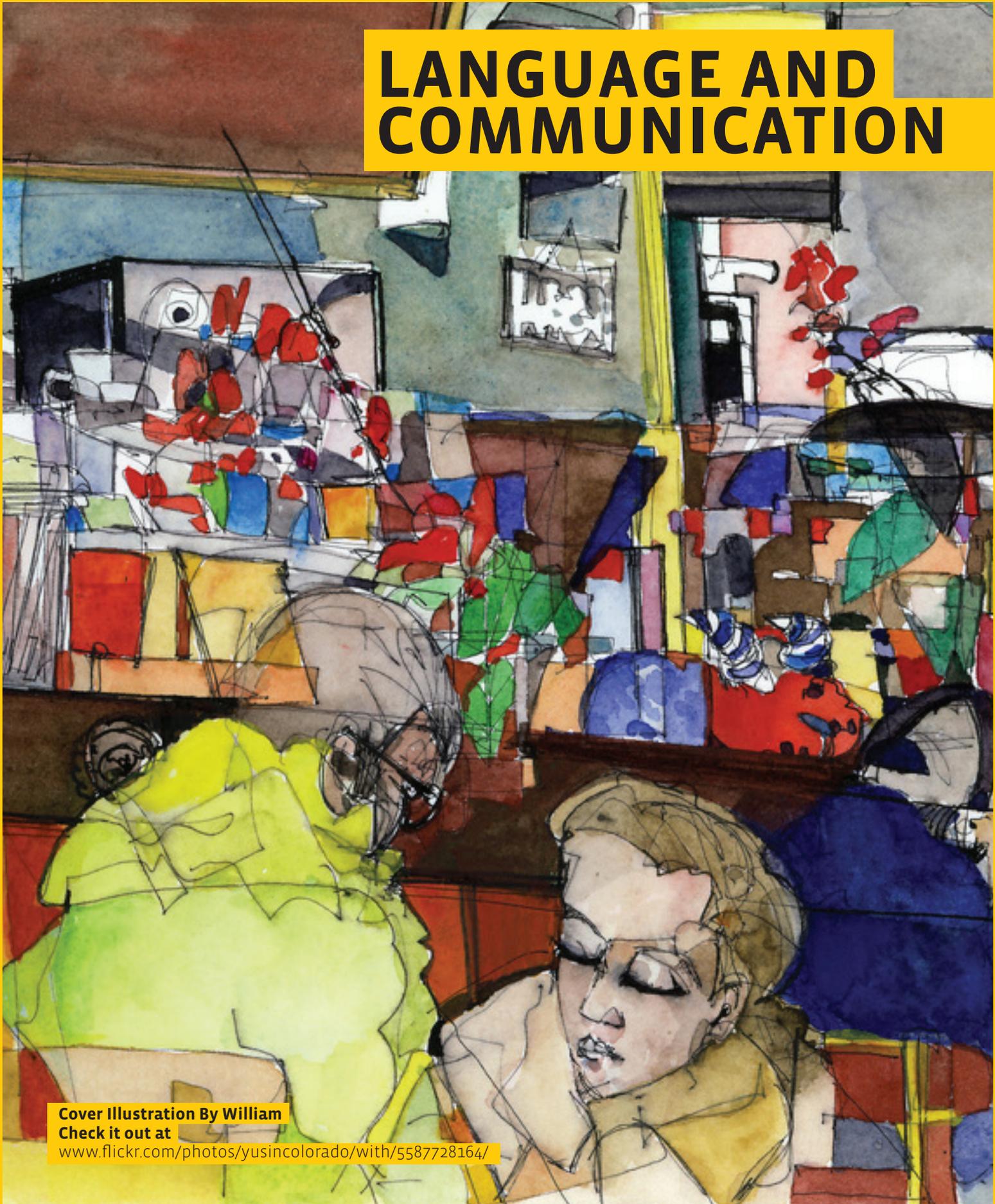


Café Philosophy

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION



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WORDS

The modern world is *awash with words*. Through our mastery of natural forces, human beings can send their thoughts in written form instantly across the planet. Words have great power and through them we conjure up realities, more or less imaginary, to believe in. We can often get so lost in these edifices created by language that they become seen as living, breathing things.

'Legal fictions' provide examples of this such as the corporation, which in many systems of law is considered to be a person. A strange kind of person indeed, born from the union of pen and paper, with no real existence outside the fabric of thought. Mental fictions can end up getting the better of philosophers too, when they are mistaken for being more real and more important than they actually are.

Philosophers have always relied on words. Yet they also have an uneasy relationship with language. The more abstract and highly refined their thought becomes, the bigger the disclaimer they must attach to their explanation of the truth. The philosopher often ends up trying to describe something which, to the five senses, is intangible. You and I have both seen a chair, so when I say the word 'chair' you immediately know what I am talking about. But as soon as I start talk about something like a moral obligation or a timeless eternity, a wall of misunderstanding is likely to appear. In trying to communicate this intangible thing to you I have to rely on terms with which we are both familiar. I can say it is like this or that, referring to what you already know about, but such imprecision is never going to exactly convey my personal understanding to you. Greater sophistication of philosophical discourse goes hand in hand with the heightened possibility of misunderstanding and confusion. This is why, as **William Irwin (page 15)** points out, to make philosophy more accessible to the wider public requires talking to people in their own language.

Perhaps those who call themselves 'philosophers' must share the blame for how far they have become alienated from the interests and concerns of the wider society. At its core, philosophy touches on issues that many, if not most, people find deeply interesting at some point in their lives: what is the good life? How can I be happy? Is there a higher power that guides human affairs? The problem is not so much that people fail to ask (or seek the answer to) philosophical

questions, but that they become disillusioned by the lack of answers available within mainstream academic institutions. So they look elsewhere. The notion that someone can discover 'the good life' by pouring over screeds of obtuse journals and debating super-fine analytical distinctions lacks credibility for many people.

If the world is to find philosophy appealing, then it should be practical. There are people genuinely seeking the answers to deeper questions in life who find so much of what is done at universities impractical and useless, failing to serve the seeking that leads one to search after truth. In a sense, academic philosophy has become a particularly insular breed of philosophical inquiry – holding itself up as superior to the rest, despite the fact that no Socrates or Confucius or Spinoza ever arose from a professional academic post.

Many young people do come to a philosophy course seeking answers to life's deepest questions, and they may find useful starting points in the survey courses which introduce the great thinkers who have grappled with such questions. But as they proceed up the academic ladder, the process of 'doing philosophy' is increasingly a process of familiarizing oneself with the canon of commentators and critics, potentially being diverted by endless belaboring over obscure and often dry points of analysis whose application to the real world, and to the real problems which gave rise to the original inquiry, have been lost and forgotten in the quest to prove one's superior scholastic credentials, or to publish something, anything that will make it through the hallowed gates of journaldom.

As someone who has done philosophy with both small children and young adults, the differences in outlook are illuminating. I have found children, particularly those around 7-9, to be far more imaginative, spontaneous and daring when it comes to philosophical inquiry. Reading Margaret Mahey's *Lion in the Meadow* to 9 year olds has led to some surprisingly creative insights, whereas the discussion of more scholarly texts with uni students tends to be a lot more restrained and predictable. In 'Philosophy for Children', as a specific technique developed by educators such as University of Auckland's Vanya Kovach, kids are not confronted by a boring litany of past problems and arguments, but by the wondrous mysteries of life in a fresh and engaging way. The teaching of philosophy for adults could benefit from such an approach.

Please enjoy this issue of Café Philosophy about language, philosophy and their often weird interactions.

Topics covered by our contributors include *irony, small talk* and other stuff that people do while stuck inside a café during the pouring rain.

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY VS TEACHING TO PHILOSOPHISE

Pablo Cevallos Estarellas reviews the developments that caused professional to triumph over amateur philosophy in education, and proposes a way forward.

If to do philosophy is to ask questions of a special kind about central human problems and then to grapple with them in a rigorous way, most people can in principle learn how to philosophise. This means that unlike most academic disciplines, philosophy has two legitimate manifestations: the professional practice of philosophical inquiry, with reference to the canon of historical philosophical works, and the amateur practice of philosophical inquiry, without reference to previous philosophy. In this article I'll distinguish between these two expressions of philosophical practice and explore their educational applications.

TWO MANIFESTATIONS OF PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

We need to begin with a definition of philosophy. This is tricky, as it seems that there are as many conceptions of philosophy as there are philosophers. However, many philosophers work with a shared notion of what philosophy is, even if it is often left unarticulated:

Many philosophers conceive philosophy as an activity or a process, more than an accumulation of contents or products.

This sketchy conceptualization of philosophy has at least two properties that are relevant to this discussion. The first is that philosophy is defined mainly in procedural terms, identifying it with the activity of philosophizing (what philosophers do, ie, the method) rather than with the products of philosophy (what philosophers have accomplished, ie, the results). The second is that it describes the philosophical method as the combination of two basic elements:

- (A) a specific kind of thinking (reflective, critical, creative, striving for understanding, etc)
- (B) a specific kind of issues or questions (fundamental or conceptual ones, which cannot be solved by mere observation or calculation).

If this 'procedural' definition of philosophy is accepted, then one important implication that follows is that, as hinted, anybody can in principle practice it without having studied it at an academic level. This



sets philosophy apart from many other academic disciplines, which can hardly be practiced in any meaningful sense without one having a substantive knowledge of the discipline's canon and without one keeping abreast with the knowledge produced in the field. For example, it is very difficult to conceive somebody who practices sociology nowadays and does not know anything about the works of, say, Max Weber or C. Wright Mills, or somebody who practices biology and ignores Darwin's theory of evolution by means of natural selection, and Stephen J. Gould's corollary of punctuated equilibrium. By contrast, philosophy can be practiced without knowledge of the academic tradition that exists behind it.

—PROFESSIONAL PHILOSOPHY—

Philosophy can indeed be practiced without knowledge of its academic tradition, but can does not imply must. There is an extensive written record of the ways in which past philosophers have dealt with philosophical questions, and how successive generations of philosophers commented on their answers. Knowing that rich tradition has an intrinsic intellectual value, for as one English philosopher: Nigel Warburton has remarked, "without some knowledge of history philosophers would never progress: they would keep making the same mistakes, unaware that they had been made before" (Philosophy: The Basics). Thus, within the realms of academia, to philosophise means more than just grappling with philosophical questions from scratch; it involves arguing with the answers given to philosophical problems by other philosophers, in what can be seen as a conversation spanning many generations. According to this narrow view, a (Western) philosopher is somebody who continues the tradition started by the ancient Greek philosophers. Since universities are more or less the

only institutions which pay people to philosophise, it follows that a professional philosopher is nearly always a university teacher of philosophy.

