

Stephen Maitzen
Philosophy/Cornell University

Can Philosophers Communicate With Other Humanists?

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Background

Our experience at the 1989 biennial Conference of Mellon Fellows in the Humanities convinced many of us that a wide conceptual gap, or difference in worldview, divides two groups of humanists: philosophers in the analytic tradition—the dominant tradition in recent Anglophone philosophy—and humanists influenced by contemporary literary theory. It seemed to us that this at least apparent gap often made it difficult for members of one group to communicate with, and profit from the insights of, members of the other. The gap, we discovered, not only divides analytic philosophers from students of literature; it also sometimes surfaces in conversations between analytic philosophers and, for instance, historians and between analytic philosophers and philosophers working in the continental tradition.¹ We resolved to use our time at the next Mellon Fellows conference to examine this conceptual divide and to explore ways of overcoming it.

Results of the 1991 Conference: A Summary

Each meeting of our group strove to address the conceptual gap dividing philosophy from most other humanistic disciplines, and each meeting produced considerable heat but also

¹ Since the analytic approach dominates Anglophone philosophy, I'll henceforth use simply "philosophy" and "philosophers" to denote analytic philosophy and analytic philosophers, unless I specify otherwise.

light. Our discussions focused somewhat loosely on a handout I had sent to participants beforehand contrasting what I saw as salient features of the respective sides of the gap (see Appendix). Several participants on both sides questioned the features I had chosen and the contrasts I had drawn. I had intended to assert only statistical generalizations, strong correlations between the features I listed and their associated disciplines, rather than ironclad laws. I think my generalizations hold up in spite of the handful of exceptions brought out during the discussion, but I won't take time here to defend them any further.

The short answer to the question posed by my title is, perhaps unsurprisingly, "It depends." The experience of two Mellon conferences suggests to me that, for example, philosophers and linguists have no trouble communicating. On the contrary, linguists in general seem to do the kind of empirical, scientific research and propose the kind of clear, precise, and testable claims that many philosophers instinctively admire. Roughly the same thing strikes me as true of many Fellows working in anthropology and history. No doubt the humanities provide other cases of unfettered communication besides these.

The trouble, however, comes when philosophers try to communicate with humanists influenced by post-structuralist literary theory—or, as many of its adherents prefer, simply "Theory." Neither session of the group directly addressed the two questions with which I opened our discussions, but clear answers to those questions nevertheless emerged: first, the conceptual gap I described is real, and not just apparent; second, it divides philosophers from only some, and not all, other humanists.

Drawing from our discussions and from related conference materials, I will try to offer a more detailed account, and perhaps some explanation, of the gap between

philosophers and those humanists influenced by Theory. I find it useful to divide the analysis into issues of style and issues of substance, even though I'm well aware of the Theorists' contention that no non-arbitrary criterion separates style and substance, form and content. If the Theorists turn out to be right, then I would be happy to regard all of the following issues as substantive and none of them as "merely stylistic."

Stylistic Issues

Clarity

My handout claimed that, for philosophers, clarity in exposition is at least a prominent goal, and I still stand by that claim. Granted, regrettably many philosophers fail to write clearly, but I doubt such failure stems from their rejecting the goal. Theorists, on the other hand, often do seem to reject clarity as an expository goal. One participant in another seminar quoted with approval the view of a prominent Theorist that clarity and clear prose "are colonizable" and therefore to be employed sparingly. Defenders of Theory often claim that the obscure prose of some Theorists exposes the central contradictions and inherent limitations of language, while its detractors contend that such obscurity exposes nothing more than the limited skill of Theorists in *using* language. While a simple difference in subject matter surely accounts for part of the gap between philosophers and Theorists—there's a Socratic rift between philosophy and rhetoric that goes back millennia—I think that much of the trouble stems from their pursuit of different, and incompatible, stylistic goals.

The second session took an interesting turn when one participant quite legitimately criticized the opacity of much analytic philosophical writing. He lamented

the fact that an educated non-specialist, such as a historian, “could read a 300-page book on truth and come away with nothing.” Aside from my personal suspicion that a 300-page book on truth is probably hundreds of pages too long, I appreciate his implied criticism: a philosophy book so opaque that it makes no impact at all on a conscientious reader is a scandal. In my view, all philosophers ought to commit themselves to A. P. Martinich’s maxim that “the goal of analysis...is to make philosophy less difficult than it otherwise would be.” “This,” says Martinich, “is just a corollary of a more general principle: anyone can make a subject difficult; it takes an accomplished thinker to make a subject simple.”² Writing as clearly as the subject will allow is an important step toward making it simple.

