Must Philosophers Be Obscure?[1]

BY

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A GOOD STYLE is not always considered a virtue in serious philosophical writing. To say that a philosopher writes well is oftentimes to imply that he is not much of a philosopher. There is a tendency to look down on the readability of Nietzsche; an inclination to regard the lucidity of James as evidence of philosophical levity. The grace of Bergson is something to be pardoned rather than praised, while Schopenhauer will be commended as a stylist in one breath and classified as a second-rate metaphysician in the next.[2] It is, in fact, the custom to associate obscurity with profundity, and clarity with superficiality.

Yet philosophy, because it is, after all, attempting to communicate something through the medium of language, should be as much concerned with style as any of the literary arts. It would not be too harsh to suggest that philosophers, being of all men the most consistent and serious seekers after truth, should be the most assiduous in striving for clarity and fitness of expression. That writer can have little respect for his thoughts who would willingly clothe them in limping sentences and dictionary words.

Fortunately, the really great remain great even when hindered by eccentricities of style: it is their influence in such matters which is to be deplored. It is all too easy for the disciple to adopt the master's way of speech without being able to assume the master's way

[1]Read at the meeting of the Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology, St. Louis, Missouri, April 4, 1947.

[2]*E.g.*, Irwin Edman's introduction to *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, N.Y. [1928].

of thought. The involution of structure or tastelessness of phrase which may be only an unfortunate mannerism in the true philosopher becomes a positive evil in his followers. Still, because the impression persists that the serious pursuit of knowledge results in thoughts too vast to be encompassed within an existent language, obscurity retains its place in respectable philosophical writing.

It may be that philosophers themselves have had something to do with the propagation of this myth. Heraclitus wrote difficult Greek, and was rewarded not with neglect but with the awesome title of "The Dark." Certainly the activity of abstract contemplation appears mysterious and terrifying to many persons, and certainly, too, the role of trafficker in an occult art is not altogether displeasing to most philosophers. Just as the professional juggler calls our attention to his skill by occasionally dropping a plate, so the philosopher reminds us of what a deep fellow he is by sometimes seeming to struggle in the effort to take us into his confidence. Frequently we are impressed by the struggle and think to ourselves what an incomprehensible thing philosophy must be. So it is no wonder if the philosopher clings to his magic cloak of ambiguity. Every trade has its secrets, and perhaps the philosopher's secret is an occasional wilful nebulousness.

It may be protested that the philosopher really does make discoveries which language is inadequate to convey. Nevertheless, the fact that he chooses to attempt to convey them brings him under the jurisdiction of the grammarian. The question of the ineffability of philosophical thought cannot be dealt with here, since we are concerned with the mode of philosophical expression rather than with the content to be expressed. It is enough to say that if a philosopher genuinely believes himself to be in possession of a thought which is, by nature, inexpressible, he should at least be able to impart the fact that he believes it to be so. The myths of Plato, for instance, occur at the precise points in the argument where the language of exposition would have served not to clarify but to confuse.

Thus the stylistic virtue to be insisted upon above all others is that of clarity—even if this clarity be at the expense of making a

difficult thing seem easy. Philosophers have been too long disporting themselves in the light of reason; it is time to return to the cave.

Under the general heading of clarity, the two topics which seem to me most significant are clarity of terminology and clarity of structure.

In the matter of terminology philosophy is faced with a problem not in general shared by the other sciences. The technical language of philosophy is largely drawn from common speech; consequently the philosopher must often go out of his way to identify as technical some word that might otherwise fail to be identified as such. "Carbon disulphide" is a technical term in anybody's language; a word like "intuition" comes to the philosopher not only laden with the weight of definitions heaped upon it by his predecessors, but also dragging with it the burden of connotations acquired in everyday usage. Furthermore, much of the language of philosophy refers to abstractions or constructs, and it seems much more difficult to agree upon the definitions of these than upon those of concrete objects. It is not surprising that many philosophers have found the traditional terminology so shopworn as to have become almost meaningless.