— 'AMATEUR' PHILOSOPHY —

While the professional model of philosophising has undeniable merits, the fact remains that the rich tradition of philosophical texts needs not be known (let alone mastered) in order to be able to philosophise. People who have no acquaintance with the philosophical tradition naturally struggle with philosophical problems. This is probably because these problems are grounded in everyday experience. As **Thomas Nagel puts it**: "the philosophical raw material comes directly from the world and our relation to it, not from writings of the past" (What Does It All Mean?). According to him this explains why is it that philosophical issues "come up again, in the heads of people who haven't read about them." (By the way, I use the adjective 'amateur' simply as the antonym of professional, ie, as the activity engaged in by those who philosophise without necessarily referring to the canon of philosophical works.)

The professional (academic) practice of philosophy has become the dominant and by far the most prestigious one. This might be due to the fact that at least since the late Middle Ages professional philosophy monopolized universities and other academic centres, where it eventually acquired, according to Kwame Anthony Appiah, "the highest-status label of Western humanism" (In My Father's House). In the contemporary world, philosophy as a professional practice enjoys great health, at least within the boundaries of universities. In his article "What is philosophy?" Barry Stroud argues that this is good because it protects the existence of philosophy as a relatively free activity, by isolating philosophers from the restrictive controls of society and government. But at the same time this is bad for philosophy, because the more it becomes professionalised, the more it becomes an esoteric activity to which amateur practitioners of philosophy have no access.

Philosophy's increasing professionalization has had at least two lamentable consequences. The first is that as philosophy grows apart from society, philosophers' interests (and their publications) become increasingly abstract and less applicable to the real problems of regular people and societies. The second is that as society grows apart from philosophy, it becomes less philosophical, fostering an attitude that Martha Nussbaum has fittingly dubbed 'philosophical recalcitrance', which encourages simplistic answers to real life problems.

One possible antidote against the increasing public image of philosophy as an esoteric and elitist activity (and its resulting isolation) is the fostering of the amateur practice of philosophy. And yet, paradoxically, one consequence of the dominance of professional philosophy has been, precisely,

the impairment and weakening of the amateur tradition, which was always predicated on the non-elitist assumption that everybody could learn to philosophise, an assumption that came under attack by professional philosophers. Especially during the heyday of philosophical professionalization (which in the English-speaking world coincided with the dominance of the analytic movement during the 1950s and 1960s), some academic philosophers openly ruled out the possibility that the regular folk could practice philosophy – a contemporary equivalent of Plato's snobbish conclusion that only a tiny minority of intellectually advantaged individuals are able to philosophise.

However, there have always been dissenting voices among academic philosophers who questioned and severely criticized the 'elitist' tradition. For example, Arthur Schopenhauer publicly ridiculed the academic 'book-philosophers' who dedicate most of their time to the study of what other philosophers said instead of thinking for themselves. Later, John Dewey argued that philosophy had become a rarefied discipline infatuated with a quest for certainty, and thus he proposed a reconstruction of it. In his classic *Democracy and Education*, he says that although philosophical problems arise in everyday life, most people do not identify them as philosophical because philosophers have developed a specialized vocabulary that can only be understood by those who belong to the guild, so to speak. A more recent critic of the elitist tradition is Bryan Magee, a renowned populariser of philosophy, who says: "The notion that only those who have studied philosophy at a university can philosophise is on par with the notion that only those who have made an academic study of literature can read a classic novel" (Confessions of a Philosopher). What unites all these criticisms of the exclusively professional (and elitist) tradition of philosophical practice is the conviction that, given the opportunity, laypeople are likely to philosophise. That takes us directly to the next topic, namely, the educational implications of philosophy.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE TWO TRADITIONS OF DOING PHILOSOPHY

When thinking about the educational implications of philosophy, the above distinction between the professional and the amateur traditions becomes extremely important. Under the predominance of professional practice, philosophy as a school discipline has become a quasi-arcane subject dedicated to the study and interpretation of texts written by famous philosophers of the past (or secondary sources referring to them), instead of engagement with pressing philosophical problems relevant to students' lives. The use of this educational approach, which I will term 'didactic', has the practical result of alienating many people from philosophy, not because they are incapable of studying it, but simply because they lose interest.

When academic philosophy is included in high school or university curricula, the courses usually take the didactic approach. Perhaps with the commendable purpose of having students learn to philosophise from being exposed to the inspiring ideas of academic philosophers, or perhaps with the less commendable one of making it easier for instructors to test students, these courses as a norm are limited to the teaching of the history of philosophy, either in chronological stages or according to the traditional problems of philosophy. In so doing, they fail to teach students how to philosophise, instead merely teaching them what the philosophers of the past said. This is a problem for two reasons.

The first is that even when executed well, the didactic approach does not help students to understand the world and them-selves better. Only rarely are students new to philosophy in a position to fully appreciate what others have written about philosophical problems until they've engaged with those problems on their own. A similar criticism, expressed in stronger terms, is Schopenhauer's tirade in his essay *'On Thinking for Your-self'*:

"The man who thinks for himself becomes acquainted with the authorities for his opinions only after he has acquired them and merely as a confirmation of them, while the book-philosopher starts with his authorities, in that he constructs his opinions by collecting together the opinions of others; his mind then compares with that of the former as a automaton compares with a living man. ... This is what determines the difference between a thinker and a mere scholar."

The second problem is that in many cases the didactic approach is not applied well, and then fails even to help students understand the philosophical ideas of famous philosophers, instead making them parrot ideas that they do not understand. It also confirms students' prejudice that philosophy is an inert subject, completely disconnected from their lives. When this happens – and unfortunately it happens a lot – not only is the original purpose of teaching philosophy absolutely nullified, but students are also likely to develop strong feelings against it.

In response to the elitist professional tradition and its 'didactic' educational approach, advocates of amateur philosophical practice have drawn on Socrates' example to propose a completely different approach to teaching philosophy. This alternative approach, which can be called 'dialogical' because of its emphasis on dialogue in the classroom, aims to teach students how to philosophise by doing it, even if that means that beginner students may not learn what the main philosophers of the past have said, or what the traditional philosophical problems are. In so doing, the dialogical approach recreates a significant aspect of philosophy's dialectical origins, whereby in order to philosophise it was not at all necessary to know what

others had said about philosophical issues (mainly because there was no accumulated record to refer to). In emphasising method over content, the dialogical approach makes philosophy accessible to those not necessarily trained in the professional tradition of philosophy. Showing characteristically democratic leanings, this pedagogical approach is based on the premise that every person is a potential philosopher.

How is dialogue used to teach to philosophise? The word 'dialogue' comes from the combination of two Greek words: dia, which means 'through', and logos, which means 'word'. Etymologically, dialogue suggests a movement or exchange of words between two or more persons. 'Dialogue' is sometimes used as a synonym for conversation, but they refer to very different types of communication. Matthew Lipman, the founder of Philosophy for Children, perhaps the most famous K-12 philosophy curriculum that uses the dialogical approach, observes that:

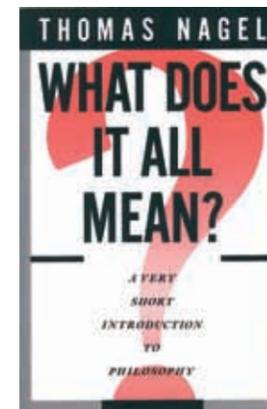
"Dialogue is a mutual exploration, an investigation, an inquiry"

"Conversation is a simple exchange: of feelings, of thoughts, of information, of understandings" (Thinking in Education).

A philosophical dialogue, then, is a collaborative exchange of ideas and arguments among people, with the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the problem at hand. The dialogical nature of philosophy derives from the simple fact that, as the Spanish philosopher Fernando Savater explains, "philosophy does not occur as a revelation made by someone who knows everything to someone who knows nothing." On the contrary, philosophy ideally occurs when two or more people who see themselves as equals, to quote Savater again, "become accomplices in their mutual submission to the force of reasons and their mutual rejection of the reasons of force" (The Questions of Life).

To the extent that dialogue aims not at persuasion at any cost, but at understanding, it will take the form of philosophical investigation or inquiry. And because it presupposes fallibility of the interlocutors, who are nevertheless willing to go wherever argument takes them, philosophical dialogue is also a form of critical discussion. The term 'critical discussion' was coined by Karl Popper to refer to a model of dialogical interaction aimed at the resolution of disputes governed by what he called 'critical rationalism.' Under the influence of Popper and also of Jürgen Habermas' notion of the 'ideal speech situation', Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst defined a 'critical discussion' as an ideal communicative context in which arguments are used to resolve disputes, that is to say, differences of opinion. They explain that disputes can be either settled or resolved. To settle a dispute means setting it aside to go on with life. On the other hand, to resolve a dispute means that one or more of the participants in

the discussion retracts her/his standpoint in the light of the other party's arguments.



Thomas Nagel
What does it all mean



Socrates—470 BC—399 BC

IN WHAT WAYS CAN THE THEORY OF DIALOGUE HAVE EDUCATIONAL APPLICATIONS?

Many contemporary theorists of education have written extensively about the benefits of using discussion in the classroom, or what some of them call "dialogical education." While important, these contributions seem to be made from a purely educational/psychological perspective, and tend to miss the philosophical (ie, normative) dimension of dialogue, which has been so well explored by the philosophical tradition. The question is how the educational/psychological perspective and the philosophical perspective can be combined in a theory of dialogue that can be useful for the classroom.

Another way to ask the same question is to ask how dialogue can be at the same time philosophical and educational. That might seem like a simple question until one realizes that it is a variant of R.S. Peters' 'paradox of moral education'. If the educational goal is to construct rational and moral individuals, how can we educate them when they are too young to understand reasons? We are confronted with two apparently equally undesirable options: either we wait until they are old enough to understand reasons and only then teach them to be moral (at which point it might be too late), or we teach them to be moral when they are still very young, when we must inculcate those ideals in a way that seems contrary to reason – by indoctrination. This paradox is indeed very old, and I think it has been solved by Aristotle and Dewey, with the theory of the acquisition of habits. When children are too young to be persuaded by reasons, the only way to teach them to be critical is by developing in them the habit of being critical. But because this habit is non-dogmatic – it can be questioned – we avoid indoctrination as much as we possibly can.

