

HOW PHILOSOPHY IS PRESENTED: AN INTRODUCTION

STEPHEN LEACH and JAMES TARTAGLIA

There may be something gravely wrong with this issue of Human Affairs. So suggests **Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca**. For philosophy is not something that precedes its presentation. Philosophy and the presentation of philosophy are one and the same.

Athenian Stranger: What are we reading?

Roman Stranger: It's an essay by Stephen Leach, a fine fellow. He's written it to introduce a symposium that was held on the topic of how philosophy is presented.

Athenian Stranger: That's an odd topic! Still, I think I'll go along to find out what they have in mind, where's it being held?

Roman Stranger: You mistake me, sir. These are strange times. The symposium has already taken place and exists only in writing. (And not even on paper, but rather as illuminations on screens powered by electricity). None of the contributors even met. Rather, they read a notification of the topics of interest and then wrote their essays alone, over the course of many months in some cases.

Athenian Stranger: I wouldn't call that a symposium! Why would they do it like that? Is there a plague raging?

Roman Stranger: There is, but they'd have done it that way anyway. As I said, these are strange times.

Athenian Stranger: I see. So where can I find the notification that inspired them?

Roman Stranger: You'll find it at the start of the first of these essays, unique in that it does at least contain a semblance of philosophical conversation, one which took place between the person Leach just mentioned, Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca, and James Tartaglia, who is Leach's colleague and the co-instigator of all this.

Athenian Stranger: I shall take a look. In the meantime, let's continue with Leach's essay.

But that would seem to leave no room for solitary thinking. We can, however, grant that there is more to philosophy than presenting and re-presenting the classics of the philosophical canon in the classroom. That may be uncontentious but it is a point that many of the contributors to this issue find it worth their while to make, before departing from each other in an interesting variety of directions.

In the final speech in her dialogue with James, Laura seems to suggest that there is a lot of philosophy that goes on outside of the university classroom. That is true but a lot of that surely consists of just the first one or two steps of arguments that are taken up and then dropped, almost immediately, over and over again. Teenagers seem to be an exception. When they are not engaged in what Grant Bartley terms “the exaltation of stupidity,” they often seem to pursue philosophical arguments with greater stubbornness and determination than most adults. But sometimes arguments are put aside and philosophical attitudes are simply tried on like new clothes.

All of which occurs without much awareness of any philosophical tradition. In some ways that may be just as well. Fourteen-year-olds (with their blindness to pomposity), telling their parents that what they say was said already three hundred years ago, and much more eloquently, is not an especially welcome picture. But that is probably too flippant. Whereas teenagers tend to earnest pomposity adults, by comparison, tend to flippancy.

Roman Stranger: Leach’s attitude to teenagers is hard to pin down. With one hand he berates them, yet with the other he applauds their doggedness in the pursuit of philosophy.

Athenian Stranger: Yes, but why the concern with teenagers? The reason, perhaps, is that he despairs at the lack of philosophy in adults, and sees in the youngsters’ doggedness a hope that they might develop differently.

Roman Stranger: A hope for the next generation, I think you’re right. Let’s allow the fellow to continue.

Ermanno Bencivenga, however – like Nietzsche – is something of an eternal teenager, in that he seems to defend the idea of trying on “narrative elements” in much the same way as trying on new clothes. In his words: “A narrative element is essential to philosophy, because nothing gets going in it without some vision, some story about what the world or the story is like. The argumentative element can only structure the story from the inside; it can never prove it true. And, whatever clarification arguments provide for the story, the latter remains in all its dangerous glory, ready to originate new arguments and spawn new visions.” For Bencivenga, arguments are like stitching. Of course, the stitching’s important – without logical inference we would not be able to trace the consequences of the story – but the stitching is not the first thing that we notice, nor should it be.

Athenian Stranger: Stories are useful for conveying images that fix the mind on truth, but they’re quite different from thoughts. Life is not a story, but what you think and how you think determines your life.

Good clothes tell a story – and a story is unavoidably ambiguous – able to both conceal the body and to draw attention to it. This is an ambiguity that has to be accepted, and celebrated.

Roman Stranger: Is he saying that narratives are garments for thoughts? And do I detect erotic undercurrents?

Logic alone cannot tell us about the world. There are those who claim it can, and their influence can be seen in philosophy that is distinctively unvisionary, pedantic and nit-picking. But do not be intimidated, says Bencivenga: the Emperor wears no clothes.

Roman Stranger: Did anyone really say that logic alone can tell us about the world? If there are such people then the contempt Leach expresses is fully justified.