Noncognitivism about Theory

Apropos of style, some philosophers seem troubled by the suspicion that not only is rhetoric a central concern of Theory; rhetoric may be all there is to Theory. Shortly into the first session, one participant made a striking suggestion: much of what goes by the label “Theory,” such as historian Joan Scott’s invocation of what she calls *partage*,³ isn’t meant to propose a truth-claim so much as to “suggest an image” or “paint a picture” that

² A. P. Martinich, *Philosophical Writing: An Introduction* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989), p. xiv.

³ Joan W. Scott, “Deconstructing the Campaign Against Political Correctness,” *Proceedings of the Mellon Fellows Conference on Scholarship and Society* (Princeton, NJ: Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, 1991), pp. 1–19 (Keynote Address at the 1991 Mellon Conference), at p. 17.

“resonates.” This participant found, moreover, that *partage* (a French word meaning both “division” and “sharing”) “embraced an interesting contradiction” and so succeeded in resonating with her. She suggested, quite plausibly, that practitioners of Theory have more interest in the “richness” of an image than in its truth-value (if any), and she concluded that tropes such as *partage* can be, as she put it, “fruitful,” even if they don’t translate into the literal truth-claims that most philosophers prefer.

I found intriguing this interpretation of Theory in terms that seem to me unmistakably *noncognitivist*. According to a standard taxonomy, an utterance counts as cognitive if and only if the utterance, when literally construed, is literally true or literally false.⁴ By that definition, presumably, “Holy Toledo!” would count as noncognitive, while “Dukakis is the president” and “Love is a rose” would both count as cognitive: literally construed, the last two utterances express literal falsehoods. Thus, an utterance meant simply to paint a resonant picture is strictly speaking noncognitive: it does not amount to a claim which, literally construed, is literally true or literally false. Of course, claiming *that* some trope resonates (with a least one person) might very well be a cognitive affair (assuming we can get a handle on “resonates”), but that is presumably not the sort of thing our session participant or Joan Scott has in mind. For them, painting a resonant picture is the principal concern, not claiming or arguing *that* the picture

⁴ See Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, “The Many Moral Realisms,” in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 6. I invoke this taxonomy merely as a standard way of dividing cognitive and noncognitive utterances. Literal truth and literal falsity are semantic properties; as I suggest below, it is an independent, epistemic matter whether we can tell if anything actually instantiates those properties.

resonates.

When I asked other participants what they thought of this noncognitivist interpretation of (much of) Theory, I got mixed reactions. Several considered the label “noncognitive” to be pejorative and objected to being tarred with that brush. I asked them to ignore the label and focus instead on the accuracy of the interpretation. This request didn’t prevent more quarreling over terminology, but I did get the impression that not everyone rejected the interpretation itself. Indeed, there may be good reason for accepting it if painting pictures or evoking images is the real aim of much Theoretical discourse. In sum, I think the jury is still out on a noncognitivist reading of Theory. It remains a live and interesting issue that deserves further attention.

Substantive Issues

Even assuming we can properly construe much of Theory as noncognitive, that would still leave untouched several substantive issues on which philosophers and Theorists routinely differ. These differences, moreover, play a part in frustrating communication between the two camps.

Extralinguistic reality

One rather basic issue dividing philosophers and Theorists concerns the existence of a world external to language and text. Under the influence of post-structuralism, many Theorists like to maintain that nothing exists outside texts: as Derrida is supposed to have put it, “*Il n’y a rien hors du texte.*” By contrast, philosophers for the most part accept an extralinguistic ontology of the sort endorsed by common sense. In their view, there really

are such things as tables, chairs, skunks, and so on, independently of any language containing terms for those objects; indeed, I had planned to include “acceptance of a largely realistic ontology” among the salient features of analytic philosophy but left it out in favor of other features. This basic difference in ontological outlook has predictably dire consequences for communication.

When philosophers respond with puzzlement to the Theorists’ denial of an extralinguistic reality, Theorists often emphasize, for example, how language shapes and structures thinking. Philosophers typically acknowledge that fact, but they deny that it has either of the consequences Theorists say it has, namely that we cannot use language to refer to extralinguistic reality or that no such reality is even out there.