Building on the tradition of Socrates, it is possible to offer a theory of doing philosophy that has educational application. In the Greek cradle of Western philosophy, dialogue was the communicative context in which both the practice and the teaching of philosophy took place, as illustrated by the interactions between Socrates and his interlocutors in Plato's dialogues. The 'Socratic method', as it is often called, is a misleading term because it seems to suggest that Socrates had just one method. A closer study of Socrates' behaviour in Plato's dialogues shows a more complicated picture. David H. Calhoun has made such a study (published in his article 'Which Socratic Method?'), and he concludes that the general opinion which identifies the Socratic method with a pedagogy "in which the teacher coaches and cajoles students to take an active role in the learning process by asking probing, leading questions and strategically guiding discussion", is incorrect. Plato's Socrates, as Calhoun explains, showed a range of pedagogical strategies, which makes it more accurate to speak about Socratic methods, in the plural. Calhoun identifies at least two main styles of teaching or pedagogical modes into which all of Socrates' acts can be categorized: transmission and inquiry. By the transmission mode, Calhoun refers to the act of "communicating a body of information ... to another person in a straightforward and unambiguous fashion." By the inquiry mode, Calhoun refers to a pedagogical relationship that "focuses on active learning by the student, and thus requires the teacher to structure the learning process in such a way that the student must take a heightened degree of responsibility for learning."

The transmission mode has a more authoritarian dynamic than the inquiry mode, but there are important similarities underlying them. What these two styles of teaching have in common, Calhoun argues, is that both aim at the same ultimate goal. **As Calhoun puts it:**

"Is there some identifiable object to which all of Socrates' activities are aimed? To what, if anything, does Socrates seek to convert his interlocutors? The best place to begin is with those methods for which Socrates clearly identifies objectives. As he insists, refutation is intended to instill intellectual humility, and to motivate further inquiry into the things that are most important for human life. . . . The same holds true for Socratic exhortation, which reminds interlocutor of the stakes of inquiry, and thus urges on the activity of philosophizing about the most important things."

In other words, the final educational goal of all Socrates' methods is to persuade students of the importance of philosophical inquiry. As Calhoun reminds us, however, this does not mean that Socrates is valuing inquiry "for inquiry's sake, irrespective of its contribution to clarifying how human beings ought to

live.” Rather, the purpose is to use philosophical thinking in order to evaluate one’s society and life. In Calhoun’s words, Socratic methods intend “to seek truths about how to live, but to recognize that these truths, however firmly established by repeated argumentation, are always theoretically corrigible, and thus always subject to ... further inquiry.”

The behaviors that characterize what I have called amateur philosophy are model behaviors that ideally should be found in any academic or scholarly inquiry, not just philosophy: conceptual analysis, identification of assumptions, careful reconstruction of arguments, attentive listening, striving for relevance, self-correction, and so forth. The reason why I call this kind of education philosophical is that philosophy is the paradigmatic activity (but certainly not the only one) that utilizes a critical, creative, and careful style of thinking. As Martha Nussbaum suggests in her article ‘Public Philosophy and International Feminism’, “philosophy in our culture has high standards of rigor and refinement in argument; debates on related issues in other professions often seem sloppy by comparison.” In the educational environment that I am envisioning, students who are exposed to philosophical education share the abilities and dispositions ideally possessed by philosophical inquirers. Education is philosophical, then, to the extent that it is fundamentally dialogical, though in a wider sense – which might mean, for example, accepting some forms of lecturing as dialogical, provided that the instructors engage in self-correction and encourage students’ reactions and questions. Pierre Bourdieu once famously protested (in Acts of Resistance) that “the logic of political life, that of denunciation and slander, ‘slogonization’ and falsification of the adversary’s thought”, had permeated all discourse, even academic, instead of having “the logic of intellectual life, that of argument and refutation,” to be exported to public life. Philosophical education aims at this latter goal.

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Vice-Minister for Education of Ecuador, This article first appeared in *Philosophy Now* magazine.

“The debate over whether philosophy should play a mandarin or public role has been a contentious one throughout American intellectual history. In the hands of thinkers like Sidney Hook and John Dewey, philosophy turned its attention “from the problems of philosophers toward the problems of men,” as Dewey wrote in “Reconstruction in Philosophy” (1920). After the Second World War, the mainstream of American philosophy became reclusively “analytic,” orienting itself around the study of logic, mathematics and the philosophy of science, while maintaining only a tenuous connection to the world at large. With John Rawls’s “A Theory of Justice” (1971), academic philosophy initiated a wary rapprochement with its more socially engaged past, using the analytic idiom to address age-old questions of justice. Martha Nussbaum’s work has played an important part in this revival, as she has extended Rawls’s liberal insights to examine questions of gender, race and international development. She insists that philosophy be rigorous and, above all, useful. Whereas Ludwig Wittgenstein once compared philosophers to garbage men sweeping the mind clean of wrongheaded concepts, Nussbaum believes they should be “lawyers for humanity” – a phrase she borrows from Seneca, her favourite Stoic thinker.” Robert Boynton

SMALL TALK

I recently found myself sitting across a table from a stranger, chewing awkwardly in silence. It was a familiar scenario: a hole-in-the-wall sandwich shop with not enough tables and me sitting alone, assenting readily when an older woman asked if she could share my premium slice of real estate. She sat down and we both began to eat, eyes studiously averted— quickly, the silence became unbearable. Lovely day out, isn’t it, she ventured. Oh yes, I agreed enthusiastically. Perfect temperature, and sunny too. Just beautiful. This was talk, yes, a verbal exchange between two interlocutors—*but it was small talk*.

The weather has a long-standing monopoly on the small talk market, and it’s not hard to see why. What we’re searching for in this kind of conversation is linguistic grease to oil the gears of social interaction. With acquaintances we can assume a certain shared pool from which to draw conversational topics, but with strangers about whom we know nothing, the weather is our old faithful, always ready to be enlisted in action. Of course, the perfect obviousness of the weather is why it’s also the ultimate sign of banality. Samuel Johnson famously observed in 1758 that “when two Englishmen meet, their first talk is of the weather; they are in haste to tell each other, what each must already know, that it is hot or cold, bright or cloudy, windy or calm.” And for the German Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher,



the art of interpretation was defeated in the face of Wettergespräche, weather-talk, with its endless repetitions of what has already been said or what needs no saying at all.

The Oxford English Dictionary dates the first appearance of the term “small talk” to eighteenth-century British Parliamentarian Lord Chesterfield’s Letters to His Son, a collection of pedagogical nuggets dispensing wisdom on a comprehensive range of topics, as befits a book with the subtitle “On the Fine Art of Becoming a Man of the World and a Gentleman.”

In a letter from 1751, Lord Chesterfield informs his son that “there is a sort of chit-chat, or small talk, which is the general run of conversation at courts, and in most mixed companies. It is a sort of middling conversation, neither silly nor edifying; but, however, very necessary for you to become master of.” At its best, he goes on, such talk turns on the public events of Europe, but more frequently it concerns subjects like the clothing of the troops of different princes, the marriages and relations of “considerable people” and the magnificence of balls and masquerades. It may have fallen from “sort of middling” to definitively small, but in the transition to its contemporary form—“Did you see Lady Gaga’s meat dress?”; “No way, they broke up?”; “Crazy party on Friday, huh?”—very little about small talk seems to have changed.

A little small talk before getting down to business is like washing your hands in preparation for a meal. But it can also be a filler that ends up consuming the entire conversation, an endless ritual of hand-washing in which no one actually gets to eat. We’ve all had them—exchanges of meaningful words strung together in well-formed sentences lasting multiple minutes in which, to borrow a line from “Singin’ in the Rain,” nothing has passed between us, just air. This aspect of small talk is undoubtedly the reason it earns our suspicion and contempt. Solicitous inquiries with no desire for an answer, self-evident observations running on a permanent cycle of rinse and repeat—it’s little wonder such discourse is associated with vapidness or falseness.

Exchanging small talk with people we’ve just met may be an unfortunate necessity, but with people we already know, it seems to suggest that they’re people to whom we have nothing to say. And

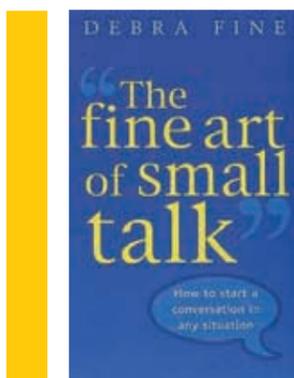
yet if small talk is just talk that’s idle, insignificant and without stated purpose, then surely a substantial portion of the chatter that goes on between couples, friends and (or especially) families must count as small. Banality, however, need not always be insignificant. There’s nothing earth-shattering, usually, about missing the bus, what you ate for lunch or the new dress you just bought, but these are just the mundane titbits that make up so much of the talk between intimates. In fact, such conversations about trivialities

can arguably happen only with those close to us—only the members of our inner circle do we presume to burden with the minutiae of our lives.

Idle talk about inconsequential matters between friends may be divided into several varieties. There’s a notable species, for instance, that goes by the name “chewing the fat” or “shooting the breeze” (there is a variation of the latter for the more scatalogically inclined). This type of non-purposeful conversation, made up mostly of freewheeling banter, relies less on its subject matter than what you can do with it, and, usually, how amusing you can be while doing it. A kind of conversational scattiness, the best breeze-shooters and fat-chewers can riff on any topic, the smaller the better—their virtuosity is displayed in the irrelevance of the subject matter to the rapier of their wit. “I love talking about nothing,” said the great talker Oscar Wilde. “It is the only thing I know anything about.”

Of course, as in all forms of speech, more is being communicated than just what is said. However inconsequential the things spoken, we’re also sizing each other up in the act of speaking. Gestures, facial expressions, postural shifts and places of pause are just a few of the examples Erving Goffman cites as communicative non-linguistic aspects of conversation. There is no doubt that we distinguish ourselves at least as much by the manner of our talking as by its content.

It’s unsurprising, then, that the phenomenon of small talk seems to receive interest today primarily from linguists interested in discourse analysis or pragmatics, and self-help gurus interested in improving your networking skills. The readership of the first camp, if you can believe it, is not large. The



latter group is doing a little better: the go-to tome in this genre seems to be *The Fine Art of Small Talk*, by the conveniently named Debra Fine. She provides a helpful list of icebreakers you can memorize (but at your own peril, I have to note, since they include prompts like, “If you could replay any moment in your life, what would it be?”—a question that must surely count as at

least “middling” talk). Another source of wisdom on this matter, a networking expert named Susan RoAne who, according to her website, is a Mingling Maven® and can teach you to be one too, advises adhering to the maxim: “Be bright. Be brief. Be gone.” The talent of ready utterance has long been a virtue, and in a way it wouldn’t be too hard to trace a line—sloping downward, for a number of reasons—from Lord Chesterfield’s epistolary advice to latter-day “conversation consultants” like the author of *Goodbye*

to Shy, Leil Lowndes, who promises breezily to turn you from a “shy” to a “sure.”

