literally, Philosophy owes its birth to Plato, who is the genuine "lover of discourses", which is an expression that is to be found in Plato's dialogue entitled "Phaedrus".

Plato was a kind of philosopher - philologist. The philosophical discourse gained its own value because of Plato and not thanks to Socrates, who did not seem to care about written philosophical word. No doubt, of course, Socrates' stance towards written philosophical thought is to be respected for several reasons. Aristotle, as well, is well known for his treasuring compelling ideas of influential philosophers of the past. Aristotle's texts, on the other hand, are to be admired for their technical adequacy and their meaningful clarity.

Throughout the long history of Philosophy, the leading philosophers are competent readers, sincere admirers of the gifted philosophical writing and talented writers themselves. This is how Philosophy developed through its long history. The name of Philosophy became eminent thanks to the philosophers – philologists.

That philosophical tradition tends to be abandoned. Wittgenstein is indirectly responsible for the abandonment of the philological past of Philosophy. According to Ray Monk, whom I consider to be one of Wittgenstein's most brilliant biographers: 'He felt that even the people who understood in a detailed way his views on this, that and the other, had missed his attitude on these questions.'⁸ Wittgenstein's indirect responsibility lies in the fact that he inspired the distrust of his followers to the traditional philosophical discourse. Ever since technical syllogisms, as well as logicity, have prevailed. Once again, as far as Wittgenstein is concerned, Ray Monk makes himself explicitly clear:

He didn't just have an argument against logicism. He hated logicism. He described logicism as a cancerous growth. He talks about the disastrous invasion of mathematics by logic. Why did he feel so strongly about that? Because it's a symptom of what he perceived to be a more general cultural degeneration.⁹

In my opinion, this evolution is not to be considered as a fatal one or a development, let's say, of the Cartesian spirit. Descartes himself, in his *Discourse on Method*, writes on the matter of logic:

When I was younger, I had studied, among the parts of philosophy, a little logic, and among those of mathematics, a bit of geometrical analysis and algebra—three arts or sciences that, it seemed, ought to contribute something to my plan. But in examining them, I noticed that, in the case of logic, its syllogisms and the greater part of its other lessons served more to explain to someone else the things one knows, or even, like the art of Lully, to speak without judgment concerning matters about which one is ignorant, than to learn them.¹⁰

Consequently, in order to regain their spontaneity together with their originality, philosophers may have to renew their faith in philosophical discourse. J. Cottingham speaks about the sterility of analytic philosophical writing: 'Many analytic philosophers have increasingly adopted this austere scientific model of discourse, either subconsciously or deliberately cultivating a mode of writing such that any stamp of individuality is ruthlessly suppressed.'¹¹ Hans – Johann Glock gives his own account of the writing attitudes of analytic philosophers:

⁸ Julian Baggini and Jeremy Stangroom, (eds). *New British Philosophy*, (London: Routledge, 2002), .

⁹ See Julian Baggini, op. cit., 12.

¹⁰ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, translated by Donald A. Cress, (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1998), 10.

¹¹ John Cottingham, 'What is Humane Philosophy and Why is it at Risk?' op. cit., 251.

Unfortunately, the speech of many contemporary analytic philosophers is as plain as a baroque church and as clear as mud. Indeed, many of them seem to regard this as an achievement, because it shows that their work does not suffer from the alleged superficiality of the logical positivists and ordinary language philosophy, both of which were marked by lucid prose.¹²

Therefore, it might be worth to give some thought to the rediscovering of the philological nature of the traditional philosophizing. The point is to utter an original philosophical speech, free from the load of guilt “granted” to philosophers by the philosophy of language. M. Bunge talks about this peculiar philosophical obsession with language:

No doubt, philosophers must be careful with words. But they share this responsibility with all other intellectuals, whether they be journalists or mathematicians, lawyers or demographers. Only poets can afford to write about lucky winds or drunken ships. Besides, it is one thing to write correctly and another to turn language into the central theme of philosophy--without, however, paying any attention to the experts, namely linguists.¹³

Without doubt, philosophically speaking, even though the language is guilty, one way or another, Philosophy has never been afraid of language.

