A False Dilemma:

Philosophy is Either Argument or Mere Poetry

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About the author

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Abstract

Some analytic philosophers ask about continental philosophy where its arguments are, suggesting that it typically doesn't have any. The implication is that philosophy without argument is philosophy badly done or else not philosophy at all. In the first part of this talk, I question this appeal to arguments – at least transparent ones – as a criterion for proper philosophy. To what extent does it depend on an overly narrow model of what counts as providing an argument? In the second part, I go to the other end of the spectrum, namely the idea that, once arguments are left behind, such philosophy can only turn to various kinds of linguistic inventiveness, indulging in metaphors and ending up as "mere" poetry. I argue that continental philosophy is, for better or worse, a far cry from poetry; it deals in ideas and thoughts that are assessable for their truth, coherence and plausibility. In the last part of the paper, I briefly illustrate through Nietzsche and Heidegger how philosophy can bypass explicit arguments and still remain within the orbit of critical discourse.

A False Dilemma: Philosophy is Either Argument or Mere Poetry[*]

In a talk I heard not long ago a European analytic philosopher with some background in continental philosophy discussed the difference between the two traditions, analytic and continental. He pointed largely to a difference in method or presentation. On his account, analytic philosophers define their terminology while constructing, presenting and defending arguments. Continental philosophers, on the other hand, don't bother with argumentation. They are more given to a kind of poetic communication. Of course, this is a generalization and the speaker, knowing this, indicated a number of exceptions. Not wanting to be judgmental, the speaker avoided asserting that poetic philosophy was necessarily inferior. Among philosophers however, there is an assumption, silent or not, that a non-arguing, poetizing philosophy is less precise, less rigorous, and less amenable to critical judgment, among other things, all of which constitute central deficiencies for philosophical thought and discourse. It seems to me that this assumption raises important questions about what philosophy is, has been and should be. Should it primarily consist in nothing but the construction, analysis and defense of arguments? Has it always been just this? What forms can argumentative discourse take? What else can philosophy be besides argument? Is poetry the only or main alternative? If not, what could lie between argument and poetry? What are the tools and devices available to philosophy? These questions touch on the issue of genre (journal article versus play, poem, story, autobiography) which is the theme of our conference. But they touch on more. They deal with all level of philosophical inquiry even those at the level of paragraph, sentence and word.

These are big questions. What I want to do in this short talk is to make three points about the need to overcome a simplistic picture of philosophy as either explicit argumentation or "mere" poetry, whereby the word "mere" signals the deficiencies mentioned before. My three points are these. First, arguments are present or implicit even they are not identified as such and that their lack of explicitness may have certain functions. Second, there are other ways of raising and making philosophical points besides presenting arguments. One of the most common alternatives to making an argument is presenting, what I will call for lack of a better term, a model. Third, metaphorical language is often considered an obstacle to clear philosophical

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argument. I will argue that we should be hesitant about making such an easy assumption. Finally, I will conclude with some remarks about some implications of the points I've made.

I. Arguments are present even when not explicit

The paradigmatic philosophical presentation is one in which premises, further steps and conclusions are clearly identified and formulated as such and in which the inferences follow according to the familiar logical rules of inference. Further, although it is not part of the definition of a sound or valid argument, the expectation is that important, contested terms are defined in advance. In its most explicit form, steps may be numbered, logical rules named and some degree of formalization is employed. Clearly, though, most philosophical writing today does not come in the form of a high degree of schematization. The idea is that it is sufficient if the relevant terms are defined and the conclusion and separate items of supporting evidence are clearly identified as such, then the argument structure is in place. And this is sufficient. Further, philosophical writing that is only moderately explicit is not, according to common standards, judged as inferior to extremely explicit argumentation, though this might depend on the branch of philosophy and on the specific content put forth. Too much prized philosophy is of the more moderate sort. What is expected, though, is a certain moderate degree of argumentative transparency. More explicitness is not needed because the arguments are recognizable in the moderate form in which they are given.