Although a sometime topic of instruction, small talk, as is clear by its very name, possesses no great stature among the arts of conversation. No one, after all, aspires to banality. So we wield our scorn for vacuous chatter like a strand of garlic, warding off the contaminating musk of inauthenticity. The allegiance to high-mindedness and substance that most of us have carefully displayed at one time or another was summed up in a recent New Yorker cartoon depicting a dinner table in ancient Greece, where a father admonishes his son: “If you don’t have anything profound to say, don’t say anything at all.” It’s no coincidence that this cartoon is set in antiquity, at the birth of Western philosophy. As a group, philosophers have been the most vocal critics of empty chatter. It wouldn’t be hard, in particular, to imagine that dinner table scene taking place chez Martin Heidegger. His 1927 *Being and Time* offers an analysis of *Gerede*, translated as “idle talk,” which forms probably the best-known philosophical critique of this phenomenon.

Heidegger’s remarks arise in the context of an investigation into our everyday way of being. Let me report the results upfront: our everyday being is resoundingly inauthentic. Instead of a genuine self-relation, we allow ourselves in daily life to be determined by “das Man,” the neutral, impersonal “they”—not any particular person or group of people, but the murky, anonymous subject of formulas like “so they say” or “people often think.” “We enjoy ourselves and have fun the way they enjoy themselves. We read, see, and judge literature and art the way they see and judge ... we find ‘shocking’ what they find shocking.” At this point, no one will be surprised to discover that Heidegger wrote much of *Being and Time* while sequestered in a hut on the edge of the Black Forest.

“Idle talk,” correspondingly, is the inauthentic everyday mode of language, the indistinct chatter of anonymous “people” (the founders of Twitter knew what they were about when they named it). It shouldn’t be understood pejoratively, Heidegger is quick to claim, because idle talk is the first way that things are made intelligible to us, especially things we aren’t acquainted with or haven’t experienced ourselves. In addition to small talk, *Gerede* for Heidegger also includes forms of discourse we wouldn’t consider diminutive at all, such as those in academic philosophy departments. But what all statements of idle talk share, from platitudes about the weather to the free-will problem, is that they offer up their basic terms as already known, already understood, and in so doing make us forget to attend to the things themselves.

We become wrapped up instead in the *idées reçues* that circulate around the object, taking for granted what’s said about it, then repeating

and disseminating these as self-evident truths that become ever more authoritative the more they’re repeated: “things are so because they say so.” *Rede* is speech, and *Gerede* is literally that which has been spoken, formulas and clichés with no author or origin, which we toss to one another like so many balls in a circle—Heidegger calls idle talk “gossiping, or passing the word along.” It’s not intentionally deceptive like, say, swift-boating, but in this vast social game of broken telephone, the results of all the passing along can be equally misleading. In contrast, the authentic mode of being of discourse is defined in terms of the “essential possibilities” of “keeping silent” and “reticence.”

“Passing the word along” certainly seems to constitute the major activity of 24-hour cable news networks, not to mention what passes as political analysis. With ever less centralized seats of authority and canons of legitimation, discourse may be believed against all evidence if it’s just repeated enough. Technology now circulates words and images at previously unimagined velocities, and if the internet has enabled everyone to have their say, it has also made it easier than ever to say less while speaking more. Think of all the linking, reposting and retweeting that make up so much of the chatter online, not to mention the status updates and IMs that have made us privy to previously unimagined banalities in each other’s lives (it turns out that we do presume to burden more than just intimates with our daily minutiae). More troubling is the fact that in a framework where everything is pre-digested and already-understood, comprehension is presumed to be a matter of course rather than something to be achieved after careful thought (if at all). Is it any surprise, then, that there seems to be less and less space for ideas that are demanding or difficult? And that such ideas increasingly seem, by virtue of their very difficulty, simply wrong?

Small talk in our daily lives may be far less insidious than the circulation of hearsay on Fox News, but for Heidegger both amount to idle talk or linguistic inauthenticity. Certainly the amount of recycling that goes on in small talk would make Greenpeace proud. Its stock in trade is the endless circulation of platitudes we don’t really mean and that themselves mean nothing—talk that’s suitable to everyone and distinctive of no one. Grammar may generate a near infinite set of sentences, but this doesn’t mean talk is novel in the same way. “We draw on a limited compendium of pat utterances,” Goffman reminds us. Make no mistake: small talk is idle talk, just a little smaller.

But the critique of the inauthenticity of our everyday speech may also provoke a distinct prick of discomfort. Idle talk encourages the public proliferation of the formulas that it passes around, Heidegger writes, because it encourages the idea that everyone can have access to the comprehension of everything. But the repertoire of pre-formulated sayings is also a common linguistic bank that affords us immediate access to public meanings. Talk that

“anyone can snatch up” allows us to speak with facility in our everyday lives. If we had to rewrite Shakespeare every time we opened our mouths, it’s doubtful any words would come out.

Heidegger is not unaware of this. Everything that gets circulated in idle talk, all the pat formulas and conventional wisdoms, are just part of the “thrownness” (one of his most vivid neologisms) that defines the human condition: the fact that we always find ourselves thrown into an already-interpreted world. “All genuine understanding, interpreting and communication and new discovery come about in [idle talk] and out of it and against it.” In no case are we untouched by the way things have been previously and publicly understood. In no case are we set before “an open country of a ‘world-in-itself’” to be encountered with virgin eyes. And yet for all this, the true form of talk for Heidegger can never be idle.

The valorization of silence and condemnation of chatter has a long philosophical tradition. “Wise men speak because they have something to say; fools because they have to say something,” Plato reportedly claimed. But taciturnity, the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski argues, is in many cultures a sign not just of unfriendliness but of bad character. The opposite of small talk isn’t big talk, but no talk; not meaningful conversations about the infinitude of the private man, but the potential hostility of dead air. We find the silence of others alarming rather than reassuring, Malinowski observes, and breaking silence with companionable words is the first act in establishing links of fellowship; empty pleasantries are required “to get over the strange and unpleasant tension which men feel when facing each other in silence.” In this analysis, “beautiful day out” is just the evolved form of “look, I’m putting down my machete.”

Drawing on his ethnographic field studies in Papua New Guinea, Malinowski identifies the type of language used in “free, aimless social intercourse” by the term “phatic communion.” Prevalent in “European drawing-rooms” no less than “savage tribes,” such talk takes place when a number of people sit together over a village fire at the end of a day, “or when they chat, resting from work, or when they accompany some mere manual work by gossip quite unconnected with what they are doing.” We tend to think of linguistic communication as a meaningful transmission of thoughts from a speaker to a hearer, but “inquiries about health, comments on weather, affirmations of some supremely obvious state of things—all such are exchanged, not in order to inform, not in this case to connect people in action, certainly not in order to express any thought.” Instead, Malinowski suggests, the function of phatic communion touches on “one of the bedrock aspects of man’s nature in society”: our fundamental need for the presence of others, “the well-known tendency to congregate, to be together, to enjoy each other’s company.”

With all due respect to Schleiermacher, *Wettergespräche* might be the best example of small talk’s potential to express sociality. As Virginia Woolf

makes clear in a passage from her late novel *The Waves*, there is no greater democratizer than the weather. “The fine rain, the gentle rain, poured equally over the mitred and the bareheaded with an impartiality which suggested that the god of rain, if there were a god, was thinking, Let it not be restricted to the very wise, the very great, but let all breathing kind, the munchers and chewers, the ignorant, the unhappy ... and also Mrs. Jones in the alley, share my bounty.” Our lovely-day-outs and yes-isn’t-it’s assure one another of at least one thing we all share. However diverse the forms of our experience, we are, all of us munchers and chewers, indiscriminately subject to the vagaries of the skies.

Lest this point seem too humanistically utopian, let me bring things down to ground. “A fine thing to get up on stilts: for even on stilts we must ever walk on our legs! And upon the highest throne in the world, we are seated, still, upon our arses.” That’s Montaigne at the end of his long, rambling essay, “On Experience.” He’s not talking about the weather, of course, but the sentiment isn’t dissimilar to Woolf’s, if we throw a sprinkling of precipitation and a splash of pathetic fallacy into the mix. The rain that falls indifferently on the very wise and the very great, the ignorant and the unhappy, and also Mrs. Jones in the alley, we could say, serves to remind us of both the inescapability and the universality of our seats.

My best friends and I often catch ourselves talking about the weather, especially if we live far apart. I say “catch” because as soon as we realize it, we stop self-consciously, almost guiltily, as if each of us wants to reassure the other that our friendship hasn’t come to that. But inquiries about the climate where the other person lives are an expression of care, a signal of wanting to know what it feels like where the other person is. These questions and comparisons—“It’s been raining here for days. No, really? The sun’s been out here all week”—manifest curiosity not about the actual tempers of distant skies, but about the interior weather of the people who live beneath them. In a recent *3 Quarks Daily* piece entitled “What We Talk About When We Talk About the Weather,” Alyssa Pelish speculates similarly about the empathy that can be coded in redundant observations about the temperatures outside, poignantly relating her father’s habitual practice of checking the forecast in the faraway cities where his children lived.

For Heidegger, a crucial aspect of the human mode of being is that we find ourselves not just thrown into a world, but thrown into a world that we share with others. By his own logic, then, we could understand small talk as an affirmation of our collective thrownness, even if for him it always remains inauthentic. In this sense, it’s a way of continually responding to the perfectly justified complaint of children, I didn’t ask to be born. The content of idle chatter may be empty, but through it we affirm to each other that out of the existential catapult and across the range of possible worlds, we’ve landed on our arses, all of us, in this one.

If this truth has any profundity, it has at least as much banality, and double the amount of self-evidence. Is it any wonder, then, that we're constantly communicating it to each other not by weighty argument or the authentic mode of keeping silent, but by the inconsequential chatter of the everyday? In making observations about "what is perfectly obvious" with strangers, or idly shooting the breeze with friends, we simply employ the appropriate tool for the job. It may be hard, living in such close proximity to one another, to find reprieve from unsought or unwanted talk of all kinds—cell phones, for one, have made imposed eavesdropping a fact of modern life—but if we restrict speech to the profound, the serious or even the meaningful, we impoverish it.