Athenian Stranger: I assume so, Leach is a trustworthy, upright fellow, but here's another matter. If your interpretation is right – if he was indeed saying that narratives are garments for thoughts – then it seems that he is opposed to pure thought, since he sees wearing no clothes as a rebuke. I find that very odd indeed – and not just the preference for dress over nakedness ... even in erotic matters, apparently. For as we both know, narratives are only a means to an end, the end being to teach and exalt the philosophical life. You don't use narratives yourself, as I understand it, and that's perfectly fine by me.

Grant Bartley argues that seeking deep truth depends on communication: "Without communication there's no cultural history for an isolated mind working alone always has to start from scratch." The counter-argument could be made that philosophy always does have to begin from scratch. It is not a collaborative endeavour, in the manner of, for example, natural science.

Roman Stranger: I feel Leach's counter-argument is inspired by a misinterpretation. Bartley meant only that philosophical thought must build on what came before. My own thought has never progressed beyond yours and I wouldn't want it to, there would be no need.

Athenian Stranger: Thank you for saying so.

As editor of *Philosophy Now*, Grant Bartley is in the frontline of the battle against dumbing-down. And what he says about dumbing-down I would accept, not only from the evidence of his experience – having to reject 'original' arguments that, without knowledge of the philosophical classics, unknowingly repeat arguments that were originally made many years ago and more eloquently – but also from personal experience of philosophy on television. One of us is just old enough to remember Bryan Magee's philosophy programmes, shown on BBC2 between January and April 1978.

Athenian Stranger: Why does he say ‘one of us’, if this is Leach’s own essay?

Roman Stranger: He’s trying to make the reader believe it was co-written with his colleague, Tartaglia, since that’s the normal procedure in these matters – and also, one suspects, because he thinks it adds weight to his words. This age of electric screens and isolated writing is full of deceit, you know? Within such a context this is all quite innocent.

When these are compared to programmes made by Alain de Botton, there seems little doubt that television, at least, has dumbed down. The format of Magee’s programmes – two talking heads – would simply not be countenanced by the commissioners.

“If in doubt, pitch lower,” argues Bartley; but I am not so sure. I am fairly confident that when I watched Magee’s programmes as a fourteen-year-old I would not have understood all that was being said. I probably over-estimated how much I did understand but there were certainly parts that I would have been glad to listen to again. That I did not quite understand all of it was part of the attraction. What I did understand made me wish to understand more.

Roman Stranger: That’s certainly been my experience in reading your work. I understood little of it when I first encountered it in my mid-20s back in Egypt, but it inspired me to pursue the philosophical life nonetheless. Now I have my own school of philosophy, in a lovely house in Rome, and I am able to follow your path of thought in all its intricate detail.

Athenian Stranger: Again, thank you.

As Dewey says, in **Michelle Sowey’s** essay: “the most important attitude that can be found is [. . .] the desire to go on learning.”

Roman and Athenian Strangers [in unison]: Here, here!

Sowey, like Grant Bartley, is engaged in the battle against dumbing down – she is a teacher of philosophy in schools – leading “friendly excursions into disequilibrium”. She formulates five criteria for judging the likely effectiveness of a philosophical stimulus: that it activates emotion; induces perplexity; challenges intuitions; ignites controversy; and elicits reasoned argument. Wisely, she refrains from specifying what sort of exercises are suitable for which age groups. For this, she tells us, cannot be determined *a priori*. It is a matter of practice and judgement.

Roman Stranger: Now here’s a little background information which you might find interesting. One of the commentators on Sowey’s text asked that she might add an indication about intended age groups. This was put to her and it seems she declined. Leach is commending that decision.

Athenian Stranger: I didn’t find that terribly interesting, to be honest; let’s continue.

Her five criteria, it seems to us, might also be applied to judge the effectiveness of philosophical stimulus among those who have left school. But how desperately needed is her work. It is appalling that most children leave school without knowing anything about the validity and soundness of an argument. In philosophy, a narrative element may be more important than logic but, as Bencivenga recognises, like stitching, logic is important too.

Richard Rorty said that the study of logic was relatively unimportant. In his view it was like the study of Old English in a Department of English Literature, understandably obligatory but not an area of paramount interest. He probably had in mind advanced logic; the basics are, in our view, more important than he credits.

Roman Stranger: Leach was definitely impressed by Soweys's contribution, that much seems clear.

Athenian Stranger: He'll have a difficult job stating where basic logic ends and advanced logic begins, however.

We are reminded of an (unverified) story told about a very eminent philosopher – a narrative about logic. Somehow, at some time when the 'Moonies' (the Unificationists) (followers of Sun Myung Moon) were rapidly growing in number in the 1970s and 1980s, and were the subject of concern about 'brain washing' their converts, they came into contact with this philosopher who was, by the way, a notorious atheist. The philosopher accepted their offer of hospitality and enjoyed a number of holidays at Unificationist gatherings around the world and recommended their excellent hospitality to a number of his astonished colleagues. At long last, it was announced that the great man had at last agreed to address the Church. Excitement mounted. To have him as a convert would be a coup indeed. But it was not to be. Having endured as many sermons as he could, to all round bemusement, the philosopher stood up and gave a lecture on basic logic. In the circumstances, he could not have chosen better.