The question is what we are to say of a large body of philosophy that does not meet this moderate standard of identifiable argument parts and inferences. (I'll come back to the point about defining terms later on.) Indeed, there is a good deal of philosophical literature, indeed canonical philosophical literature, which does not meet this standard and, importantly, does not even appear to be trying to conform to this standard. Two questions arise: 1) Does this kind of philosophical writing contain arguments? 2) Is it bad philosophy or philosophy that is less good than it might be just because it does not meet the moderate standard of argumentative transparency? In what follows, merely for the sake of convenience, let "AT" stand for argumentatively transparent and "non-AT" for its opposite.

I will contend here that while it might be the case that some non-AT philosophical literature does not contain, suggest or imply arguments, most of it in fact is saturated with

argumentative reasoning. Let me appeal to two examples in this talk: Heidegger's *Being and Time* and Nietzsche's "God is dead" ("Madman") passage from the *Gay Science*. Not all philosophers value this kind of philosophy, but I do and so do plenty of others. Yet it is hard to deny that Nietzsche's passage is non-AT and Heidegger's work is largely non-AT. In fact, when teaching *Being and Time*, I've encountered students who have said: "But it offers no arguments … Where are the arguments?" My view is that Heidegger's work is full of them but they need to be brought out. The same even goes for Nietzsche's parable of the madman announcing the death of God. And this is true though Nietzsche's passage contains no explicit premises, conclusions and inferences.

Why do I say that there are arguments contained in these cases? Without going into detail, a huge piece of evidence is the presence of a lot of good secondary literature, as in the case of *Being and Time*, that is devoted to the extraction of these arguments and that does a pretty convincing job at its set task. Thus, Heidegger's claim that "knowing is derivative on our everyday concernful involvement" is a conclusion of an argument in that work for which Heidegger offers supporting evidence. Further, this conclusion itself is offered in turn as evidence for the further conclusion that we need to rethink fundamentally the character of human existence. The book is one big, quite complex, argument with lots of smaller parts. The same goes for Nietzsche's passage. It is a parable featuring a madman and sober onlookers and it is not immediately clear which players are closer to the truth. It is not even immediately clear what the truth is that is being put forward. God's non-existence? God's being a human invention? God's being no longer believed in? The consequences of the absence of faith? I say not *immediately* clear, but after examining the text more closely, especially in the context of Nietzsche's other writings, these questions can come to be answered, allowing some space for interpretive disagreement. One might boil down Nietzsche's passage into a series of propositions and fuse it with argumentative glue. Why didn't Nietzsche do that instead of giving us a parable?

This leads to the next question: If non-AT philosophy does contain or at least imply arguments, what is the point of not being more explicit, not being more transparent? I think that in the case of *Being and Time* part of the story is this. Heidegger was not more transparent in his argumentation because he didn't see the need for it. The text clearly contains arguments and if today's readers do not see them, I think this is testimony favoring Jon Stewart's observation that today's readers cannot always easily read and digest texts from an age in which philosophy

presented itself in more diverse ways. But this is not the whole story. Being and Time is less transparent because it introduces a different vocabulary for reasons that were certainly philosophical, reasons that can be argued for and that Heidegger did in fact argue for. Further, Heidegger presents us with what I call a different model, a point I'll return to in the second part of my talk. But I think when it comes to making points and offering argumentative support for them, Heidegger, at least in the first part of his career, is doing just that, though in a less explicit way than is common today. For example, Heidegger says that it is not so much a scandal that philosophers have been unable to prove the existence of the external world (as Kant said) but that they have tried to do so in the first place. External world skepticism is not a legitimate problem. One doesn't find a direct argument attached. But the text of *Being and Time* contains an extended argument for the need to redefine the idea of a world, which when reconstructed by readers and commentators, amounts to an argument for taking the external world problem as predicated on false assumptions. Why doesn't Heidegger just present the argument itself rather than giving us a text which requires the reconstruction of commentators? Is he incompetent? Is he being cagy or coy? Incompetence, no. Caginess, to some extent. But I think the deeper and more important reason is that he relies on a different method, one which, as I'll indicate below, consists in making plausible and compelling an alternative model.

