

On Anti-Philosophy

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Ludwig Wittgenstein's anti-philosophy philosophy still seems to leave us with some *philosophy*. We still have not melted philosophy away completely like the snow in spring. Wittgenstein may not have escaped a performative contradiction something like the paradox of the liar. Wittgenstein still leaves us with a therapeutic *philosophical* activity aimed at curing us of the felt need to philosophize. Philosophical investigations, where they are done well and thoroughly carried out, will lead us, or so it is claimed, to see and to acknowledge that *all* philosophical activity is incoherent, rooted, as it inescapably is, in particular places where we feel compelled to philosophize. They are places where we fail to understand the workings of our language. I speak here of a natural language and not of some kind of 'ideal language' that has been concocted. A natural language, one which is our ordinary language and what has been called our home language, whatever one it is, is where having some such a language is something that we cannot avoid if we are to have even a minimal understanding of anything. There will be places, if we become philosophically driven, where we are blocked; indeed where we unwittingly end up blocking ourselves in our understanding of how that language works, and this blockage, where it is felt to be philosophical, will be sometimes for some of us stressful as well as perplexing. It will seem, and compellingly so, to generate strange puzzling beliefs which we cannot shake off and that may come in ways to dominate us. It is here where we will feel the sting of philosophy. Wittgenstein feels that it is like coming to have an illness.

Therapeutic analysis, for Wittgenstein, is itself genuine philosophical analysis that if rigorously carried out may very well cure us of philosophizing. It was something that Wittgenstein believed, but it is better to say that it is something that he, as I, warily hope can be carried out. And I would add in some respects sometimes ambivalently so. But I want now to say—and this is something that stirs the pot—that there seems at least to be the following problem. Wittgenstein, as I am, seems at least to be caught in a performative contradiction. *It looks as if we need philosophy to rid ourselves of philosophy. We need philosophy for it but then it seems at least to be clear that we have not rid ourselves of philosophy.* And then all philosophy cannot be all nonsense or be incoherent or be thoroughly untoward. Moreover, it will remain in any future ridding. Philosophy has not, and seemingly rationally and reasonably cannot, be swept away entirely. It is not something a reasonable person can just leave, as Marx attempted to do. So we are left with philosophy in this way having at least a legitimate, very perhaps an indispensable, role. It cannot be, as Wittgenstein has it, just a house of cards. It must sometimes at least and unavoidably have some point or role, some task. Or so it seems.

To say that a certain engagement in philosophy shows that all philosophy is nonsense is like a Theban showing that all Thebans are liars. If both these statements are true then they are also both false, and this is nonsense. It looks like we philosophers, if we try to practice our therapy, are caught in a performative contradiction.

We cannot escape this by something like a theory of types even if this is not itself an arbitrary stipulation, an artificial device that does not solve or dissolve our puzzlements here. We also cannot intelligibly say that philosophy is resolutely and exclusively *second order*, for that philosophical remark itself is not second order. But why not? Why not just say that in saying all philosophy is itself in reality a statement about the misuses of language that we get entangled in when we try to philosophize? It may be second-order; why say that that itself must be a philosophical remark? Because it surely seems, of course possibly mistakenly, to be a philosophical

remark but isn't that very pronouncement itself then another expression of an illusion? Just another in our collection of illusions? Another house of cards or a room in it? If it is true it is a philosophical remark then it is also false. But with this we have plain nonsense. If such therapy is philosophical, as it is with Wittgenstein and with me, we *at least seem* to be caught here in a performative contradiction. To go in Wittgenstein's liberating way, *it seems that we cannot be negative all the way down*. Our philosophical liberation from bewitchment must remain incomplete because we inescapably have a philosophical dangler. We cannot be Wittgensteinian therapists and totally escape from philosophy—take our leave of philosophy as Marx tried to—and still be reflective and coherent. To be curative, philosophy must have a kernel, a core kernel, of something philosophical and reasonably so. Or so it seems? Are we not caught here in a performative contradiction?