It is true that there have been efforts by philosophers to standardize and clarify technical terminology, but some of these efforts have only succeeded in complicating the problem further. I see, for instance, no value in the logician's quarrel over which of the terms "sentential function," "propositional function," or "propositional form" is the most correct, since there seems to be no difficulty in identifying the sort of expression to which all three are designed to refer. Similarly, the formation of new words through the hyphenating of old seems to me a peculiarly objectionable and useless habit. The introduction of such terms as "problem-inquiry," "selection-rejection," and "ends-in-view" is totally unnecessary, whereas Peirce's "pragmaticism" and Huxley's "agnostic" are legitimate innovations. When a really new concept appears in philosophy, then is the time for the coining of new words or the reintroduction of old ones. For ordinary purposes the principle of parsimony is best: never use a technical term where the same thought could be ex-

pressed equally precisely in words which are simple and familiar. As Aristotle says in the *Rhetoric*,

> . . . we ought only to bring in a new name if it indicates a real species with distinct specific qualities; otherwise the practice is pointless and silly, like the way Licymnius invented names in his *Art of Rhetoric* – "Secundation," "Divagation," "Ramification."[3]

Oftentimes it will be impossible to avoid the use of technical terminology, but when the effort to do so fails, the possibility still remains of supplying definitions which are clear and simple.

Thus the use of technical language is not in itself a fault in philosophical writing if that use be toward the aim of greater clarity and precision. It is the misuse of terminology, either through inadequate definition of terms or unnecessary additions to the technical vocabulary, that results in lack of understanding.

While vagueness of terminology will frequently stand in the way of comprehension, incoherence of structure can do so even more effectively. The fact that logicians are able to reduce all intelligible discourse to a handful of standard forms suggests that material which fails to fit these standard forms is unintelligible. Suppose, for instance, that someone who has never studied philosophy encounters this statement:

> Thus, for example, any individual is both a predecessor and a successor with respect to the relation of identity, so that the domain and counterdomain of this relation are both the universal class.[4]

Since the form of this sentence presents no difficulties, he would recognize his failure to understand as owing to his unfamiliarity with the terms "predecessor," "counterdomain," and so forth, rather than to the writer's profundity or to his own obtuseness. On

[3] 1414615 tr. W. Rhys Roberts; *cf.* also Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Transcendental Dialectic, Book I, Section I.

[4] Alfred Tarski, *Introduction to Logic*, Oxford (1946), p. 88.

the other hand, suppose that the same reader is confronted with the following sentence:

> In contrast, the position of the text is that what is meant by comparison is institution of *selected* facts on the basis of equivalent (similar) evidential force in a variety of cases, which are existentially different, this determination being grounded only as the operations of observation involved in the selection eliminate, *pari passu*, other existential constituents as irrelevant, and indeed misleading unless eliminated.[5]

Here the situation is reversed. The vocabulary is innocent enough, but something has happened to the structure. The reader would be compelled to suspend the train of philosophical thought in order to assume the mechanical task of reducing the conglomeration to structurally comprehensible units. This, of course, he could do only at the risk of making rearrangements and divisions that might well distort the writer's meaning. Thus the misuse of content seems to me a lesser evil than the misuse of form. As long as the structure of a sentence is clear, it is at least possible to isolate the particular word which is an impediment to understanding.

In the matter of structure as it extends beyond the unit of the sentence, there is little to add to what Plato, in the *Phaedrus*, and Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, have said of the organic nature of literary composition. One single point may be made here: that the philosopher, being under no obligation to supply the atmosphere of suspense that is essential to the creative writer, need not conceal his purposes from his audience. Therefore, he can and should, remind us constantly where he is going and how he proposes to get there. If what he has to say is significant, it will bear repetition; if it is difficult, it will need repetition. The reader can skip what seems obvious to him far more easily than he can supply what was omitted because it seemed obvious to the writer.

The principle to guide us in the attainment of clarity of structure is evidently similar to that which was suggested previously in relation

[5]John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, N. Y. (1938), pp. 184-5.

to the use of terminology: whenever possible the clearest and simplest mode of expression is best. This is an ideal much more readily attainable than clarity of language, for while there are some concepts which can be conveyed best through a technical vocabulary, it is doubtful if there are any concepts which require complicated structure for their expression.

Up to this point one problem intimately connected with clarity of style has been deliberately avoided: the problem of audience. It is all very well to urge that philosophers should write clearly, but the injunction carries little weight without a characterization of the audience for whom this clarity is designed.