Any defense of small talk is difficult to mount today because we are obviously undergoing an erosion of big talk—serious discussion of complicated ideas and events—in our public discourse. But if much of what masquerades as big talk turns out to be small, it doesn't follow that small talk is the enemy. If talking is a fundamental human propensity, we should attend to its different forms, taking care to distinguish between them, serving as they do such different functions. There should be more real, big talk. But perhaps there should also be more small talk. It is, after all, the first means by which we herd animals paw the ground around each other and tentatively join our solitudes.

"Throughout the Western world it is agreed that people must meet frequently, and that it is not only agreeable to talk, but that it is a matter of common courtesy to say something even when there is hardly anything to say"—this is C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards in *The Meaning of Meaning*, cited by Malinowski in his essay. A similar sentiment is expressed in a defence of gossip from 1821: "Why do men associate? Some say it is owing to our weakness, and our wants, but it would be more correct to attribute it to the delights afforded us by the sound of the human voice." And over a century and a half later, talking about her observations of chat-rooms dedicated to the Furby, the electronic pet that swept the late Nineties, MIT sociologist Sherry Turkle speculates that "the extraordinary popularity of the seemingly extraordinarily banal chats has to do with people experiencing the pleasures of the feel of talk." The delights of the human voice, the pleasures of the feel of talk—it seems there's something to be said for talking for the sake of talking. Small talk may be speech when there's nothing to say, but what we're expressing is our need to talk regardless. Which reminds me: lovely day out, isn't it?

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SHALL WE DANCE —JAPANESE STYLE



Masayuki Subo: the director of the popular movie, "Shall We Dance?" explains about the difficulties of bringing his Japanese movie to American audiences, in spite of the communication differences between the two cultures. Subo says that, when he had finished making the movie, he had no idea how popular it would become world-wide.

A married man (Koji Yakusho) is attracted to a woman (Tamiyo Kusakari) and is drawn towards her through their mutual interest in ballroom dancing. The movie displays a balanced combination of Japanese culture with a universal theme of middle age life and love of dance and music.

Definitely an enjoyable, humorous and convincing film about the power of human desire and the inter-relationships and needs of men and women and the way love affairs transcend all of our cultural diversity.

For a detailed review of this award winning film visit: http://www.academia.edu/381165/CROSS-CULTURAL_STUDY_OF_A_MOVIE_SHALL_WE_DANCE_

Shall We Dance: available now on DVD

OUR AESTHETIC CATEGORIES: ZANY, CUTE INTERESTING

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These are the issues that animate the work of the literary critic and poet Sianne Ngai. In 2005 she published *Ugly Feelings*, a study of "minor" states of feeling and how they have been shaped and animated by the commercial culture around us. Rather than thinking about emboldening, triumphant feelings of anger, joy or faith, for example, she wrote of "envy" and "boredom," what it means that these feelings are so ambient and natural to us nowadays. In her new book:

Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting

Sianne considers how those feelings help us form judgments about the aesthetic world, how we know to describe something as "interesting" or adorable (or, worse yet, "adorkable"). What does our critical vocabulary say about our present time? Is there a broader context for the conversational readymade "That's interesting ..."?

At first, talking about aesthetic experiences can seem like a dreary, specialized kind of thing. But these conversations are always about so much more than describing pretty or pleasurable things. For instance, what is the difference between beauty and the sublime? While this distinction might not strike us as particularly pressing, the two categories are suggestive of radically different ways of understanding the world, and the question—one wrestled with by figures like Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant—contains the anxieties of its time. Beauty is recognition, mastery, a scale that we can comprehend; the sublime remains mysterious, metaphysical, difficult to take in all at once. To speak of beauty and the sublime, then, is to have a conversation on rational judgment and faith.

Our Aesthetic Categories, though, argues on behalf of aesthetic experiences that aren't

Most of us read or look at art in order to feel something—to experience sensations perhaps unavailable to us in everyday waking life. But it's not just our feelings. Encountering the visions of the past, we also begin to acquire a sense of how people used to feel as well. Perhaps they lived in more interesting times, where every plot moved deathward or toward maudlin ends. Or maybe their works deadpan an aloof, utterly demystified view of the world, where the only way one feels anything at all is in short, intense bursts of euphoria. Nothing seems more intimate or idiosyncratic than our feelings, of course, but what we allow ourselves to feel is shaped by the culture around us, and art indexes how those in the past understood the scope of their imagination.

quite so awe-inspiring or rare. Sitting before your computers or walking the streets of your town, you don't encounter beautiful things as frequently as you do interesting, momentarily arresting ones—and as for the sublime, when was the last time you experienced catharsis? Instead, Ngai considers our "minor" aesthetic experiences, the ones that make up our day. The zany, cute, and interesting won't stir us to tears or action or a belief in the creator. Rather, these are dashed-off assessments that feel like second nature, given the speed at which things circulate. But these are judgments as rich for unpacking as the beautiful or the sublime—and, in our time and place, more important than ever. Advertising doesn't want to be beautiful or sublime; it wants to be everywhere at once, remembered but not necessarily judged. Hello Kitty and Sonic the Hedgehog don't aspire to high art and seem totally disposable. And yet their cuteness survives the market, feeding into a persistent yearning to be able to hold and cuddle and cherish these images that don't actually exist in the real, hyper-fluid world.

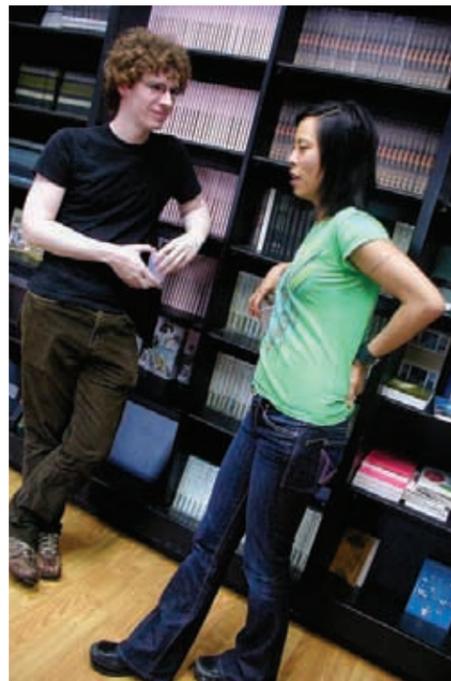
In *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Ngai unpacks these seemingly simple judgments and finds a great deal hidden within. For example, judging something "cute" often "infantilizes" the beholder, as we melt into a puddle of oohs and aahs at the sight of a baby bunny eating a baby carrot. But just as a child might love a doll to tatters, our absorption with "cuteness" is born of both tenderness and aggression. Something cute is something we condescend to, even as we desire to touch and ruffle and hold and possess it.

The category of zaniness is something we recognize in performance—imagine Lucille Ball at her most frazzled, Jim Carrey at the height of his super-elasticity. Ngai's chapter on zaniness is the most historical, as she describes zaniness as a flustered, exaggerated response to the all-at-once

stresses of modern life.

To deem something “interesting” is to promise to return to it. It’s a judgment that doesn’t really say anything, beyond forestalling that judgment, like a (per Ngai) “sticky note” amid an endless wash of data. At its most thoughtful, calling something “interesting” might be an expression of indeterminacy, a placeholder for a future conversation. But more often than not, it’s just conversational filler, something dropped in when you don’t feel like judging at all.

So—what does any of this mean? There have always been things that have struck people as zany, cute, or interesting. The question becomes why these kinds of judgments predominate nowadays—what historical and cultural developments they point to, how the world around us might begin to draw on our unexamined comfort in such categories. Ngai offers Yoshitomo Nara and Takashi Murakami’s paintings of surly adolescents and fanged anime knockoffs as moments when our assumptions around cuteness—the stability of feeling somehow “above” the cute object—melt away, for these images manage to be “helpless and aggressive” at the same time. Does our sense of things being “interesting” relate to our present-day situation, where “change is paradoxically constant and novelty paradoxically familiar”? Do we long to hold and protect cute things



as a way of anchoring ourselves and making the world manageably small? Is the zany workplace comedy our way of obscuring how awful actual work is?

Our Aesthetic Categories isn’t exactly light reading—it’s certainly not as glib as a book on cuteness and zaniness, one that juxtaposes Kant, modernist poetry, Yoshitomo Nara and The Cable Guy, might suggest. It’s almost compulsively thick with references. But it’s the type of book that contains ideas that are broadly provocative, even for the “merely interested.” It is one of the most useful guides to the present I’ve read in a while, almost despite itself. It offers a way of thinking about so many forms of present-day self-expression, from the prevalence of first-person writing on the Internet to the “Like/Share”—this cheer of social networks. It helps explain a certain style of art (Tao Lin, for example) that advances on muted, subdued, contingent feelings.

Ngai’s book prepares us to think about these new ways we might feel about these relationships—how, for example, our categories for judgment seem to suggest a diffident, uncertain, ironic feeling about life and its possibilities. Does anyone ever mean it when they say something is “interesting”—or do we all, in art and conversation, merely aspire to be interesting enough? We usually ponder the present condition by considering our consumer choices or modes of self-presentation. But perhaps the line around our imagination starts elsewhere, in those aesthetic experiences that happen on the edge of comprehension. Before we are inventories of symbols and things, we are thinking, feeling people navigating a fluid, ever-changing world—a world where everything is interesting but not much more, where cuteness and zaniness are the only scales available to us when confronted with global vastness.

Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting by Sianne Ngai. Harvard University Press.

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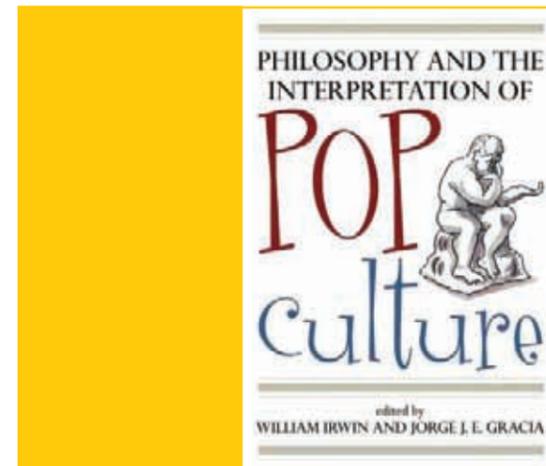
BY WILLIAM IRWIN

THE POP CULTURE MANIFESTO

WILLIAM IRWIN ON PHILOSOPHY AS/AND/ OF POPULAR CULTURE.

