

Questions About Philosophy

By

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Edited by

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Editor's note

This book came into my hands in a curious and peculiar way. I was working at the University of Tromsø, Norway, when one morning on my way to the office, I met a night watchman. I said hello and he saluted me back, but just as I was passing him I noticed that he carried a heap of paper, a manuscript of some kind. "Was that something you found?" I asked him, pointing. He said it all lay in some bushes right across the road. "Someone lost it, or threw it away. I'll have to trash it." "May I have a look?" I asked. He passed me the sheets, said he had no interest in them, I took them and promised to look for the owner.

The bushes where he had found the sheets grew right under a five-storey building which hosts, among other things, the philosophy department. A look at the front page strongly suggested it had fallen out of a window up there in that department. I wondered how. It is not usual that things fall out of those windows, as far as I know.

The sheets were firmly pinned together. But as I opened the first page, a printed letter fell out. I picked it up and read it. This is what it said:

Dear Professor,

This is the book that I mentioned. The story behind it is quickly told: I wanted to get clear about what philosophy is and is not. So I started to write. Thank you for accepting to look at it. Let me explain a little more about what sort of book it is:

Early in the process of writing it I realised that I needed some rules to protect me from various distractions that would make it impossible to think adequately about the difficulties that I knew I would meet. Two of those potential distractions that I felt pulling me are worth mentioning because my coming to see them as sources of distractions rather than as intellectual *virtues* explains some oddities of this book:

First, I realised that if I were to write *continuous prose* I would be unable to treat every problem that needed treatment in a manner that did proper justice to it. I understood that if I were to make my argument connect neatly at all junctions I would end up with slurring over difficulties and thus with overlooking deep problems. *Very* frequently in philosophy the problems turn out to be greater than one expects them to be. If one tries in those situations to maintain a continuous line of thought, either that line is destroyed and one has to begin over, or one stops enquiring when one feels that one's neat argument starts to disintegrate. When posing a question such as "What is philosophy?" it is better to prepare oneself for trouble. One should not expect neat connections and steady progress, but rather leaps and shots from the hip. Two leaps forward and one lapse back. Inconsistent prose for the purpose of consistent philosophy.

The other source of distraction that I mentioned, concerns relation to various sorts of philosophical literature: I realised that making references to other writers who have said things that could be taken to express or explain a point I was interested in could lead to a loss of focus. It is tempting, of

course, to mention in passing the points of contact that one sees with what others have written, and to use terms or phrases or passages from others to express one's own ideas. I realised, however, that such references demanded that I would have to give too much attention to the particular problems that those writers were engaged in, and to problems of scholarship. This would distract me from dealing well with the problems I had decided to deal with.

After some experimenting with how to work fruitfully, I ended up with developing the following set of rules:

- Do not write continuous prose, but rather separate entries in which you treat only one idea or point or question at a time.
- Express yourself with as much clarity as you can.
- Make new entries for that which is still obscure.
- Finish your treatment of each point before you go on to the next.
- Look for examples and analogies when explaining a case, but be suspicious of them, and make a note of that suspicion.
- Avoid references to other writers if not strictly necessary for explaining the point.

By following these rules I think I have been forced to work more patiently and concentrated with the problem than I could have managed if I were to write in the ordinary academic style that aims at continuity in argument and connectivity with other writers' works. The rules gave me the liberty to be patient where it was necessary. And as patience is really the only tool a philosopher has for making sure that he assesses correctly the depth of a problem, I am convinced it was a good idea to follow them.

Sincerely,

There was no signature. The writer had probably just forgotten to sign the letter. The most conspicuous thing about that sheet, though, were the signs “??” written in the margin of the first page. The abbreviation “unscient” was scratched down at the end. The professor, clearly, had not had much sympathy for the thing. The rest of the sheets carried no signs of having been read. So, one could guess, he was irritated after reading the letter, so irritated that he actually *threw* the ms out of the window.

I went up and knocked on some doors, since I had promised the watchman to do so – but no-one knew anything about this, they said. So I took the thing with me home.

Now, to make a long story short, I didn't think that letter was so stupid. And I thought the book, when I started to read it, also explained some things quite well. Qualms and questions that I have had myself were both expressed and treated in ways I had not seen elsewhere, or thought of myself before.

I tried to find out where it came from. I knew of a person in our town that could maybe have written it, and after some indirect communication with that person I'm now sure about the authorship. I've also indirectly been given permission to publish it. After some editorial work with typos and style

issues, I now print the book as a work by Mr. Incognito. The English, of course, is not better than can be expected when non-natives try to work things out by themselves. As English is the working language of philosophy, however, we foreigners just have to do our best at expressing ourselves. I apologise of course for all linguistic deficiencies, though I'm as little shameful of them as non-native aviation personnel are for their poor pronunciation. I do believe the book is fully understandable.

I make this piece available not because I think there's much to earn on it moneywise, but because I think the book is good enough to defend material existence. It simply fits into the publishing strategy of CosmicusBooks. Hopefully, there are readers now or in the future who will find something interesting or stimulating in it.

K.v.d.G.

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