Moreover, to be philosophical it cannot be an empirical claim for then it will not count as philosophical. Or is this an illegitimate restriction? Well, if so, this restriction has been a major part of the philosophical tradition. And if philosophical claims are all logical claims, what Wittgenstein calls grammatical remarks and what some others would call conceptual claims, then it gives us something that is substantively empty as is 'Squares are not circular'. The only difference is that with 'Squares are not circular' we have obviousness. Philosophical bewitchments do not *sound* like grammatical remarks or a grammatical matter. Philosophical remarks do not *seem* so and not obviously. Their emptiness is disguised. We may be conned into thinking something deep and profound is involved. Where a philosophical spell is upon us philosophical remarks do not seem in reality banalities but profundities. For escape from bewitchment to be successfully therapized away the philosophical remark must be revealed to be just a grammatical remark—another stale banality, another platitude to echo Wittgenstein.

For Wittgenstein's therapy to work, for his anti-philosophy philosophy to be successful, *philosophy itself* cannot be nonsense, a house of cards, or an illusion. But then to *be* successful it also *cannot* be successful. It must leave *some* philosophy in place, namely the proposition of

philosophical therapy itself or, if you will, the practice of philosophical therapy itself. Is Wittgenstein not mired in a plain performative contradiction? His anti-philosophy *philosophy* cannot, or so it seems, go all the way down and still be anti-philosophy *philosophy*. It cannot, logically cannot, be an anti-philosophy *tout court* and still be a liberating philosophy or an un-liberating one either. Contradiction? A philosophy that takes the fly out of the fly bottle, as Wittgenstein put it and obviously aimed at, should be a thorough anti-philosophy. There can be, for that to be so, no liberating philosophy which continues to rely on philosophy. Wittgenstein's own account relies on philosophy and thus undermines itself on its own account. Or so it seems. Why could it not be just a liberating period, not a liberating philosophy? Because to be a *cognitive* liberating from philosophy it must somewhere along the line rely on philosophy. But why should the liberation rely on what is cognitive or be cognitive? That is like asking, 'Why be reasonable?' But this descends into ridiculousness.

Wittgenstein wants his therapeutic account to be through and through negative but it can't be and still remain coherent. His own method makes it impossible to utterly liberate us from *all* philosophy for he employs, indeed must employ, philosophy to cure us from all philosophy. That is like being neurotic is necessary to cure us and to keep us cured of *all* neuroses. But that is again self-contradictory. Philosophy cannot always be a failure to understand the workings of our language if that itself is a philosophical remark, for then his own therapeutic philosophical endeavors would be a failure. But without that liberating endeavor, we cannot have Wittgensteinian liberation either.

Why not, it might be responded, instead of trying to construct an anti-philosophy *philosophy* just go for anti-philosophy period? Go anti-philosophy *sans phrase, tout court*, without the self-contradictory endeavor of philosophically trying to establish that all philosophy is incoherent or in some other way untoward? Jacques Lacan tried to do that or, more accurately, he sometimes just asserted, though not as itself a *philosophical* claim, that all philosophy was illusory. Can this claim

of Lacan be anything but a bald assertion? Can any such claim be anything other than a bald assertion and an arrogant one at that? Lacan might counter that he has solid psychological evidence for that but that would be very controversial and he gives none. Still, not infrequently, bald assertions can be true. But not *qua* bald assertions. I assert, rather ignorantly but with utter confidence, that there are no mosquitoes on the sun. This for me is near to an ignorant bald assertion. I know practically nothing of what would be the scientific grounds for it. I could not establish it. Still, while it may be baldly and utterly confidently asserted by someone, including me, there may also exist very good empirical reasons for it being so and someone with even a little scientific knowledge can be reasonably confident that there are no mosquitos on the sun and assert that. Though we can be reasonably confident that this is so, it sounds ridiculous to assert it.