We can loosely define popular culture as artifacts and subjects of mass interest and appreciation. Popular culture does not exclude people from appreciating it on the basis of class or formal education. This is perhaps a necessary, though not a sufficient condition for popular culture. ‘Mass interest and appreciation’ is admittedly indeterminate, though hopefully not troublesome. How popular does popular have to be? No fixed answer can be given. One size does not fit all. The British sense of ‘pop’ sheds light on the issue. In this sense Ozzy Osbourne and the Grateful Dead, for example, can be considered pop stars, even though they have cult followings. Cult followings may be large or small, but they are still part of popular culture as I conceive it. As long as we have a general idea of the coverage of ‘popular culture’, this definition will be enough to begin.

PHILOSOPHY AS POPULAR CULTURE?



Philosophy is not popular culture – not an artifact or subject of mass interest and appreciation: but it could be. At various times in the past indeed it was. Arguably rocketry and the space program were also elements of popular culture for a time in America, as dinosaurs and the internet are now. Astronomy and computer programming clearly could become popular culture. So could philosophy. Freud and Einstein were among the People/VH-1 top two hundred popular culture icons. Why not Russell and Sartre?

Consider books such as *The Tao of Pooh*, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, Wittgenstein’s

Poker, *Sophie’s World*, *Socrates Café*, *Plato not Prozac*, *If Aristotle Ran General Motors*, and *The Metaphysical Club*. Arguably, none of these is either philosophy or popular culture, but their very existence shows some popular interest in philosophy. So how can we get people further interested in philosophy? The answer, to paraphrase a popular British philosopher, is we need “a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down.” We need to start with popular culture and use it to bring people to philosophy. This is what I have attempted to do in editing *Seinfeld and Philosophy* and related books. Even if these books are, in some loose sense of the word, philosophy, they are surely not in themselves popular culture. They simply make use of popular culture.

There is now no instance of philosophy that is also popular culture in America and the Anglophone West. Is there any reason to want philosophy as popular culture? One obvious objection is that it would cheapen great treasures. “Books for all the world are always foul-smelling books,” Nietzsche said in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Though it may often be true, only the most cowardly snob could believe Nietzsche’s statement is necessarily true. Actually, there is a long tradition in philosophy of making exoteric the esoteric, carried on by the likes of Socrates, Aristotle, Boethius, and Descartes.

Is there any harm in people knowing a lot about popular culture and relatively little about philosophy? Yes. People hungry for knowledge and wisdom have turned to sources such as astrology, motivational speakers and self-help books. While these sources are of varying value, none matches what philosophy has to offer. Philosophy needs to replace pseudo-philosophy (crystals, astrology, Tarot Cards) as science must replace pseudo-science (often surrounding things such as Big Foot, Loch Ness, UFOs, and other paranormal phenomena). Pseudo-philosophy, like pseudo-science, is attractively packaged and readily available. So philosophy needs similar packaging and availability if it is to compete.

Part of the difficulty in interesting people in philosophy is that it deals in abstractions. Of course, so do physics and mathematics; but people more readily see the payoff for studying math or physics, with their clear applications to technology that makes life easier and supposedly, better. The value of living the examined life through the pursuit of philosophy is much more difficult to demonstrate than the technological and pecuniary payoff of studying science. Still, for the benefit of the individual, although not everyone needs to be a scientist, ideally everyone should be scientifically literate. Similarly, though not everyone needs to make a vocation of formal philosophical study, ideally everyone should be philosophically literate, having a sense of the history and questions of philosophy. Citizens of a democracy would be better citizens for having a knowledge of philosophy, as it teaches them to think critically and encourages them to dissent

responsibly. Unenlightened elected officials will never see it as in their best interest to encourage the popular study of philosophy, so philosophers must take the message to the people. To sample Chuck D of Public Enemy, we have to rock the bourgeoisie and the boulevard. Philosophy as popular culture would be of tremendous service in this regard, and such a democratization of philosophy need not be dumbing down. Popular science is not necessarily pseudo-science. In fact, it rarely is, as magazines such as Popular Science demonstrate. Most popular science simply explains scientific theories and discoveries sans mathematics. Of course popular science risks oversimplifying and misrepresenting the science; but that is a much lesser risk than depriving the public of a comprehensible account. Similarly, popular philosophy does not have to be pseudo-philosophy, as Philosophy Now attests, for instance. To democratize philosophy is not necessarily to dumb it down, but to make it available in some form for all. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the lives of Socrates and Buddha, or the thoughts of Aristotle and Descartes, were better known as a result of being related in pop cultural forms? Though not a panacea, such sources would not only inspire philosophical musing but would foster skeptical, critical thinking. And by starting with children we have a greater chance of interesting future generations of adults in philosophy. The increased interest in Philosophy Cafés is a good sign.

The fact is that currently neither popular science nor popular philosophy is popular culture – not a subject of interest to the masses – and we may not realistically hope for this. But we may not need philosophy as popular culture. We might be satisfied with increased and increasing popular awareness of and interest in philosophy. And all that may be necessary for that is the successful combination of popular culture and philosophy.

PHILOSOPHY AND POPULAR CULTURE

The most neglected part of Plato's celebrated allegory of the cave is the escaped prisoner's return. Once he has come to true knowledge in and of the higher world outside the cave of illusions, he is not to remain there, but to return from whence he came to "share the knowledge." This is the duty of the philosophically educated Guardian in Plato's Republic; it is the way of Socrates; and it is the duty of philosophers generally. Plato tells us that the returning ex-prisoner must be prepared to be mocked and persecuted, for he will be talking of a strange and unlikely world. What's worse, he will appear to be psychologically damaged, as he will no longer be able to see the shadows on the wall as clearly and significantly as he once did. How then is he to succeed in conveying his message? Plato offers little hope that he will. For a more hopeful answer we must turn to Socrates, who, despite losing his life to the cave-dwellers, was able to communicate with some of them.

Did Socrates start off talking about a higher level of reality? Of course not. He met his interlocutors where they were, often using agricultural analogies, and references to Greek culture – commonly known at the time, the stuff of scholars today. He then gradually led them from what they knew or thought they knew to higher knowledge.

Socrates' example makes clear that one must not only return to the cave, but learn to see the shadows again, in order to tell the prisoners about the world outside in terms of the shadows the prisoners see. They are unlikely to understand or even listen if the message is delivered any other way. Those who criticize people for being immersed in popular culture but show them no way out and provide no motivation to seek one, are like escaped prisoners who simply sneer at those still stuck in the cave, haranguing and ridiculing them. Why would they listen?

Jeremiads aside, popular culture and philosophy is like a bike with training wheels. The idea is to become comfortable enough to no longer need the support. We kick away the ladder once we have ascended. Popular culture and philosophy is akin to a philharmonic orchestra performing Beatles songs. People will come to the philharmonic who might not otherwise: they'll enjoy it; and some, who would not have done so otherwise, will come back to hear Beethoven.

Another example is Shakespeare's play, *Much Ado About Nothing*, recently adapted by Joss Whedon for the silver screen. In this black and white version the costumes, the sets and the voices anchor the play in a pop-cultural dimension where it sparkles effortlessly

THERE IS A PRAGMATIC, AMERICAN SPIRIT IN USING POPULAR CULTURE TO SPREAD PHILOSOPHY.

IT WORKS.

It is not just that we can or may, but that we should and must bring philosophy to the public in terms they will know and find attractive and interesting – not for the sake of joining the crowd in the cave, but for the sake of showing them the way out. Willie Sutton was a criminal mastermind, a genius of sorts. Once asked, "Willie, why do you rob banks?" he replied pragmatically, "Because that's where the money is." Why should a philosopher write about popular culture? Because that's where the people are. And as the goal is to bring the prisoners from the shadows to the light, so the goal is to bring the public from popular culture to philosophy. In his controversial book *Cultural Literacy*, E.D. Hirsch contends that there are certain pieces of cultural information that "every American needs to know" to communicate effectively and comprehend others. I contend that this can be extended to the realm of pop culture. The idea of adding pop cultural literacy to cultural literacy may seem contrary to the intentions of the father of intentionalism, but it is not. Hirsch never intended cultural literacy to be a conservative notion, despite its embrace by political conservatives. Hirsch duly recognizes and accepts that the shared body of knowledge is not stable, but changing.

Like it or not, good or bad, popular culture is the common language of our time, and knowledge of popular culture has become necessary for effective communication.

Assuming that like politicians, philosophers have a vested interest in using popular culture to reach the public, what is the proper use of popular culture for this purpose? It is the same as the proper use of literature, which is to open the imagination and to aid philosophical reflection by providing vivid examples, as Peter Jones argues well in *Philosophy and the Novel*. Martha Nussbaum has argued for the importance of literature in theorizing ethics. Good literature may be more helpful than bad literature or shallow pop culture in displaying the intricacy of moral problems and moral reasoning, but not always and not necessarily. There is a virtue in appealing to what is commonly known; what is not great literature or fiction can still be a great example. Metaphysics, epistemology, and other areas of philosophy have been

generally neglected, but they too benefit from the use of literature – particularly science fiction and other popular culture. Thought experiments have long been valued in philosophy, and popular culture can supply us with thought experiments that are sometimes less contrived than those cooked up by philosophers. Certainly they tend at least to be more entertaining and better known, sparking thought and argument. People are often very knowledgeable in very sophisticated ways about their favorite aspect of popular culture, whether it be comic books or rugby. This can be used to lead them to sophisticated thinking about philosophy.



PHILOSOPHY OF POPULAR CULTURE

Dictionaries and encyclopedias of philosophy and aesthetics have no entry under 'philosophy of popular culture'. Although 'philosophy and popular culture' may some day be worthy of an entry, the addition of 'philosophy of popular culture' will not be necessary. We could for practical purposes have a 'philosophy of popular culture', but that would likely have the undesirable consequence of perpetuating the distinction between the high and the popular. There are questions for the study of popular art that might come under the heading of 'philosophy of popular culture', such as the nature of fictional worlds, or of expression and interpretation; but these are just the same methodological questions and issues raised by aesthetics generally and by the philosophy of literature, painting, theater, film, music, etc more specifically. Questions raised by pop cultural non-artistic phenomena, such as rugby and fast food, can be studied under the headings of philosophy of sport or philosophy of food.