With Nietzsche and particularly in his more "aphoristic" works, things are a little different from early Heidegger. Nietzsche more clearly breaks with standard argumentation. Take the "God is dead" or madman parable. It is a story with particular characters and a sequence of actions. Furthermore, we get the truth not from a sage but a madman. And we get the truth in the form of counterintuitive propositions ("we have killed god"), unanswered questions and suggestive, here one can even say poetic, images. Why does Nietzsche choose to write in this way? Does it serve a philosophical purpose? There are a number of ways in which one might defend its philosophical value and point. Here I'll restrict myself to just one. This passage is one of the most fruitful passage for discussion in the classroom that I have ever encountered. Read it aloud in class, ask for comments from students and a discussion is always easily generated, one that deepens more and more as students voice their observations. Its pedagogical usefulness is no accident. Nietzsche's mode of presentation is not about handing to the reader premises, inferences and conclusions on a silver platter, but about forcing the reader to educate himself by confusing and unsettling the reader. It aims not just at truth but at the process

and difficulty of acquiring the truth in the face of recalcitrant, rigidified thinking. This process should belong to philosophy though it's not much attended to. In the end, Nietzsche's madman parable *can* be translated into propositions, even premises and conclusions. I think it's worthwhile to start with the parable and work towards identifying a more conventional message. It's not only worthwhile, it's also unavoidable. But the conventional message at the end does not replace the parable. The parable was needed to get there in the first place, to get there through a process and the message never exhausts the parable, shown by the fact that one finds oneself returning to the parable again and again even after a message has been extracted.

II. Model versus Argument

My idea of a model in philosophy is this. Philosophers have presented sometimes large and even more often small models of philosophically relevant phenomena. These models are not singular propositions, but bundles of propositions connected either structurally or narratively. The models might *require* arguments but they need not be arguments in themselves or contain arguments. Colloquially, these are sometimes called "stories" as when a philosopher says "Here's my story about x", where x might be just about anything from perception to happiness to the laws of physics. Another word that's used is "picture" as in "Here's my picture of the role of emotions in cognition." I don't want to use "story" because there not always a narrative thread with a temporal beginning, middle and end, though there sometimes is. I wouldn't want to use the word "picture" either because philosophical models are not typically visual representations. So I use "model" instead.

To make this more concrete, let me give some examples, leaning again on Heidegger and Nietzsche. Heidegger's *Being and Time* offers an alternative model of human beings and human existence beginning with his line that Dasein is that being whose own being, in its very being, is at stake for it. He develops this idea in great detail with regard to how we come to grasp or make sense of the world and much more. This is a very different model of the human being from Aristotle's, Descartes' or Kant's. One way to put the point is that it is a model of human being as

agent and participant rather than spectator or pure knower. Heidegger's model is complex with many parts. And as I maintained above, he offers arguments for this model and its components. But my point is that to the extent that arguments are absent or, counterfactually, if he had not supplied the arguments, we would still have a different and, I think, original model of what makes human beings the beings that they are. However, models need to be scrutinized in terms of their acceptability. And here is where something like arguments are needed – arguments for their accuracy in describing the phenomena or in terms of their relation to antecedent assumptions. It may also be the case that when comparing the Cartesian and the Heideggerian model of a human being, it is best to look not for which is justified in itself but for which model is most fruitful in leading to the right kinds of questions and answers. But here too arguments are needed to make models compelling or to put them in doubt. Still, a model in itself even independent of the arguments they require and give rise to.

Nietzsche, I think, is also someone to have provided various models for us. One is his model of the underlying historical and psychological beliefs, values and motivations of our Judeo-Christian moral norms. Another is his model of a pre-Judeo-Christian morality and his model of a post-Judeo-Christian morality. His models of past and present morality might be historically or psychologically incorrect. His model of a future morality might be unsustainable on other grounds, as I believe it is. But they are models that deserve attention. And their value as models is recognizable even before the arguments about them begin.