Are there similarly good reasons for believing that all philosophical beliefs are nonsense or in some way untoward or illusory? How could this be established or disestablished? How could we go about doing it? Isn't Lacan or anyone else reduced just to bald assertion here? Didn't Scheffer do better? He correctly called to our attention that throughout philosophy's history philosophers have batted around philosophical ideas to little or no cumulative effect. There has been nothing in philosophy that constitutes a generally significant agreement about progress in philosophy. Here it is unlike science. Compare philosophy and chemistry. Did Scheffer exaggerate? Well, perhaps toned down a bit, what he said is on the mark. There is no clear agreed on path to progress in philosophy. It that is not like chemistry or even geology.

In examining this do not muddy things up by making a bad implicit persuasive definition of 'a philosopher' by saying that any reflective person or that any reasonably disciplined and reasonably informed reflective person is really a philosopher. There are plenty of disciplined reflective people, including disciplined and clear-headed disciplined people, who are completely innocent of philosophy unless we make them into philosophers by so labelling them with a stipulative *persuasive* definition (really, a re-definition). But that is just a trick. That is not how

philosophers themselves view philosophy. that is not how they characterize what it is to be a philosopher. It *may* be a necessary condition but it is surely not a sufficient one. And who else, if anyone, is to ascertain what philosophy is? Well, perhaps Freud, Lacan or Marx? That won't float.

Similarly, we assert something arbitrary if we say that any theory that seeks to explain fundamental structural conflicts or structures in the world is really a philosophical theory. That is absurd because physics, chemistry, archeology and geology, as well as the so-called soft sciences of economics, sociology, history, anthropology, social psychology and cognitive science, try in one way or another to do that. Sometimes they succeed in some areas. And it is arbitrary to just assert they do not dig deep enough.

However, for my purposes the important matter is that *these disciplines are not philosophical disciplines and do not state philosophical theories or accounts or claim to, though they may wittingly or unwittingly sometimes have philosophical elements*, probably readily excisable if they are genuinely scientific accounts. They may be made to seem philosophical or dependent on philosophical theories by an arbitrary playing around with words such as making arbitrary *persuasive* definitions. But this is just trickery. It is like saying that anyone who can successfully practice first aid is an M.D. or anyone who has taken a philosophy class is a philosopher.

We add insult to injury if we assert—or rather try to assert—that any theory which asserts that there are contradictions or structural conflicts in the world is philosophical and indeed may be a legitimate philosophical theory. However, while there can be and indeed are fundamental conflicts in the world there can be no contradictions in the world for it is propositions and *perhaps* sentences and not the world that can be contradictory. Of course, propositions and sentences are uttered in the world. Where else? But that is a different matter. Don't muddy things up. There is already enough mud around.

This is perhaps a rather pedantic point, though still a correct point. Why should I want to make it? It is to make the point that anti-philosophy all the way down theories or accounts cannot

be dismissed by asserting deep theories of structural conflicts such as Marxian ones can be used to reject the anti-philosophy that I have defended here by calling them philosophical. They are not philosophical—at least not when we consider the ways that philosophers themselves characterize philosophy and actually do it. What philosophers want to do and try to assert in doing what they regard as philosophy is what being philosophical comes to. But what these quite legitimate Marxian claims are is far from the tradition of philosophy and deliberately so. They appeal to structural matters, not to purely conceptual ones.

After all, shouldn't the actual philosophical tradition be left to philosophers to characterize what they take philosophy to be, just as it should be left to chemists to characterize what chemistry should be? But with philosophy this is sometimes treated as problematic. Marx, Freud and Lacan in *some ways* did not do that. They thought the various self-images of philosophy, even those of Nietzsche, did not answer to reality. Indeed philosophers themselves mish-mashed it in various ways, or at least often characterized it in conflicting ways. The conceptions of Marx, Freud and Lacan of how we should view philosophy really do conflict with those of philosophers and indeed challengingly so. For Marx, Freud and Lacan, and arguably rightly, the very tradition of philosophy is to be set aside because it rests on a mistake, indeed often divergent mistakes, and if we can take a clear view of things we will see that it all is in reality much ado about nothing. But it is still the philosophers' view or views of what they are about that we should *first* consider? Perhaps Marx and Engels were on the mark when they said in *The German Ideology* that philosophy is to science what masturbation is to sexual intercourse. But that is not where we should start and nor should we start with Lacan. And that says nothing about where we should end up. Perhaps Lacan and I are right here: that we should be anti-philosophical *tout court*? Nothing is accomplished here by redefining or re-characterizing philosophy. It is the characterization of philosophy as understood by philosophers and has been part of the tradition of both religious and secular philosophers that Lacan and I are saying is an illusion to be set aside.