In a word, philosophers should exercise, besides their academic one, cultural politics as well. Rorty makes a similar suggestion, in one of its recently published collections of texts, entitled: “Philosophy as cultural politics”:

I do not think that philosophy is ever going to be put on the secure path of science, nor that it is a good idea to try to put it there, I am content to see philosophy professors as practicing cultural politics... I am quite willing to give up the goal of getting things right, and to substitute that of enlarging our repertoire of individual and cultural self-descriptions. The point of philosophy, on this view, is not to find out what anything is “really” like, but to help us grow up – to make us happier, freer, and more flexible.¹⁴

To be sincere, I do not subscribe to Rorty’s disappointment with the research dimension of Philosophy. Besides, Philosophy’s recognition in the domain of scientific reasoning, makes Philosophy accountable when uttering alternative cultural proposals. Of course, I do not overemphasize philosophical scientism. I rather agree with P.M.S. Hacker, who makes some interesting remarks on the distinction between scientific and philosophical reasoning: ‘That philosophy is an a priori investigation does not mean that it is an a priori science. ...No philosophical question can be answered by scientific enquiry, and no scientific discovery can be made by philosophical investigation.’¹⁵

The cultural mission of Philosophy would be best supported by the promotion of studying classical philosophical texts, and the production of new, equally weighty ones. Nowadays, a lot of philosophers teach philosophical texts by way of abstracting ideas. Somehow, we mutilate the texts, and what actually rests of them is certain propositions and arguments. Maurice Natanson has an interesting view on the nature of philosophical arguments:

Whatever the philosopher *believes* himself to be doing, there is immanent within his professional activity something antecedent to either a unilateral or a bilateral mode of procedure: there is a mono-lateral or proto-lateral activity. To translate simply: the

¹² Hans – Johann Glock, *What is Analytic Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 171.

¹³ See Mario Bunge, ‘Philosophy in Crisis.’ op. cit., 29. For a thorough analysis of the linguistic turn, see P.M.S. Hacker, ‘Analytic Philosophy: Beyond the Linguistic Turn and Back Again.’ In *The Analytic Turn: Analysis in Early Analytic Philosophy and Phenomenology* edited by M. Beaney,. (London: Routledge, 2007), 125-141.

¹⁴ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 124.

¹⁵ P.M.S. Hacker ‘Philosophy: A Contribution not to Human Knowledge, but to Human Understanding.’ In *The Nature of Philosophy*, edited by Anthony O’Hear, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 142 - 143.

philosopher is trying to uncover something about himself. Philosophical activity is self-discovery. Philosophical reports, spoken or written, are self-reports first, arguments later.¹⁶

Nevertheless, philosophy students do not devote time to Philosophy Classics. On the contrary, they are accustomed to considering philosophical texts as containers of ideas and not as the result of laborious philosophical efforts, which include both philosophical intuition and the attempt of the philosophers – writers to produce the best possible textual result. When someone devotes himself to a dedicated reading of a philosophical text which deserves to be read, imitates in a way the writer of the text. We proceed, in a way, in the reviving of the text we read, provided that we face the text in its unity.

What I tried to show in this paper, is that Philosophy has reached, in its current state, a critical phase. Early in the twentieth century, Philosophy made its own self – critique with Wittgenstein. His shadow, ever since, is heavy enough. Academic Philosophy, after Wittgenstein, deteriorated Philosophy's social presence as well as its cultural impact. Philosophy, for the most part, limits itself to the academic dialogue and exchange of ideas. Simultaneously, contemporary philosophers have appealing ideas regarding a variety of social matters. Robert Solomon tries to be fair with analytic philosophers. He uses the example of B. Russell:

If Bertrand Russell misrepresented the case against the Hegelians at Oxbridge in his day, he was, nevertheless, the very model of an engaged and popular philosopher, with a great deal to say to ordinary people about immensely important issues. There are so many excellent philosophers today who are using analysis (which means no more, ultimately, than trying to be clear) to address real problems. What a shame, then, that analytic philosophy has saddled itself with such a "thin" paradigm and reputation as obsession with logic and language, to the disdainful exclusion of everything else.¹⁷

Conclusion

Certainly, I am not proposing an overturning of Philosophy's role and its according limitation to a cultural enterprise alone. I am defending the tradition of the philosophers – philologists. The philosophical discourse, which is an elaborated one, is a serious attainment of human civilization. As soon as philosophers regain their confidence in the philosophical text as a carrier of civilization, they are going to enrich their meditative experience and their work as a whole. The teaching of philosophical texts, as well, will become a means of deepening of the cultural spirit, which is going to be spread by philosophers to the overall social environment, to their students as well as to the followers of their philosophical action.

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¹⁶ Maurice Natanson, 'Rhetoric and Philosophical Argumentation.' In *Philosophical Style: An Anthology about the Writing and Reading of Philosophy*, edited by Berel Lang, (Chicago: Nelson – Hall Publishers, 1980), 226.

¹⁷ Robert C. Salomon, *The Joy of Philosophy: Thinking Thin Versus the Passionate Life*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 219.

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