Let's close with a note of caution: a 'philosophy of' is not for the public but for the academic. The surest way to lose a comedy fan's attention is to discuss the philosophy of comedy. So too the surest way to lose the general populace's attention is to talk about philosophy of popular culture, if there even is such a thing. And if there is, I suspect its only unique question is the one we began with: What is popular culture?

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BY EU CAFE

SHORT STORY

I can't really explain it myself, why I find myself sitting more and more often in the most un-alluring café in Brussels, in the "Berlaymont" building, on the ground floor of the headquarters of the European Commission. Not that there aren't any other eateries in the city. There are even very good ones. Brussels' gastronomy can't be praised highly enough.

But I sit more and more often in this cafeteria, from which it's not possible to carve out a coffee house essay to save one's life. No table service; the visit begins standing in the queue at the bar. The employees of the outsourced operating company cash in uneven sums at the till: 1.03 Euro for a cappuccino. A little poster pricks the conscience of the guest on each visit, this time for the "EU Sustainable Energy Week".

The cafeteria's clientele is pedigree. EU officialdom meets here, very formally dressed and conducting a restrained rational discourse. So I was pretty excited when I once observed an encounter which looked like jiggery-pokery to me. It even had a little of the smell of sex about it.

In general, the café chat is of a kind one would gladly ignore. "Basically, what the commission does", I hear in front of me. From behind, "Communicating with the citizens" reaches my ears.

The one time I eavesdropped with curiosity, I was sitting by the terminating glass front. I was looking into the crook of the Berlaymont building's arm, into an empty, paved courtyard, with bare little trees and light shafts. In the background the LEX glass palace terminated; grey sky. The only breath of fresh air in the grey glass, silvery prospect was the outline of the neoclassical "Résidence" palace: lacerated, threadbare, brown.

Perhaps I sit more and more in this café because its totality appeals to me. However much you strain, you see nothing but EU.

It was about three, the cafeteria was half empty. I had often seen my hero there. He was a small, rotund spectacle-wearer in a suit, over 50. He looked a bit like Elton John, but without the accessories.

The heroine was under 30 and quite pretty. She had braided her blonde hair, she was wearing numerous silvery bangles and her fingernails were painted red. I had never seen a woman with red nails in the Commission cafeteria before. The fingernails alone had the look of sin itself in the midst of the orderly office folk.

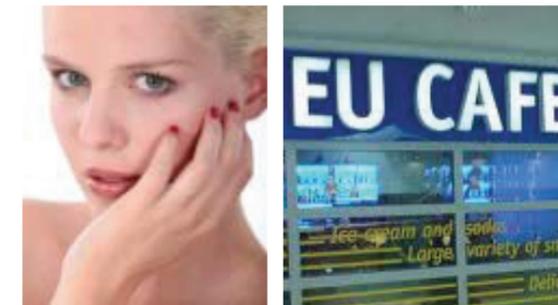
He and she, they were both British. The young woman spoke in a moderate cockney accent. Her frivolous shopping-mall style didn't fit in this place. Did she want to fit in somehow?

The young woman laughed darkly and gutturally. While he sat in front of her like an acolyte, she turned in her revolving chair and put her black-stockinged legs on show. "What about my shoes?" she asked and raised a boot. I was agog. What could she want from the official?

She was drinking cola light through a straw. The can must have been long empty by now. By degrees I discovered the trick. She sucked the cola through the white straw, wetted her lips at best and then let the liquid flow back into the can. She probably did it unconsciously. But the game with the liquid increased the older man's attention.

The gentleman finally got down to the girlie's concerns. "A good CV will get you a foot in the door", he said, "it's all presentation". He also advised her to choose italics, font size 14 for the introduction, font size 12 for the rest. It was no more corrupt than that, not in front of me anyway. And yet it was incredibly hot for relations in that cafeteria.

<http://www.leidenfrost.net/en/intimate-brussels/aktuelle-kolumne.html>



BY ZOE WILLIAMS

THE FINAL IRONY

'Isn't it ironic?'

You hear it all the time - and, most of the time, actually no, it isn't. It's more likely to be: hypocritical, cynical, lazy or coincidental. But what is irony and why did pundits think it would die two years ago, after September 11? Zoe Williams meticulously, sincerely, un-ironically, hunts it down

Taking its name from the Greek: *eironeia* (dissimulation), irony consists of purporting a meaning of an utterance or a situation that is different, often opposite, to the literal one.

Maïke Oergel, Encyclopaedia of German Literature

Irony is a state of affairs or an event that seems deliberately contrary to what one expects and is often amusing as a result.

The New Oxford English Dictionary

Pretty much everything is ironic these days. Irony is used as a synonym for cool, for cynicism, for detachment, for intelligence; it's cited as the end of civilisation, as well as its salvation. Pretty much every form of culture claims to be shot through with it, even (especially) the ones that conspicuously aren't. I read last week that Bruce Forsyth hosting: 'Have I Got News For You,' was an "ironic statement", as if you could ascend into irony just by being old, as you used to with wisdom. I read, too, that it was ironic for Alan Millburn (British Secretary of State for Health) to leave his job to spend more time with his family, when the doctors and nurses under his care don't have that facility; well, it's not ironic, it's just standard-issue self-interest, with maybe a smattering of hypocrisy. I've read claims of an "ironic" interest in Big Brother - nope. Lazy, maybe. Possibly postmodern. Not ironic.

We have a grave problem with this word (well, in fact, it's not really grave - but I'm not being ironic when I call it that, I'm being hyperbolic (overstatement or plausible exaggeration), although the two can amount to the same thing in some instances.) Just looking at the definitions, the confusion is understandable -

In the first instance, rhetorical irony expands to cover any disjunction at all between language and meaning, with a couple of key exceptions (allegory also entails a disconnection between sign and meaning, but obviously isn't synonymous with irony; and lying, clearly, leaves that gap, but relies for its efficacy on an ignorant audience, where irony relies on a knowing one). Still, even with the riders, it's quite an umbrella, no?

In the second instance, situational irony (also known as cosmic irony) occurs when it seems that "God or fate is manipulating events so as to inspire false hopes, which are inevitably dashed"⁽¹⁾. While this looks like the more straightforward usage, it opens the door to confusion between irony, bad luck and inconvenience.

Most pressingly, though, there are a number of misconceptions about irony that are peculiar to recent times.

The first is that September 11 spelled the end of irony.

The second is that the end of irony would be the one good thing to come out of September 11.

The third is that irony characterizes our age to a greater degree than it has done any other.

The fourth is that Americans can't do irony, and we can

The fifth is that the Germans can't do irony, either (and we still can)..

The sixth is that irony and cynicism are interchangeable.

The seventh is that it's a mistake to attempt irony in emails and text messages, even while irony characterizes our age, and so do emails.

And **the eighth** is that "post-ironic" is an acceptable term - it is very modish to use this, as if to suggest one of three things:

- i) that irony has ended;
- ii) that postmodernism and irony are interchangeable, and can be conflated into one handy word;
- or iii) that we are more ironic than we used to be, and therefore need to add a prefix suggesting even greater ironic distance than irony on its own can supply. None of these things is true.

Now, after all that effort numbering and sub-numbering the points, I'm going to deal with them in the wrong order. That isn't ironic, it's just a bit sloppy. There are four important epochs of irony (unless you

count Hegel, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, but to do that, I would need to have read them).

Phase one Socratic irony is simply part of a canon of rhetorical tools devised to distract people from the fact that they've been sitting still listening to hard talk for an awfully long time. The technique, demonstrated in the Platonic dialogues, was to pretend ignorance and, more sneakily, to feign credence in your opponent's power of thought, in order to tie him in knots. This is amazingly prevalent in contemporary social intercourse - every one of us, I'd guess, has a friend who engages in an argument, waits patiently until you've said something really trenchant and probably wrong, then cocks his (or her) head to one side and says, "Do you think that's true?" thereafter pursuing each one of your most ridiculous points and challenging them from a perspective of utter (pretended) ignorance. Weirdly, this is never called irony, even though every other bloody thing that anyone ever says is.

Phase two Romantic irony was framed by Schlegel⁽²⁾ the German philosopher. Here, it became a much more complex philosophical tool, of which the nuts and bolts were that you simultaneously occupied two opposite positions (what you say versus what is real). There were problems with this as a direct path to truth later on, but I'd need a more Socratic grasp of how not to be boring before I could go into them. The point with Schlegel was that irony would give you a divided self, which in turn gives you a multiplicity of perspectives, which is the only way you will unlock the truth of the whole. This romantic (or "philosophical") irony had a great influence on the English Romantic poets - Coleridge's Rime Of The Ancient Mariner, with its commentary running alongside the narrative, divides the perspective (plus, he read Schlegel, so I'm not just making that up).

But irony as part of the British literary tradition doesn't, generally speaking, commence with Romantic irony, but rather with the device that has its roots in Socrates, viz, saying the opposite of what is true in order to underline the truth. So, from this you'd trace a line from Chaucer, through More, Sidney and Milton, arriving at Swift and Austen, where you can see a pleasing bifurcation of irony's literary use. Austen uses irony as a means of being understated. Swift, by contrast, uses irony for polemical purposes, conjuring grotesque images ironically (babies being eaten, mankind enslaved to the morally superior horse) in order to state his case (that the Irish were starving, that humanity was going to the dogs) ever more forcefully.

Phase three Irony as a tool of dissent, a grim but failsafe gag and mainstay of popular culture, took hold during the first world war⁽³⁾. The gross disjunction between patriotic rhetoric and the reality of the war itself led to a widespread use of irony as a means of puncturing deceitful propaganda. Every convention of today's ironic, satirical news forms (from Private Eye, through Viz, to the Onion) has a germ in the Wipers Times, the First World War trench newspaper (established, independently of military

authority, by Captain FJ Roberts of the Sherwood Foresters.) At this point, irony was still purporting to be an overview - to be wading through the mulch of accepted wisdom and exposing its fraudulence. So, for instance, the Wipers Times would print a list of Things That Were Definitely True, and it would contain a proportion of propaganda ("40,000 Huns have Surrendered"), a proportion of enemy propaganda ("The Germans Have Plentiful and Tasty Meats") and a proportion of nonsense ("Horatio Bottomley has accepted the Turkish Throne on condition they make a separate peace"), thus undermining any information coming from anywhere at all (it's interesting that the paper was caustically ironic on the subject of the war itself, but never deviated from the line that home leave was a blessed relief, when, in fact, most soldiers found it stressful and devastating to return to normality after the trenches - there is a limit to how far you can take irony before you have to shoot yourself).