It has been my tacit assumption throughout this essay that the philosopher genuinely wishes to be understood, and to be so by as many persons as possible. At the same time his real respect for philosophy and for himself as a philosopher will keep him from extending the scope of his audience by writing down to it.[6] His problem is how best to combine the dignity due himself and his subject with the courtesy due his reader. Two methods of approach are open to him: either he may allow his audience to determine his style, in which case his style will to some extent determine his subject, or he may allow his subject to determine his style, in which case his style will to some extent determine his audience. In other words, if someone were to write a textbook on advanced calculus for the use of small children, he would be forced to use language which would hardly give a faithful representation of the subject, whereas if his style were truly appropriate, his audience would very naturally be limited to those who had already mastered its elementary phases.

I believe that the true philosopher will always take the second course and subordinate consideration of his audience to consideration of his subject. He will no more have different styles for different audiences than a really well-bred person will make a distinction between his manners towards a queen and towards a charwoman. The simplicity of his structure and the clarity of his terminology will

[6] I do not wish to imply that no one should write popular philosophy; this is a different topic altogether.

render him readily comprehensible to all who are qualified to consider the particular subject of which he writes. Furthermore, to those who cannot understand him immediately, it will at least be obvious what background he presupposes in those who can. He will never treat of a topic which might have been grasped by a large number of persons in such a way that it falls within the reach of only a few, and he will never dilute a topic which is the rightful property of specialists in an attempt to make it available to the layman. Thus there is a sense in which the writer who appears to consider his audience least is actually he who considers his audience most, for the philosopher who allows his style to be determined by his subject rather than by his audience never cajoles his readers into a half-understanding of technical matters with which they are not yet competent to deal.

What I have been saying about the philosopher's attitude towards his audience may well appear both impractical and over-idealistic. The force of public opinion is a powerful incentive when it comes to paying attention to matters of style. Consequently the removal of his external sanction leaves only the internal sanction of the philosopher's own idealism. I would reply to such a criticism that it is exactly to this idealism to which I wish to appeal. The very fact of calling one's self a philosopher seems to me to presuppose a respect both for the subject matter of philosophy and for the language which is its vehicle. It presupposes, also, a certain self-respect, in that the sincere philosopher will always wish to pay his thoughts the compliment of exhibiting them in their most flattering light. And, as a defense of idealism in general, I would say that it is always necessary to formulate the perfectionist's position if only to point the direction in which our efforts should be made. The fact that an ideal is seldom realized provides no valid basis for discarding it.

The urging of a high stylistic standard makes possible at least two other objections. The first of these is that while the philosopher has been advised to suit his style to his subject, the only criteria for this suitability are his own taste and conscience. Here again it is the removal of external pressure which forces a subjective standard

of judgment. I can only say that those who exercise the powers of self-criticism best will best succeed in the enterprise of adapting words to thoughts. To this may be added my belief that the art of criticizing one's self is capable of as much development as time and the efforts of the individual permit.

The other objection which comes to mind is an aesthetic one. It might be expected that a writer whose only standards are clarity and fitness of expression would inevitably develop a style both barren and unpicturesque. I would deny this emphatically. Neither metaphor, nor illustration, nor even charm, are incompatible with either of these ideals. What, for instance, does the ordinary student remember of a first-year course in the history of philosophy? Not Kant's transcendental deduction of the categories, nor the details of Berkeley's criticism of Locke, but Zeno's flying arrow, Plato's winged soul, Descartes' mechanical men, and Hume's billiard balls. These are the things which fasten on the imagination and give life and color to philosophy.

Briefly, then, there are three points of style which seem to me particularly worthy of the philosopher's attention:

First, the placing of expression on a plane of equality with thought, together with the abandonment of the notion that wordiness and incomprehensibility are necessarily signs of a great mind struggling to express itself.

Second, the conscious and continual exercise of self-criticism in the effort to attain a clarity of structure and terminology appropriate to the particular subject.

Third, the effective use of metaphor and example.

Underlying all of these admonitions is my deep conviction that every philosopher can improve his style if he once becomes convinced of the importance of doing so. To this I shall add, as my own nomination for the text to be hung in every philosopher's study, the following quotation from Wittgenstein's introduction to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*:

> What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.