But as I have stressed elsewhere, what counts as philosophy becomes increasingly diverse as time goes on. How then can we, or can we, find a characterization of philosophy? Something that we can intelligibly and legitimately say is its task or goal when philosophers characterize their putative discipline in so many often radically different ways? Something that across the world where philosophy, or something that is called philosophy in various tongues, is practiced is generally acknowledged to be common to and distinctive of all philosophy and only philosophy. But what it is and what it commits us to has been batted around with little in the way of consensus concerning what it is that philosophy is about and of what, if anything, is its task or goal. When we try to understand what philosophy is, my talk of something being common to and distinctive of may sound like I am in search of an essence. But I am not. I am just trying to see if there is a generally agreed on characterization of philosophy on order of that which we have for biology, chemistry, physics or geology. It is evident that we don't have it for philosophy. The attempt to say what philosophy is ends up in controversy. The batting around to no avail goes on and on. Where can we find a characterization that we can rely on? Something acknowledged to be common to and distinctive of philosophy? Who else but to philosophers can we appeal who, by attending to their own practices, can determine what philosophy is? But these often come to radically different things. When we are trying to say what philosophy is, who else can we appeal to?

Lacan thinks that philosophers are all wisdom seekers, consciously or unconsciously. But unless we stretch 'wisdom seeking' beyond plausibility that will not cover many contemporary philosophers, particularly many analytical ones. Was Searle, Austin or Ryle, consciously or unconsciously, seeking wisdom in any sense? Was Deleuze, Derrida or Heidegger doing similar things to that of Austin, Soames or Quine? Were all or any of them seeking wisdom? We perhaps could say so but then we court extreme opacity. We would be hard put to find any common task among philosophers. Isaiah Berlin, when he was still doing what he called philosophy, ended his "The Purpose of Philosophy" by writing "the goal of philosophy is always the same, to assist men

[sic] to understand themselves and thus operate in the open and not wildly in the dark” (Berlin 1980, 11). But when we look at the diverse things that philosophy has been and still is, things that philosophers have been batting around from the pre-Socratics to Quine, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Deleuze, Derrida, and Daniels, it will become evident that philosophy itself has no goal or purpose or, for that matter, task, vocation or end except, like everything else human, its eventual termination. Even if we falsely say it has a goal or a task, it certainly is not always the same. It is certainly not always to understand ourselves or, even when that is involved, it is not uniquely that. That is more attempted colonizing by philosophy. It is fine rhetoric by Berlin but that is all it is. It would be a good thing if there were some practices, philosophical or not, that helped human beings and societies in the ways that Berlin lauds. But philosophy does not do that. It can have no goals, though philosophers, like everyone else, have some different goals. But there is no one philosophical goal or one task of philosophy.

Some philosophers, and some non-philosophers as well, have had a Berlin-like goal but many philosophers have not. It is not the goal of philosophy. Philosophy has been thought by some to be a way of life but not by most philosophers and, where it is, there is no *the* way of life. All of this is more fine rhetoric—rhetoric that I am attuned with but it is still rhetoric, pure and simple, and not something that is established and firmly substantive. Whether we call it philosophy or not is something that we have scant reason to believe is establishable as *the* goal or *the* task of philosophy. Berlin, who took pride in having his feet firmly on the ground, lives here in a dream world or got carried away by rhetoric. But he is hardly alone among philosophers in being in a dream world, though philosophers (particularly the analytic ones) are less likely to be carried away by rhetoric. Of course, anyone so situated does not think they are in a dream world or are carried away by rhetoric but this is manifest for those with illusions and delusions. Lacan *here* shouldn't simply be set aside.

Bibliography

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