Roman Stranger: I think Leach's attitude to logic is as Janus-faced as his attitude to teenagers.

Athenian Stranger: Agreed.

Jeremy Barris argues that some forms of philosophy share the logical structure of jokes, and that this should be embraced. He notes that when we examine what follows from a concept with logical necessity there is often an incongruent shift of sense. He here puts his finger on why Schopenhauer described the ontological argument as "this charming joke". Schopenhauer was thereby dismissing the ontological argument but, if Barris is right, then the joke-like structure of the ontological argument is not in itself reason to dismiss it. (Bencivenga would no doubt point out that it provides no reason to accept it either.)

Athenian Stranger: Is philosophy being derided? I spent my life combatting that kind of thing, I thought that today, at least, I would be among philosophers only.

Roman Stranger: You are. Philosophers themselves have learned to deride philosophy, which is the greatest philosophical joke of all. But I think you mistake Barris's intentions, which were not to deride philosophy, but rather to illustrate something of its nature.

David Skrbina would agree with Barris that Plato's humour is part of his message and that this is rarely appreciated. Skrbina suggests that there is much to be said for thinking of philosophy as a "living dialogue". It is in the context of a living dialogue that we best understand a teacher's intentions. There is a sense in which writing, for all its advantages, takes us away from this dialogue; and digital devices remove us one step further. [*James' experience of technology in teaching is more positive than Skrbina's – eg. shy students with their screens turned off daring to ask questions.*]

Athenian Stranger: It seems they recognise the shortcomings of their method, then. The main problem with writing philosophy is that you can't respond to the person reading it. If writers knew what their words would make their readers think, they might regret them, wishing they had written something quite different instead.¹

Roman Stranger: Quite so. The advantage of writing, namely that it can reach so many people, is bought at the expense of a lack of focus and responsiveness.

Brylea Hollinshead and **Michael-John Turp** are in sympathy with David Skrbina and with Laura. They point out that the contemporary approach to philosophy "assumes a clear distinction between the *activity* of philosophy and its *presented product*" but that much more prestige is accorded to the presented product. This was not the case in the ancient world nor in the eastern traditions of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, all of which placed much more emphasis on *doing*.

However, as **Massimo Pigliucci** points out, practical philosophy is now making a comeback; and there is no logical incompatibility between theoretical and practical philosophy.

Athenian Stranger: So strange that he sees the need to point to mere compatibility. Why would anyone practice theoretical philosophy if there were no practical implications? What would be the point?

But, as **Markus Weidler** explains, Heidegger would hate all of this talk of openness and accessibility. He would damn it all to hell. He maintained that: "To make itself understandable is suicide for philosophy." According to Heidegger, journalism veils the

¹ Indeed. I must thank my unexpected guests for their attention to my draft essay, but, in my defence, they read only my *draft*, that is to say, little more than preparatory notes. However, in honour of my guests – and of philosophy as a living dialogue – as far as possible, I'll try to leave my words unchanged. S.L.

true meaning of words, and he saw no reason for philosophy to follow journalism. Rather, in style, like Leni Riefenstahl, Heidegger alludes to the divine. Weidler explains this with (journalistic?) clarity. He does not, we should hasten to add, suggest that we follow Heidegger's example.

Roman Stranger: Strong words! So this Heidegger fellow didn't teach, then? And presumably he didn't write either, for nobody would be able to understand him.

Athenian Stranger: I suppose that must be true, but then why would anyone speak of him? I'll have to read the essay.

Aaron James Wendland suggests that Heidegger should have been considerably more relaxed about journalism. He argues that the relationship between academic and public philosophy is benign and dialectical. Public philosophy translates esoteric ideas into accessible prose; the ideas are applied to daily life, an action which then provokes new problems that are themselves examined by academic philosophers – a virtuous circle.

As **Hans-Georg Moeller**, **Rory O'Neill** and **Chiang Hio Fai** put it: "Philosophy is not, as Martin Heidegger somewhat conceitedly presumed, in any privileged relationship with language." Once we put aside this idea we can more readily understand philosophy in relation to its historical context and we can ask why theory has had so much of the upper hand over at least the last two hundred years and why might this now be changing? Moeller, O'Neill and Chiang point out that philosophy is always contingent upon the different audiences for philosophy. Today there is a form of philosophy presented by an expert and a form of philosophy presented by an influencer. They address different audiences. They describe how philosophy presented by experts has developed its own self-perpetuating mechanisms since the latter half of the twentieth century. Areas of specialisation, peer review, academic rankings – the mechanisms whereby philosophy looks at itself and polices itself – these are all relatively late developments (imported from the natural sciences).

It might be added that, in some respects, the standard scholarly apparatus of footnotes and referencing is more appropriate to natural science than to philosophy. It enables each generation of scientists to build on the previous generation's work: a distinction is maintained between data and interpretation that enables old data to still be of use even after the old theory has been undermined. There is nothing akin to this in philosophy. In philosophy, though examples are becoming rare, a book can still be written without any footnotes. (How time-consuming they are! But, there are a few journals that do not impose a house style. They demand only internal consistency within each article. The result is – whisper it quietly – *not* a mess!)

Athenian Stranger: It seems Heidegger did present understandable views, we must have been getting the wrong end of the stick.

Roman Stranger: Apparently so. Did you gain any understanding of the culture of philosophy which Leach was describing?

Athenian Stranger: I think so, and it sounds appalling. Tell me, who will read this?

Roman Stranger: Very few ... very few indeed. Leach and Tartaglia have read it all, many times. The authors may read some of the other essays, and some may even read them all. Very few others will, if any at all, although some essays will be read by a select few, in part or whole.

Athenian Stranger: What was the point of producing it then?

Roman Stranger: Well, the authors will list the publication of the essay as an achievement on their résumés. The length and quality of these help people to progress in their careers, and many measure their own personal worth in accordance with them; the institutions that employ philosophers always do. Some of the essays may be referred to in other essays, and in this way they will help others to build their own résumés. More importantly, you might think – certainly you and I would – the process of writing provides a focus for the authors to think intensely, an opportunity, for a time, to live a philosophical life. As for Leach and Tartaglia, I think this is in part a gesture of despair at how philosophy is presented in these strange times, but also an act of hope, however desperate – hope of the kind seen when Leach looks optimistically towards teenagers.

Moeller, O'Neill' and Chinag's essay is fascinating but it ends on a note that is slightly downbeat: "A critical philosophy of today [. . .] can analyse these conditions and dispassionately acknowledge the limitations they impose on overly enthusiastic philosophical ambitions." **Elly Vintiadis** would argue that we should not limit our ambitions before we have even begun to do philosophy. She argues that although it should never be the case that 'anything goes', we cannot say that there is just one single correct approach to philosophy and the presentation of philosophy, and it is not in any way the case that easier or more accessible philosophy is better philosophy; but it is the case that it is *fun* to explore different possibilities.

Heinrique Shneider expresses the hope that recent signs that Western philosophy is again remembering practice – including a new awareness of the importance of presentation, perhaps – might also signal an openness to engage with Chinese philosophy. For, as he reminds us, in Chinese philosophy theory and practice were never divorced as they were in the West.

And nor, we might add – with **Dan O'Brien's** paper in mind – were art and writing so divorced as in the West.

Athenian Stranger: There's the hope you were talking about.

Roman Stranger: Indeed. I'm surprised Leach says so little about O'Brien's paper, behind the scenes he and Tartaglia were speaking rather highly of it; a most welcome case of 'practicing what you preach', I heard the latter say.

The ignorance of Eastern philosophical traditions in the West is epitomised by the claim repeatedly made that Montaigne was the originator of philosophy's most common form of presentation, the essay. The Japanese Buddhist Kenkō (influenced by Chinese Daoists) wrote essays in the fourteenth century.

Kenkō's introduction to his essays would certainly have been appreciated by Montaigne: "What a strange, demented feeling it gives me when I realise I have spent whole days before this inkstone, with nothing better to do, jotting down whatever nonsensical thoughts have entered my head." In both traditions, a certain measure of idleness seems to have been necessary at the essay's conception. In that respect, perhaps Montaigne and Kenkō are closer to each other than they are to us.

Athenian Stranger: Ah, so this fellow Montaigne is responsible for the pickle they find themselves in.

Roman Stranger: No, that's not what Leach is saying. Montaigne wrote the most wonderfully engaging essays, and I believe him to be Leach's philosophical master.

Athenian Stranger: Not Sextus?

Roman Stranger: One or the other.

Athenian Stranger: If the essay format is not serving them well anymore, having become so standardised and restrictive as to squeeze the life out of philosophical thought, and having no readership except for those who profit from writing the things, then why do they not find a new way of presenting philosophy?

Roman Stranger: That may prove to be the great problem of their century – not a philosophical problem, but a problem for philosophy and philosophers, and, more indirectly, for a populace so starved of philosophy that they look to science and religion to satisfy their needs, where it is often a shabby affair.

How strange that their favoured form of presentation should have become so ubiquitous in such different times. Hopefully, surviving the 'publish or perish' demands of academia, there is still something of their spirit in a discipline that asks the idle question – what might not be but is?



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