Models are descriptive rather than inherently argumentative. They need argument at a later stage but they need not themselves contain argument. To say that they are descriptive leads to another example. A large part of Husserl's phenomenology is meant to be not a justification of anything, but a description of how the acts and objects of consciousness are given to us independent of any assumptions about the causes of consciousness. Husserl's method yields a model of various modes of consciousness (perceptual, etc.) and aspects of consciousness (temporal, etc.) and, if I am right, this model is a) not essentially an argument and b) valuable even though it is not in itself an argument. Other examples of models would be a certain conception of a just society (prior to it being argued for). But it seems to me that a good part of the appeal of a number of philosophers in the continental tradition derives from models and stories they give us which provide compelling accounts of how to make sense of phenomena (even before we turn to the business of justifying these models).

III. Literal versus metaphorical language

For me, this is the issue that seems hardest and about which I'm most uncertain. Shall we say, with Nietzsche, that all language is metaphorical and that the idea of a non-metaphorical, literal language is an illusion? If we say this, does the ubiquity of metaphor lead to the view that metaphor no longer stands for anything at all? Can we agree that all language is metaphorical in some sense, but still hold that some language is more metaphorical and some less?

Let's assume for the moment that language can be more or less metaphorical. Let's also assume that it's sometimes possible to monitor and control the degree of metaphoricity of our language. And also that it's possible to unpack metaphors such that we can express what is essential in a metaphor in more literal language. Here's an example. Suppose someone claims that the mind operates as a machine or that it is a machine. We might ask what is essential in the machine metaphor and see that it is the idea of computing bits of information according to a set of rules. It seems that we can unpack metaphors in this way.

Now the question is this: Should philosophy avoid metaphors as far as possible and strive to translate them, when they do occur, into literal language. My guess is that the dominant view in analytic philosophy is that it's alright to use metaphors on occasion, so as to make the text a bit more colorful or serve as a kind of intuition pump, but that one shouldn't rely on them too heavily and one should for the most part start unpacking them soon after they're introduced.

This seems to be a reasonable and coherent position. Are there any reasons for doubting it? Let me suggest a few reasons here. First, it may be that unpacking a metaphor always involves losing something no matter how far one takes it. Consider the machine metaphor. What is at stake is not only the rightness of the mind as computational but whether the mind is like a machine in other ways, automatic, unspontaneous, emotionless, uncreative. Second, the insistence on literal language might be bound up with an assumption that language can be made fully transparent through identifying necessary and sufficient conditions for the meaning of key terms. This may well be a naïve view about the possibility and ease of transparency if our definitions build in unrecognized assumptions. Kant, for example, thought that definitions must come not at the beginning of philosophical exploration but at the end. The idea of literal language might fail to recognize the extent to which our use of language is not fully transparent

because it is historically shaped and contingent. Third, making language more and more literal may undo the transformative, heuristic and educative power of metaphors. It may leave philosophy less able to change minds. Finally, as mentioned above, there is the question as to whether literalness itself is not in the end an illusion.

IV. Conclusion

My arguments have been designed to show that non-transparent philosophy i) is philosophy, not poetry and ii) that it is a philosophy that is not by any means necessarily inferior because of its lack of non-transparency. I have not questioned the value of analytic, transparent philosophy mainly because I value it *not* despite its transparency, but often *because of* it. (In fact, I encourage students to make their own writing as transparent as possible.) However, I am also inclined to think that analytic, transparent philosophy is less transparent than it takes itself to be. So I see my argument as one that is in agreement with Jon Stewart's conclusion. Stewart is right to oppose Rorty's consignment of non-transparent philosophy to literature departments. Non-transparent philosophy, such as Nietzsche's and Heidegger's, is engaged with the same issues as transparent philosophy and employs a method that is amenable to critical evaluation and argument. Stewart endorses a pluralism of methods and approaches and styles of presentation. So do I. In his book he says that we should resist reformulating or translating non-transparent philosophy into transparent philosophy.[1] I don't think we should resist this kind of translation. I find it productive and, in a sense, unavoidable. But it's not the only thing we should do since the translation of non-transparent text into transparency brings with it a loss as well as a gain. If we have become indifferent or oblivious to this loss, then we have in fact come to settle for more limited horizons and fallen victim to the various illusions of transparency. We should indeed take the trouble to see what it is about the unity of form and content in much non-transparent philosophy that still merits attention and from which true insight can be gained.

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[1] Jon Stewart, *The Unity of Content and Form in Philosophical Writing*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013, 168.