Where irony springs up as a response to being lied to (by authority, or prevailing culture, or whatever), it is still adhering loosely to Chaucer's model - it states the lie in order to expose the lie, and is therefore a route to truth. It has some moral import. It may say "This belief is wrong", but it doesn't say "All belief is wrong". When people call ours the Age of Irony, that's not the kind of irony they are on about.

Phase four: Our age has not so much redefined irony, as focused on just one of its aspects. Irony has been manipulated to echo postmodernism. The postmodern, in art, architecture, literature, film, all that, is exclusively self-referential - its core implication is that art is used up, so it constantly recycles and quotes itself. It's entirely self-conscious stance precludes sincerity, sentiment, emoting of any kind, and thus has to rule out the existence of ultimate truth or moral certainty. Irony, in this context, is not there to lance a boil of duplicity, but rather to undermine sincerity altogether, to beggar the mere possibility of a meaningful moral position. In this sense it is, indeed, indivisible from cynicism. This isn't to say that "truth-seeking" irony has evaporated - many creative forms still use irony to highlight the sheer, grinding horror of pursuits or points of view that are considered "normal" (like The Office, for instance; and much of American literature is masterfully good at employing irony with a purpose - to choose at random, Pastoralia, by George Saunders, Infinite Jest, by David Foster Wallace, anything by Philip Roth, The Corrections, by Jonathan Franzen).

But other strands of media use irony to assert their right to have no position whatsoever. So, you take a cover of FHM, with tits on the front - and it's ironic because it appears to be saying, "women are objects", yet of course it isn't saying that, because we're in a postfeminist age. But nor is it saying "women aren't objects", because that would be dated, over-sincere, mawkish even. So, it's effectively saying "women are neither objects, nor non-objects - and here are some tits!" Scary Movie 2, Dumb And Dumberer, posh women who go to pole-dancing classes, people who set the video for Big Brother Live, people who have Eurovision

Song Contest evenings, Char lie's Angels (the film, not the TV series) and about a million other things besides, are all using this ludic trope - "I'm not saying what you think I'm saying, but I'm not saying its opposite, either. In fact, I'm not saying anything at all. But I get to keep the tits." As Paul de Man pointed out, some-time before FHM, "This does not, however, make it into an authentic language, for to know inauthenticity is not the same as being authentic."⁽⁴⁾. So, we're not the first age to use irony (as some insist), but we are the first to use it in this vacuous, agenda-free and often highly amusing way.

SEPTEMBER 11 AND THE END OF IRONY

Politicians especially (but serious minds of all sorts) dislike this newish twist of irony, since political rhetoric relies on moral framework - they may be spinning, they may be sexing up their evidence, they may be lying straight to our faces as we beseech them not to kill innocent Iraqis for no good reason (as an example), but at least old-fashioned protest waits until it knows it has been lied to before it unleashes its irony. Modern irony ridicules politicians regardless, for their sheer un-ironic-ness in holding a position in the first place.

So, upon the giant disaster, many people were glad to declare irony's end. Gerry Howard, editorial director of Broadway Books, said, "I think somebody should do a marker that says irony died on 9-11-01." Roger Rosenblatt claimed, in an essay in Time magazine, that "one good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony"⁽⁵⁾.

This is striking as the kind of American self-importance that leads people to think they have no sense of irony in the first place. But there is legitimacy in the claim - for a very short time, the event seemed so earth-shattering that there did seem to be an absolute and clear dichotomy between good and evil. Once you've got one of those, then a) the act of seeking the truth through irony is pointless, because the truth is staring you in the face; and b) the postmodern ironic distance that eschews concepts like "good" and "evil" has been trounced. Naturally, irony was back within a few days, not least because of the myriad ironies contained within the attack itself (America having funded al-Qaida is ironic; America raining bombs and peanut butter on Afghanistan is ironic). But even without those ironic features, irony would have resurfaced pretty soon - only a very fresh tragedy can silence it.

The end of irony would be a disaster for the world - bad things will always occur, and those at fault will always attempt to cover them up with emotional and overblown language. If their opponents have to emote back at them, you're basically looking at a battle of wills, and the winner will be the person who can beat their breast the hardest without getting embarrassed. Irony allows you to launch a challenge without being dragged into this orbit of self-regarding sentiment that you get from Tony Blair, say, when he

talks about “fighting for what’s right”. Irony can deflate a windbag in the way that very little else can.

What people usually mean when they yearn for an end to irony is an end to post-modernism. I’m not sure this will ever happen, since it places itself after originality and progress (what comes after the afters? Well, cheese, I guess).

IRONY AND AMERICA

There are a few reasons why we think the Americans have no sense of irony. First, theirs is rather an optimistic culture, full of love of country and dewy-eyed self-belief and all the things that Europe’s lost going through the war spin-dryer for the thousandth time. This is all faith-based - faith in God, faith in the goodness of humanity, etc - and irony can never coexist with faith, since the mere act of questioning causes the faith fairy to disappear. Second, they have a very giving register that, with a sense of irony, would be unsustainable (how can you wish a stranger a nice day with a straight face?). Third, because we think Canadian: Alanis Morissette is American, and she proved some time ago, with her song *Irony*, that she didn’t know what irony meant (this is so ironic - first, because we think we’re the more sophisticated and yet don’t know the difference between America and Canada, second because America sees Canada as such a tedious sleeping partner, and yet Canada is subversively sending idiots into the global marketplace with American accents. Of course, I’m being ironic. Canadian accents are not the same as American ones!)

In fact, this is absolute moonshine, since the consummate and well-documented superiority of US telly over British telly is largely due to their superior grasp of irony (as well as the fact that they have more cash). Take, for instance, the opening sequences of *Six Feet Under* versus the opening sequences of *Casualty* - they both start every episode with a vignette in which a stranger dies a horrible death or suffers a hideous accident. In *Six Feet Under*, this will never be straightforward - the porn star will never die because her silicon implants explode, she will die in some way that could happen to anyone; the wheezing, scared-looking sportsman will turn out to have been just a bit thirsty, while his amazingly strong team-mate will be dying in the background from heat stroke. There’s always some cosmic irony, swiftly followed by ironic dialogue. In *Casualty*, on the other hand - man leaves pub in middle of day; commences dangerous-looking welding job; burns own eye out in drunk accident. Dur.

GERMANS AND IRONY

Not speaking German, nor watching much German TV, nor having read any German literature apart from Bernard Schlink who, let me tell you, is about as ironic as a dog chasing a squirrel, it’s difficult to tell whether or not there’s any truth in the rumour that they have no sense of irony. However, since they invented it (well, they invented Schlegel), it’s more than likely that they’ve got plenty. To anyone who thinks I’m insufficiently bigoted, I have serious doubts about the French.

IRONY IN EMAILING AND TEXTS

Texting is a truly tricky form for the ironist - very brief texts are difficult to make ironic simply because it’s difficult to inject many layers into seven words. However, if you write a very long text, because it’s such a bugger to do, your extra effort suggests a sincerity - an un-dude-like urge to be understood - that sits all wrong with the irony. To get round this, forms like “(!)” and “Not” and “have evolved”, but they’re pretty dumb and basic.

With emails, people with a lot of time on their hands can, obviously, give themselves room to develop an ironic theme, but for people with jobs, e-etiquette demands instant response, which brings you down to the very rudiments of irony - I Love My Boss; I’m Delighted That My Ex Is Going Out With That Attractive Woman; I Really Couldn’t Be More Pleased That You’ve Lost a Stone. Once it’s as bald as that, and you’re without extra signifiers like eyebrows, there is a danger of misunderstanding. However, I think we’re actually more alert to irony than we are to its opposite, sincerity. Take the case of Rena Salmon, who last year shot her husband’s lover, and then texted him to that effect. Her words were, “I have shot Lorna. This is not a joke.” A perfect demonstration of my point (I don’t get many of those) - the first thing you think when you read a text is that it is a joke.

SITUATIONAL IRONY

This article has almost exclusively been about rhetorical irony, which has much more fluidity and variety than situational irony. That does not mean that situational irony is entirely straightforward - often, the appearance that God or Fate was attempting to make you think one thing when another was going to happen is down to your own misreading or wilful

blindness, and therefore isn’t ironic at all. Furthermore, where rhetorical irony can be as simple as saying the opposite of what you mean, cosmic irony is not simply experiencing the opposite of what you thought was going to happen. For instance, if I was having a party, and I thought my dad was going to come, and he didn’t, that wouldn’t be ironic. If, on the other hand, I was having a party and I didn’t want my dad to come, and I spent three weeks working on a brilliant cover story for why he couldn’t come, and then my sister accidentally blew my cover, so I had to invite him anyway, and then, on the way here, he got run over and died - that’s ironic.

I hope he realizes that example was, well, not ironic, but certainly meant with no ill will.

But, whatever (here, with ludic irony, I’m trying to get out of writing a conclusion by affecting the jargon of the slothful teenager. Obviously, I don’t mean “whatever” - I don’t share the disaffected carelessness of the standard “whatever” user. But I’m still getting out of writing a conclusion. To know inauthenticity isn’t the same as being authentic. Or even, just because you ironically know you’re wrong doesn’t make you right).

1.

Jack Lynch, *Literary Terms*. I would strongly urge you not to read any more footnotes, they are only here to make sure I don’t get in trouble for plagiarizing.

2.

‘In it [irony] everything should be all jest and all serious-ness, everything guilelessly open and deeply hidden... It contains and arouses a sense of the indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication. It is the freest of all license, because through it one transcends oneself, but at the same time it is the most prescribed, because [it is] absolutely necessary.’

3.

This is obviously debatable, but Paul Fussell in *The Great War And Modern Memory* made the case compellingly. Truthfully, British irony’s political usage has to be deemed to have started with Swift, alongside Addison and Steele. Oh, go on, disagree with me if you like, see if I care.

4.

Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric Of Temporality*

5.

Both these quotes are from Michiko Kakutani, *Critic’s Notebook: The Age Of Irony Isn’t Over After All*; *Assertions Of Cynicism’s Demise Belie History*



This article first appeared in *The Guardian*.

Zoe Williams has been a columnist on the Guardian since 2000. She was nominated as Columnist of the Year at the Workworld awards and was shortlisted for Feature of the Year for One World Media Awards. She is the author of one non-fiction book, *Bring It On, Baby*, about the politicisation of motherhood.

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