In debates—and I have found myself involved in them—over whether the Moon exists outside of language, Theorists typically emphasize that “the Moon” is nothing but an arbitrary string of characters, that signifier and signified become defined only within a linguistic system, and so on. Philosophers usually respond roughly as follows: “Granted, ‘the Moon’ doesn’t exist outside of language, but we’re not talking about the manner in which ‘the Moon’ exists; we’re talking about the manner in which the Moon exists.” Exchanges of this sort—and they are not rare—have tempted some onlookers to conclude that philosophers chiefly *use* language, while Theorists chiefly *mention* it.⁵ Or, to put it more charitably and accurately, perhaps: philosophers use language as laymen use it, mostly to refer or denote, while Theorists focus principally on the connotative, rather

⁵ For an example of the use/mention distinction, consider this fact: ‘the Greek alphabet’ contains fewer than 24 letters, while the Greek alphabet contains exactly 24 letters.

than the denotative, function of language.

Truth as provisional

At the top of my handout's list of differences I mentioned what I regard as the deeply different attitudes toward truth that characterize the two sides. Unlike philosophers, Theorists typically feel obliged not to use the words "true" and "truth" without enclosing them in scare-quotes (mine, of course, are mention-quotes rather than scare-quotes). I suspect that this habit of Theorists stems from the conviction either that language simply lacks the connection to reality needed for grounding truth-claims or that, as one participant put it, even true claims are at best "only provisionally true."

Many analytic philosophers will no doubt find puzzling the notion of provisional truth. If Socrates drank hemlock, they will want to say, then it is simply true, no scare-quotes about it, that Socrates drank hemlock. Granted, our putative *knowledge* that Socrates drank hemlock is provisional, since it may turn out not to be knowledge after all: it is epistemically just possible that Socrates never drank hemlock or that, even if he did, our grounds for believing he did do not suffice to give us knowledge of that fact. If so, then we would not, after all, have known that Socrates drank hemlock. But this possibility simply shows we're fallible, that our knowledge-claims are revisable, not that truth is provisional or unmentionable without scare-quotes.

Theorists may feel uneasy about truth-claims because they identify truth (a semantic property) with certainty (an epistemic property) or with consensus (a sociological fact or property). How, they ask, can we toss around "truth" when we face so many issues about which certainty and consensus seem impossible to obtain?

Philosophers often respond, as did one participant in our seminar, by stressing the logical independence of truth, certainty, and consensus: achieving one of the three does not guarantee achieving either of the others. On many issues, certainty and consensus may always elude us, but for every well-defined, contradictory pair of claims we know that exactly one of them is *true*. Far from being mysterious or fishy, truth is all over the place; the real challenge consists in discovering it.

In short, the attitude of most philosophers toward truth leads them to say things like this: “Why the scare-quotes? Clearly you believe it’s true, and not just ‘true,’ that Coleridge’s addiction influenced his poetry. If in fact it didn’t—if, say, he wasn’t actually addicted—then you’re simply mistaken. Assuming your claim is well-defined, it’s either true or false. Your being mistaken wouldn’t make the claim ‘true’; it would make the claim false.”

Conclusion

Although this summary of our discussions has the form of a post-mortem, the issues it addresses strike me as very much alive and in many ways central to the current, well-publicized debate over the humanities. In that light, I suggest devoting the next conference entirely to these issues. Given the importance of truth, reality, and noncognitivism in our discussions, we might adopt the following theme for the conference: “Is There Humanistic Knowledge?”⁶

⁶ I thank Richard Boyd, Tamar Gendler, Norman Kretzmann, and David Robb for helpful suggestions. The views expressed here are mine, however, and should not be blamed on these fine people.

Appendix

The Great Divide

This list of contrasts is not completely uncontroversial, but I consider it to be accurate in general terms.

Analytic philosophy

View of truth as unmysterious

Respect for, and emulation of, the methods of mature science

Literal-mindedness

Focus on the truth-value of claims

Principle of Charity: construe ambiguities in favor of author

Non-genetic focus on the logic of an author's arguments

Aversion to, and desire to resolve, paradox

Demand for logical consistency

Rejection of global relativism

Text as a vehicle for content

Commitment to analysis; desire to convince by rigorous argument and justification

Clarity as a goal in exposition

Concrete, homespun illustration and example

Paradigms: Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore

Humanities influenced by Theory

View of truth as deeply mysterious

Suspicion of hegemony and alleged objectivity of science

Emphasis on metaphor, trope

Focus on the resonance and so-called "validity" of claims

Construe ambiguities so as to deconstruct author's claims

Focus on the political/historical genesis of an author's claims

Celebration of paradox

Suspicion of "logocentrism"

Affinity for global relativism

Text as ultimate; content unknowable

Preference for holism; less emphasis on convincing by argument

Strategic obscurity in exposition

Little concrete illustration, few examples

Paradigms: Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger