Sages and Cranks: The Difficulty of Identifying First-Rate Philosophers

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§1

Two remarks give the impetus for discussion in this paper. W.V.O. Quine comments that:

> Philosophy has long suffered, as hard sciences have not, from a wavering consensus on questions of professional competence. Students of the heavens are separable into astronomers and astrologers as readily as are the minor domestic ruminants into sheep and goats, but separation of philosophers into sages and cranks seems to be more sensitive to frames of reference. (Quine 1981:192)

Sally Haslanger, on the other hand, suggests that others have more confidence in the possibility of identifying at least those who are *not* first-rate philosophers:

> In graduate school I was told by one of my teachers that he had "never seen a first rate woman philosopher and never expected to because women were incapable of having seminal ideas." (Haslanger 2008:211)

Statistics from around the Anglophone world tell us that women and other groups are not represented in philosophy in proportion to their numbers in the wider population (Ref Stats chapter, this Vol). Attempts to explain this must negotiate difficult questions, including questions about whether there is discrimination at work and if so how it operates; questions about why *women* are underrepresented (including fraught questions about what women are like, how they reason and so on); and questions about why *philosophy* in particular has the gender profile that it does. It is the last of these that I find myself preoccupied with when I attempt to

think through the issue. I find myself asking time and again: *What is philosophy like?* It seems to me that any useful explanation of the gender profile of philosophy must seriously consider this question, as must any strategies for change. It also seems likely that considering this question might reveal ways in which the structure of philosophy could work against others – against non-whites, the disabled, or against some men, for example. I think it is an interesting question anyway, and that it derives additional urgency in light of evidence that philosophy remains predominantly male and white while the gender and racial profiles of many other disciplines have changed more rapidly (Ref. Stats, this vol.)

In this paper I take up just one aspect of this question: how authority figures in philosophy. The two quotes cited at the beginning are both concerned with this – the difficulty of identifying who is credible, and the risk that some people may be denied credibility for the wrong reasons.

The structure of the paper is as follows: In the next section (§2) I give a general account of authority. This draws on both literature on 'practical authority' (political and legal authority) and on 'theoretical authority' (for example on the authority of experts) and aims to identify what the two have in common. I then discuss theoretical authority in more detail, as I take it to be the form of authority that philosophers sometimes have *qua* philosophers.

In the following section (§3), I argue that there are at least *some* situations in which we treat some philosophers as authoritative – for example in the classroom and seminar room. I explore what is unique about such authority in comparison with the authority of academics in other disciplines. Specifically, because philosophy does not seek to explain (only) independently accessible data like the empirical data of the sciences, but also (primarily) the slipperier data of 'intuitions', there are limits to the possibility of independently establishing one's theoretical authority within philosophy that do not exist in other fields. (But this might seem a controversial claim – more on it later). In particular, I argue that there is a risk that some individuals or groups will be marginalized within the discipline for illegitimate reasons.

I then (§4) offer a suggestion for combating this kind of marginalization within philosophy. My suggestion is that we should be doing more than we currently are to explore and articulate the

methods characteristic of philosophy. It is central to my argument that philosophy is recognized as proceeding not only by logic but also by persuasion even along its most rational and science-like branches. I discuss and offer argument for this characterization of philosophy. As such, the methods I recommend that we identify and discuss are not only those of logic and rational argument, but also those of persuasive argument – rhetoric. The idea of explicitly identifying the multifarious methods of philosophy is not an entirely novel idea – I take it that Alan Hájek's work on philosophical heuristics is just such an enterprise. Indeed, Hájek's catalog of methods includes many that look as much like tools of persuasion as of reason, although they may be characterized as both. (Hájek, Forthcoming)

In addition to the suggestion that the methods of philosophy should be collected, discussed, recognized and debated, I also think that our attitude to teaching philosophical skills should be reexamined. In my view, the methods of philosophy – both those that are widely established such as formal logic and critical thinking, and the new ones we articulate through our research efforts – should be taught much more explicitly and thoroughly at the undergraduate level within philosophy programmes. I argue that doing so provides students (not only women but all students) with the resources to establish their authority as *skilled practitioners* of philosophy, and perhaps more significantly, to see themselves as credible philosophers even when others do not immediately recognize them as such.

Finally, I note that there is a tension between treating philosophers as authoritative, and philosophy's role as a discipline that questions claims to authority or expertise. Philosophers are at least as comfortable questioning the assumptions that underpin the authority of 'experts' in various fields as they are claiming authority themselves. In the final section of the paper (§5) I explore ways in which philosophy can remain true to its critical role, given the existence of structures of authority within the discipline. In particular, I argue that it is of great importance to retain an expansive conception of philosophy and the methods that are viewed as legitimate within it. Such methodological pluralism ensures that philosophy remains able to turn a critical eye upon itself.

A distinction is sometimes made between 'practical authority' and 'theoretical authority' (e.g. Waluchow, 1989:48). The former refers to the kind of authority possessed by political leaders and judges – they are individuals whose authoritative commands provide reasons for action. In contrast, the views of those with theoretical authority typically provide reasons for belief, rather than reasons for action.[1] Yet, there is one feature that practical and theoretical authority share. The directives of an individual who has authority give others (those subject to their authority) *reasons* for either action or belief which are independent of any first-order considerations. That is, authorities give those subject to them second-order reasons for action or belief.

However, it is essential to this that the directives given by authorities – whether they are practical or theoretical – *do* answer to first order reasons, or in other words that these directives are justified. For example in his account of legal authority Raz says:

> The normal and primary way to establish that a person should be acknowledged to have authority over another person involves showing that the alleged subject is likely better to comply with reasons which apply to him (other than the alleged authoritative directives) if he accepts the directives of the alleged authority as authoritatively binding and tries to follow them, than if he tries to follow the reasons which apply to him directly. (Raz, 1985:299)

Here the key point is that an authority is really only an authority if their analysis of the relevant first-order reasons is likely to be better than that of people who treat them as an authority.

Similarly, the judgment of someone with theoretical authority is usually based on theoretical considerations relevant to the judgment. So, for example, the views of a historian on the causes of a conflict have been formed on the basis of the primary materials they consulted, such as news

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[1] Of course in some instances beliefs will give rise to reasons for action, but this is indirect. My belief that running the clothes dryer contributes to climate change will only give rise to an action – hanging the clothes on the line to dry – if it is coupled with a desire to reduce my contribution to climate change.

reports of the day, letters and diaries of parties involved, minutes of parliament, details of visits and negotiations between parties. Their extensive familiarity with this relevant material is one reason why they are considered an authority on the topic. When I treat the historian as an authority on the causes of the conflict, I take it that my beliefs on the matter are more likely to be correct if I believe what the historian tells me to believe than they would be if I attempted to make up my own mind. This is because I know that the historian has better knowledge of the first-order considerations, and has more finely honed skills of historical interpretation than I do.

I take it that this account of theoretical authority is neither novel nor radical. When Stephen Turner, for example, says: "The underlying thought is that the 'authority' has at first hand something that others – subjects or listeners – get at second hand," (Turner, 2006:165) I take him to be expressing the same shared feature of political authority and theoretical authority that I have identified.

One way to challenge someone's theoretical authority is to independently evaluate the justificatory reasons for their authoritative opinions. For example I can challenge the historian's account of the causes of the war by becoming familiar with the relevant primary historical sources. If I can systematically demonstrate that based on these sources (or all relevant sources) the historian's account of the causes of the war appears implausible, I will have undermined the historian's claim to authority on the issue. In addition, I will have gone some way towards establishing myself as an authority.

Typically, the body of expert opinion in any field is anchored by a set of facts and the person with theoretical authority exercises a set of abilities in relation to these facts: (1) the authority *knows* the relevant facts or data, or they can collect, identify or generate them; (2) the authority is able to *interpret* the facts or data, using interpretive practices characteristic of the discipline; and (3) they are able to proceed by logical inference to conclusions based on their interpretations of the facts or data.

The first of these will manifest differently in different disciplines. Roughly, in the sciences, the skills are typically those of generating and collecting data; for example by various forms of

experimentation (especially in the physical sciences) or by other methods such as survey (especially in psychology or sociology). In history it is the process of identifying data (selecting relevant documents, for example) or collecting data (transcribing first-person accounts of events or periods). In English literature it is the process of identifying the relevant texts. In linguistics it is the process of observing linguistic behavior.

The second will also manifest differently in different disciplines. Where the data is numerical, interpretation may involve statistical analysis or other mathematical operations such as performing calculations. Where the data is qualitative (for example some kinds of survey results, or interview data) it will involve relevant coding and analysis. In English literature, it will include various modes of literary criticism such as deconstruction, identifying authorial intent, and analyzing the literary form.

The third does not have the same interdisciplinary variation. It is supposed to capture those steps in any argument that are treated as valid, particularly that are treated as taking the theorist validly from a body of interpreted data to their conclusions. I take it that this process is central to philosophy in a way that it is not to other disciplines.

We can distinguish three different sorts of first-order criticism that might apply to an authority corresponding to these three aspects of exercising theoretical authority. It is worth noting that whereas we can challenge someone's authority by demonstrating a weakness in any one of these three areas, in order to *establish* authority on some matter all three must be demonstrated. We do, however, often treat the possession of one of these (in the absence of clear failure with respect to the others) as evidence that the individual has authority in the area. I set the issue of establishing authority aside for now, but it will be significant later when I discuss authority within philosophy.

Corresponding to the first kind of skill, then, I can challenge someone's authority by demonstrating that the data they have ended up with is incomplete, inaccurate or irrelevant to the current question. In the above example, I could argue that the historian had failed to collect complete data (e.g. had ignored sources that pointed towards a different account of the causes of

the conflict); had collected inaccurate data (e.g. had treated as legitimate a set of forged documents); or had collected irrelevant data (e.g. had consulted material concerning parties who did not play a significant role).

Corresponding to the second kind of skill, I can challenge someone's authority by criticizing their interpretive methods. Perhaps a medical researcher has set their threshold for significance too low, so that inconclusive data is interpreted as showing significant trends. Or, to return to the above example, I might criticize the historian for giving more weight to official documents than to diaries and letters. It is worth noting that it may ultimately be a matter of intuition, or 'feel' which interpretive methods a theorist selects. For example, there may be no objectively right answer about which kinds of sources the historian should accord more weight in identifying the causes of the conflict. Nevertheless, there will be *some* interpretive methods that are out of the running. Perhaps more importantly, there is space to discuss and defend those methods used even in the absence of any criteria against which the 'right' methods can ultimately be identified.

Corresponding to the third kind of skill, I can challenge someone's authority by pointing to invalid steps of reasoning that they have taken. Sometimes I may be able to demonstrate such invalidity formally, by using (as philosophers sometimes do) the apparatus of formal logic. More often, however, I will rely on informal means of identifying such invalid steps. Suppose the historian's sources reveal that a highly offensive personal letter was sent from one party to the other immediately prior to the latter initiating the conflict. On the basis of the timeline alone I cannot validly claim that the letter played a *causal* role in the beginning of the conflict. All I can establish is that the letter did indeed arrive immediately prior to the first strike. Further evidence will be needed to support the stronger claim.

Someone who is unfamiliar with a particular field will not be able to evaluate the claims of an authority in that field based on an appeal to first-order considerations of these kinds. However, non-experts *do* need to be able to evaluate the *claims to authority* of those with whose subjects they are unfamiliar. For example, when consulting an authority on climate change, bushfires, cyclones or mining safety, the media or government must decide who is an authority in the field. When they do so, they appeal to indicator-properties. In the example we have been considering,

such indicator-properties might include the following: the individual is a notable historian at a good university; they have published books on the topic which are highly regarded by their peers; and they are able to answer questions on the topic in a way that suggests they have done more than memorise a script. Some indicator properties, such as those I have just listed, will be treated by almost everyone as indicative of theoretical authority in a field. Others will be more tenuous. But it is important to note that non-experts are bound to trust indicator properties when identifying those who have theoretical authority, because they do not possess the relevant knowledge and/or skills to evaluate their claims directly. Someone is *credible* when they are treated by others as an authority on the subject, due to possessing the relevant indicator properties for theoretical authority in that domain.

Everything I have said about theoretical authority, thus far, assumes that someone – the authority – has access to first-order considerations that justify the claims they make. The preceding discussion assumes a kind of nexus involving: (1) the data, as generated, collected or identified by an individual with theoretical authority; (2) an observer or interpreter with theoretical authority; and (3) indicator-properties that allow a non-expert to identify who has theoretical authority, or who is credible. Now here is an important point: someone who has skills and knowledge in a particular field *but is not recognized as such* by others inside or outside of the field, does *not* have authority, because others will not treat their opinions as reasons for belief. That means that having authority involves more than simply being skilled and knowledgeable in the field. It also involves being treated as credible by your peers and by others outside of the field.

Miranda Fricker identifies two ways in which being credible can come apart from being a good interpreter of the facts or evidence:

1. An agent who is knowledgeable about and a good interpreter of the data may not be recognized as such, and will thus lack credibility.
2. An agent who has credibility may in fact not be knowledgeable about, or a good interpreter of, the data, and will thus have *mere credibility*. (Fricker, 1998:167)

When knowledge and credibility come apart in either of these ways, we can ask what the indicator properties are actually tracking (because where the two come apart they are not tracking what they are supposed to track, i.e. knowledge and trustworthiness). Fricker investigates the relationship between indicator properties and power. In simple social situations – think for example of a small group of people who are living in a state of nature – indicators of whether or not someone knows key information such as the location of food and water are likely to track what they are supposed to. However, Fricker argues that in complex societies there is potential for indicator properties to become distant from the abilities that they are indicative of. For example, wealth is required to attend a top private school, and to the extent that the mere fact of having attended a top private school is treated as an indicator-property for credibility (in some domain) there is potential for a mismatch between the indicator property and competence:

> In a significant range of contexts, the position of powerlessness may place one under general suspicion of being motivated to deceive, in a way in which the position of powerfulness does not. Further, powerlessness diminishes one's ability to protest one's trustworthiness – especially if it would be at the expense of the reputation of someone more powerful. (Fricker, 1998:169)

Fricker does not, however, think that credibility tracks power all the way down. She offers a genealogical account of the role of the good informer: at some basic level good informing is a vital social activity that allows humans (as social creatures) to share knowledge about where essentials are to be found, where danger lies, and so on. At this basic level, it is essential that indicator properties track competence and trustworthiness; where they don't there will be direct consequences (e.g. if someone tells you where to find water and they are wrong or have deliberately misled you, this will quickly become obvious). However, as the sorts of things humans know become more complex and abstract, it is much more difficult to ensure that credibility tracks competence and trustworthiness. So the more complex the subject matter (think of the complexity of medicine or the law, for example) or the more abstract the subject matter (think of philosophy) the more chance there is that indicator properties will fail to track competence and trustworthiness, and might instead come to track power.

In the previous section I gave an account of theoretical authority. According to this account, someone is a theoretical authority when their beliefs give others (those subject to their authority) reasons for belief that are second-order reasons in the sense that they do not look to, but replace, first-order considerations based on (for example) relevant evidence. In this section I look at how philosophy fits this account: can philosophers be authoritative *qua* philosophers? I argue that they can, and that we do treat at least some philosophers as authoritative in their capacity as philosophers in at least some contexts. But I point out that exercising theoretical authority in philosophy is different to doing so in other disciplines, largely because it is not obvious that philosophy is anchored by a set of facts that are in any way similar to those that ground work in other disciplines.

There are at least two contexts in which philosophers appear to exercise theoretical authority in their capacity as philosophers. The first is in the classroom. Students treat their lecturers as authoritative both as knowers and as critics. Usually students defer to the lecturer on questions of who said what, and on questions of interpretation. They expect the lecturer to have better knowledge of both the material covered in the course, and the wider context within which this material sits. Students will also usually take critical questions raised by the lecturer more seriously than those raised by other students (see also Hanrahan and Antony, 2005 for a discussion of authority in the philosophy classroom).

These same forms of authority operate between philosophers within the profession. We typically know who in our department is an authority on recent work in philosophy of mind, or epistemology, or Kant. Likewise, we can all think of someone whose questions in seminars we are inclined to take more seriously than those of others, because they have a fearsome reputation for identifying the weak point in an argument. When we treat the fact that Christine Korsgaard has offered a particular interpretation of Kant as a reason for accepting this interpretation, we treat her as an authoritative knower. When we treat the fact that a particular individual has asked

a question as a reason to take it seriously – quite apart from its content – we treat that individual as an authoritative critic.

In the previous section I noted that theoretical authority in a field is typically anchored by a set of facts; and that the person with theoretical authority exercises a set of abilities in relation to these facts. In this section, I apply this account of theoretical authority to philosophy. I argue that philosophy is not anchored as firmly by facts or data as other disciplines. It is therefore not abilities associated with identifying, collecting or generating facts or data that are of central importance in philosophy. Instead, philosophy is characterized largely by abilities of the third kind – those associated with reasoned argument. Two implications of this, I suggest, are (1) that it is particularly difficult to challenge the authority of an established philosophy, or to establish oneself as an authoritative philosopher, because any attempt to do so is not firmly anchored by facts or data in the way it is in other disciplines; and (2) that authority in philosophy is much more firmly attached to the ability to argue rationally and persuasively, than it is to identifying the 'right' answer.

It is widely accepted (at least within analytic philosophy) that the raw data of the subject is intuitions. By way of offering some kind of evidence supporting this, I will briefly discuss the literature on intuitions in philosophy. It is worth noting first, however, that there are two quite different views on the role of philosophers in generating, collecting or identifying such intuitions. According to one view, intuitions are the kind of commonsense things that non-philosophers, as well as philosophers, have ready access to. According to this view, first-rate philosophers do not have special access to facts or data that anchor philosophical viewpoints, indeed anyone has access to this body of commonsense facts or intuitions, and can generate them with no more than a few moments reflection. The other view, in contrast, sees philosophers as skilled at identifying which intuitions are the 'right' ones. According to this view, non-philosophers are more likely to have faulty or corrupt intuitions. For example they might have incoherent sets of intuitions, or their intuitions might be subservient to other objectives they have (such as their own desire for material goods, power, and so on).

Rawls' theory of reflective equilibrium offers an account of how intuitions and theory in philosophy can be balanced in a manner analogous to the balancing of evidence and theory in the sciences (Rawls, 1951 and 1999). Focusing on the role of intuitions in ethics, Singer has criticized Rawls' approach on the basis that one important role of philosophy is to challenge accepted wisdom, and that this means challenging (rather than accepting) at least some of the intuitions people hold (Singer, 2005). Yet Singer himself acknowledges that intuitions are difficult to escape:

> Whenever it is suggested that normative ethics should disregard our common moral intuitions, the objection is made that without intuitions, we can go nowhere. There have been many attempts, over the centuries, to find proofs of first principles in ethics, but most philosophers consider that they have all failed. Even a radical ethical theory like utilitarianism must rest on a fundamental intuition about what is good. So we appear to be left with our intuitions and nothing more. If we reject them all, we must become ethical skeptics or nihilists. (Singer, 2005:349)

And some of Singer's own work makes use of one set of intuitions to cast doubt on another. Consider the structure of "Famine, Affluence and Morality": In this paper Singer's own argument depends upon our intuitive acceptance of the claim that: "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it."(Singer, 1972:231) Singer attempts to show that our intuitive acceptance of this principle should lead us to reject a number of other intuitions, including intuitions about where the distinction between charity and duty ought to be drawn.

It is notable that those who are critical of the role of intuitions in philosophy do not necessarily claim that they are not the raw data of the discipline. Consider Alvin Goldman's critique of the role of intuitions in revisionary metaphysics. Goldman does not argue that intuitions play no legitimate role in philosophy, far from it. He argues in a number of different places that the idea that intuitions give good evidence for claims about the structure of reality is misguided (see, for example, Goldman and Pust, 2002). But he has pursued the project of describing our intuitions

in both metaphysics and particularly in epistemology, and offering psychological explanations of how we come to have them.

Taking the data of philosophy to be intuitions, then, we can consider how they are generated, collected, or identified. Philosophers use a range of techniques to generate intuitions in those reading or hearing their arguments. One is the use of examples that are likely to bring about the same intuition in the audience as they do in the author. Such examples, often fictional 'thought experiments', are sometimes referred to as 'intuition pumps' (Dennett, 1995). Some philosophers, including Dennett, have been critical of the use of such 'intuition pumps'. However, their criticisms are not universally shared. One argument for accepting the practice of 'pumping intuitions' is that it doesn't matter whether some intuition is artificially generated or not, the important thing is that it is a widely shared intuition in the given case. As such, it is appropriate to expect its occurrence to be explained by a satisfactory theory of the phenomena in question.

Recently, experimental philosophers have undertaken the process of collecting intuitions by surveying members of the general population (or, more often, members of the undergraduate population at their universities). The 'experiments' conducted by these philosophers seek to collect and analyse the intuitions of a wide range of different individuals, to avoid the risk of relying on the intuitions of professional philosophers, which may, for example, have become distorted over many years of bearing the weight of the philosophical theories they are supposed to support. Perhaps experimental philosophy can equip us with a set of broadly accepted data on intuitions. 'Accepted', at any rate, if we view the process of philosophy as analogous to the process of linguistics; as describing and explaining (but not critically evaluating or revising) a set of beliefs or practices; in the case of linguistics, practices of language use; in the case of philosophy, perhaps, our commonsense beliefs about concepts such as truth, freedom, justice, beauty, time, causation, and so on. Some philosophers, such as P. F. Strawson, have indeed defended something like this conception of philosophy (see the introduction to Strawson, 1959). But this is by no means unanimously accepted, and is, I think, highly controversial. It is at odds, for example, with Rawls' account of the character of philosophical process as a quest for reflective equilibrium. Therefore, even if experimental philosophy can provide a robust set of

data on commonsense intuitions, we would still need to explore and discuss what sort of intuitions philosophy looks to *and* what role these intuitions play (for example whether reaching a reflective equilibrium ought to be the goal of our philosophical investigations).

Finally, it is difficult to see how the philosopher's process of identifying intuitions might be successfully challenged, especially where the idea is to consider a particular example and examine one's own intuitions in response to it. Of course it seems in-principle possible that I could either deliberately misidentify my own intuitions (e.g. because the ones I really have do not fit the theory I advocate); or that I inadvertently misidentify my intuitions. The latter might occur, for example, if I have thought so hard about some particular philosophical situation that I am no longer capable of having clear, uncorrupted intuitions about it. In such cases is it not clear that someone else would be able to establish that I have erred in identifying my own intuitions. There is no possibility of challenging my authority by pointing to the data. Likewise, it is not possible for me to *establish* that I have correctly identified my own intuitions, because they are not independently verifiable. In this respect, philosophy appears to differ from other disciplines, whose data is independently accessible.

It is worth saying something briefly about another kind of raw data that features in philosophical investigation, especially as it was suggested by the examples that I gave at the beginning of this section. On some occasions, the works of authoritative philosophers are treated as raw data. The raw data associated with philosophical authority of this kind is (approximately) the relevant tomes in the philosophical canon. Whilst it is typically assumed that 'first-rate' philosophers do more than interpret the work of other philosophers and repeat familiar objections, certainly one aspect of being a credible philosopher is familiarity with the canon, or at least some part of it. Many excellent philosophers stand on the shoulders of other great philosophers, contributing to the debate by developing or extending their ideas. Yet the best work of this kind is surprising and creative – making interpretations that are both unexpected and plausible, or extending an existing idea in an unlikely but fruitful way. It is the demand that philosophers be creative – that they produce 'original' philosophical ideas – that is at the centre of evaluations of individuals' contributions to the discipline. When Haslanger's professor stated that "women were incapable of having seminal ideas", he not only implied by his choice of word that maleness (i.e. having

semen) was associated with being a first-rate philosopher. He also said (and clearly intended to say) something that most philosophers – including women – agree with: that having original ideas, and especially having original ideas that are interesting enough to be taken up by other philosophers, is characteristic of first-rate philosophers. Of course the professor is wrong: women philosophers do have original ideas. However, if women are less able to establish their authority – less able to establish themselves as 'sages', rather than 'cranks' in Quine's terms – then they will struggle to have their ideas taken seriously, and built upon, by other philosophers.

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Given that philosophers do not appeal to raw data that is objectively accessible (in the way that historical sources or the empirical evidence of science are) but rather to intuitions, their ability to challenge the authority of those currently deemed to be first rate (credible) philosophers is limited. So too – even more so – is their capacity to establish themselves as first rate philosophers. As I noted earlier, in order to challenge someone's authority it is necessary only to find one thing that they are doing badly. But in order to establish authority, one must demonstrate that *nothing* is being done badly. In the above discussion of intuitions I attempted to show that it is very difficult in philosophy to establish the veracity of one's philosophical data.

However, there is more than one way to challenge someone's theoretical authority – it is possible to challenge their authority by challenging their interpretive methods, or the validity of their inferences. Often our criticisms of others' philosophical work do look either to their interpretive methods, or (perhaps even more often) to the logic of their argument. Whenever we challenge the validity of someone's move in an argument by demonstrating that it is inconsistent with the rules of formal reasoning we are doing this. And it is very powerful when we can do so.

Bernard Williams has characterized philosophy as:

> [P]art of a more general attempt to make the best sense of our life, and so of our intellectual activities, in the situation in which we find ourselves. (Williams 2000: 182)

According to such a characterization, philosophy aims at understanding – 'making the best sense' of our lives – and is presented as a process that is undertaken by individuals who are situated both physically and temporally, and thereby have only a limited capacity to transcend their own perspectives. Interpreting, explaining, and understanding our intuitions and practices will, on this view, be central to the process of philosophy.

Some philosophers do focus – or pay lip service – to the importance of *understanding* ourselves, but this does not seem to be the orientation of much current analytic philosophy. As other papers in this volume have argued, analytic philosophy is, for a range of reasons including the systems of measurement and valuation in academia more generally (Jenkins REF this vol), the dominant strand in contemporary philosophy as practiced in the Anglophone world. In a seminar at the ANU recently the consensus of the audience was that philosophy is a search for *truth*,[2] rather than *understanding*.

There are good reasons to think that philosophy as a search for truth will always fall short. One reason is that philosophy comprises a set of residual hard problems; problems to do with the nature of such things as time, causation, existence and knowledge; that have not been commandeered by the sciences. Another reason is that the questions of value (such as in ethics and aesthetics) that are part of philosophy are not agreed by all philosophers to aim at truth (especially not by anyone who is not e.g. a moral realist). If philosophy will always fall short in its search for truth, perhaps as philosophers we ought to pay more attention to our interpretive methods, and the role of interpreting, understanding and explaining in philosophy.

A characterization of philosophy that differs from Williams' is offered by Hájek in his discussion of philosophical heuristics. He says that doing philosophy involves:

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[2] The paper that these comments responded to apparently supposed that philosophy *qua* philosophy aimed at *nothing*, but instead involved the exploration of logical space through argument.

> [T]rying to come up with an original philosophical position, or an original argument, or a counterexample to someone else's philosophical position, or trouble for an argument of theirs, or solving a puzzle, or resolving a paradox. (Hájek, Forthcoming)

Whereas Williams' characterization aligns philosophy centrally with skills of interpretation, Hájek's characterization aligns it centrally with skills of argument – proceeding by logical inferences and so on. Viewed as such, philosophy differs dramatically from other disciplines which are firmly anchored by some set of facts, literature or body of data; and in which data generation, collection or identification, along with interpretive skills, are the primary skills associated with exercising theoretical authority.

Especially according to this characterization, philosophy, more than any other discipline, is characterized by its emphasis on argument. In particular, on its process of reasoned argument that is supposed to arrive at the *truth*, or perhaps more modestly, to arrive at true conditionals of the form 'if [the (plausible) starting premises] are true, then [the conclusion] is true'. Academics in other disciplines also use such arguments, or at any rate they also 'proceed by logical inferences to conclusion'. But whereas in other disciplines this is a limited part of what they do, and the sorts of inferences that the discipline counts as valid are constrained in various ways, philosophy is characterized by this process. We have some well-established methods in philosophy for constructing such arguments. The most obvious is the formal apparatus of logic, although relatively little interesting philosophy is presented in formal logic. Indeed, even those papers that do make use of formal logic usually also employ other methods. Many of these other methods are, or are supposed to be, true to principles of informal reasoning – they are supposed to proceed validly from premises to conclusion, to avoid a range of fallacies (the sort students are sometimes introduced to in undergraduate critical thinking classes) and so on.

But these informal methods are much less scrupulously described and taught in philosophy, than the formal methods of logic. In this respect, too, philosophy differs from other disciplines. Disciplines such as mathematics and science explicitly teach methods. A mathematics class is typically a class in the methods relevant for solving particular classes of mathematical problems. Similarly in the sciences: laboratory classes focus on teaching a range of experimental methods,

while theory classes teach, amongst other things, interpretive methods including statistical analysis. This is typical of teaching in a range of academic disciplines as well as the teaching of non-academic pursuits. As Hájek has observed:

> …consider some other skill—say, skiing. A skiing instructor does not just say: "You've seen people ski well; now do it yourself! Go on: SKI!" Rather, the instructor gives you *skiing heuristics*, breaking down skiing into manageable bits: "shift your weight to the downhill ski", "keep your hands forward", and so on. Yet in philosophy we typically just show our students finished pieces of philosophy—the classics, the recent literature—and then effectively say: "You've seen people philosophize well; now do it yourselves! Go on: PHILOSOPHIZE!" (Hájek, Forthcoming)

And (in an earlier version of the paper, but not the latest) he makes this point more striking by reference to science, noting that it would be strange if scientists were not introduced to the scientific method.

Of course there is a significant literature on matters of philosophical method. The material on intuitions that I referred to earlier is just one such example. The literature on formal logic is another. But very often we go on as though our less formal methods are well-established and understood. It is worth noting, in particular, that the literature on philosophical method tends to be focused fairly narrowly. There are papers on intuitions and their role; there are papers on formal logic, its status and role (and competing forms of logic). I imagine that in other traditions there are also papers on, for example, deconstruction (although I am not familiar with this material). Philosophy employs a much more extensive range of methods than other disciplines. This is no doubt partly due to its unparalleled scope in comparison with other disciplines. Hájek claims to have identified hundreds of different philosophical heuristics, for example.

To press this point further: if philosophical methodology is something we are familiar with mainly through having encountered good philosophy, we are likely only to be familiar with the methods employed within our own sometimes narrow areas of specialization. But this means that we are often very badly placed to judge the quality not only of the *contents* but also of the

techniques employed in other areas of philosophy. A more open and robust discussion about methodology would give all of us the opportunity to become familiar with (and where relevant, to question) the techniques we use as philosophers, including the ones that have legitimacy outside of our own narrow areas of specialization. Fiona Jenkins has drawn attention to the fact that "there is […] more than one type of project that we could find very reasonable grounds for supporting." (this volume), and she argues that having one set of standards of excellence might miss this point, ranking as 'better' or 'worse' projects with aims so different as to make such comparison laughable. So too, our peer evaluations become ridiculous where we make false presuppositions about the methods being employed, or the way in which the 'products' might be valued. This is a real problem, given that in some contexts (hiring and promotions panels, for example) it is not specialists in some narrow area who are entrusted to make decisions, but typically the most senior philosophers in the institution, irrespective of their areas of specialization. There are two risks: (1) that in general we tend to undervalue work produced using methods we do not understand; but also (2) that in specific cases we may overvalue such work, failing to recognize it as a poor example of its kind.

It is worth saying just a little more about the first of these risks – the risk of undervaluing in general work produced using methods we do not understand. There is a view held by some analytic philosophers that analytic philosophy is superior to Continental philosophy because it proceeds by rigorous argument, rather than questionable rhetoric. Neil Levy cites this as a common distinction:

> It is often said that what distinguishes analytic from Continental philosophy is the greater place and respect for argument in the former. Dagfinn Føllesdal, for example, characterizes the difference between analytic and nonanalytic philosophy as essentially a difference in the place given to arguments, rather than rhetoric. (Levy, 2003: 286)

To the extent that this is a widespread view, it surely fails to acknowledge the role that rhetoric plays in all forms of philosophical argument, including the arguments of analytic philosophers. Hájek's heuristics, for example, include devices aimed at *persuading* one's opponent, or audience. One such is his set of heuristics for answering problems associated with extreme, self-

referential or weird cases. These include a range of side-stepping manoeuvres such as asserting that "the case is too far-fetched for us to trust our intuitions about it" (Hájek, Forthcoming). Further evidence for the role of rhetoric in analytic philosophy includes the regularity with which criticisms like "that's implausible", "that's just crazy" and "I don't understand what you're saying", figure in the question and answer sessions that follow papers in analytic philosophy. Even where an argument is presented in formal logic, the use of logic itself plays a rhetorical role. The view that any argument presented in purportedly valid formal logic demands an answer, whereas suggestions or urgings that are not in this form do not, is one example. One reason to view this as a partly *rhetorical* device, rather than a purely rational one, is that the contents of logic are hotly disputed by some philosophers. To treat an argument presented in formal logic as holding a special claim presupposes that the logic it is presented in leads safely from premises to conclusions, a claim that those who dispute the content of logic do not necessarily accept.

The argument that we should examine and articulate the methods of philosophy more thoroughly and exhaustively has, in my view, a very important application to undergraduate teaching. Undergraduate programs often offer critical thinking and logic courses, both of which give students some explicit grounding in philosophical methodology. However not even this happens across the board (here at ANU, for example, courses in logic and critical thinking are electives). Significantly, limits to our understanding of the methods we use as philosophers, and limited resources articulating what these methods are and how they can be used, constrains our ability to teach these methods to undergraduate students.

I think there are a lot of good reasons for developing a rich understanding of the methods we employ as philosophers, and for viewing the teaching of these methods as an important aspect of undergraduate philosophy programmes. But as I mentioned at the beginning, I think that one potential benefit of doing so may be to give all students who come through our undergraduate programs the means to establish their authority within the discipline. I think this takes two forms. Firstly, in the absence of the kind of data that can be banged down on the table accompanied by "You look at the data – it bears out what I'm saying!" the ability to say: "I've done this carefully and rigorously – I'm a skilled practitioner" and to be able to point at least to

the method that has been used, is very powerful. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, is the confidence derived from being able to identify and articulate one's own skills. If students know what some of the various methods of philosophy are, and they have completed courses in them with success, then they will be able to see themselves as skilled practitioners. Having a grounding in the methods and techniques of philosophy offers a way of establishing oneself as authoritative in philosophy whether or not one has access to its (informal) power networks.

§5

The preceding discussion has taken it for granted that philosophers can be authoritative *qua* philosophers. But there are reasons for thinking that the notion of theoretical authority might *only* apply to those fields of inquiry where the raw data is readily accessible. Philosophers might not be properly viewed as possessing theoretical authority, precisely because the discipline is not firmly anchored by a body of facts or data. In a paper on epistemic dependence, John Hardwig indicates that his claims about expertise (a notion that I take to be intimately related to theoretical authority, if not synonymous) are restricted "to belief in and knowledge or propositions for which there is evidence."(Hardwig, 2006:329). If, as I have already argued, philosophical propositions are propositions for which the evidence – intuitions – is more slippery than that of other fields, then the theoretical authority that philosophers have as philosophers may turn out to be a very marginal form of theoretical authority. Steve Fuller offers a salient distinction here between the 'expert' and the 'intellectual'. According to Fuller:

> An intellectual takes the entire world as fair game for his judgments, but at the same time he opens himself to scrutiny from all quarters. Indeed, the intellectual's natural habitat is controversy, and often he seems to spend more time on defending and attacking positions than on developing and applying them. In contrast the expert's judgments are restricted to his area of training. The credibility of those judgments are measured in terms of the freedom from contravention that his colleagues accord him. (Fuller, 2006:342-343)

Perhaps, according to this distinction, philosophers are intellectuals rather than experts, and as such their claims invite controversy rather than giving non-philosophers reasons for belief. The central role that critical engagement plays in philosophy is apparent throughout the discipline. It influences the way we run our tutorial classes, the way seminar and conference presentations are structured (and the nature of the discussion after them). It is also apparent in the role philosophers play in public life. From Socrates to Peter Singer, philosophers appear in public as critics of (some of) our pervasive assumptions and unreflective habits.

I think most philosophers would agree that philosophy must accommodate the critical content that is characteristic of much of the best and most influential philosophy, *as well as* the possibility of establishing one's authority as a philosopher – of demonstrating one's 'professional competence' as Quine puts it in the opening quote, or of making judgements about whose work is 'first-rate'. Yet if treating someone as an authority means taking their opinions on some subject as reasons for belief independently of the first-order considerations relevant to that subject, then this is clearly at odds with the idea of being critical of pervasive assumptions and unreflective habits. Taking another person's word for it because they're widely regarded as an authority is just the sort of unreflective habit that some philosophers counsel against. And it is surely just as important within philosophy that we remain open to the critical challenges of others (and the possibility that these challenges can come from unexpected directions, and can strike at the founding assumptions of our thought) as it is in the world outside the discipline.

Briefly, then, I suggest two strategies that I think will allow us to retain both these aspects of philosophy, while diffusing what is most worrying in the tension between them. First, I want to return to the earlier discussion of philosophical methodology. During that discussion I stressed the importance of understanding and explicitly discussing the various methods of philosophy. I argued that it was a problem that discussions of philosophical methodology are often narrow and speak only to practitioners of certain forms of philosophy. One reason for my emphasis on this was a concern that philosophers from different traditions or different sub-specialities are increasingly unable to engage in meaningful dialogue, even where such dialogue might yield valuable insight. By failing to familiarize ourselves explicitly with our own methods, we also fail to articulate them in ways that can make them accessible to other philosophers who use other

methods. By failing to teach a range of different philosophical techniques to our students, we effectively force them to choose specializations not only by subject matter but also (by default) by method. At the same time, we rob ourselves of the tools we need to engage critically with one-another in terms that will be understood by all members of the discipline. The first strategy I suggest, then, is the same one I suggested above: that we undertake more research, and more expansive research, into philosophical methodology both so we understand the different (legitimate) forms it can take better ourselves, and so we can teach it more explicitly and broadly at the undergraduate level. This will allow philosophy to fulfil its critical function more effectively.

The second strategy is to recognise and question ways in which, in practice, we exclude one another from our own areas of specialisation, and thus stifle important forms of critical engagement. Our tendency to do this is evident in the existence of many philosophy journals that are sub-discipline specific, as well as many conferences that are sub-discipline specific, and the streaming of general conferences (such as annual conferences organised by national philosophical associations) into sub-discipline specific streams. In the face of changing measures of the research output, there also seems to be a trend towards specialisation of departments, so that departments foster 'centres of excellence' around particular research topics, at the expense of breadth. There are obvious advantages of this in terms of securing competitive external funding, but its implications for the shape of the discipline, the effect it has on our opportunities for engagement outside of our own narrow areas of research focus, and the way philosophy appears to students who take courses at such universities as undergraduates, cannot be ignored.

Of course specialised journals and conferences provide important opportunities for philosophers working the same topics to come together and share work at the cutting edge. This, however, presupposes that most of us spend most of our time working at some (physical) distance from others in our areas of specialisation, and that getting together is thus an occasional *exception* to the status quo. Current arrangements seem to risk making it the norm.

Haslanger's research into journal publication rates offer a useful example of the risks specialist journals pose to critical engagement. Haslanger's data shows amongst other things that the mainstream general philosophy journals publish hardly any work on feminist philosophy (Haslanger REF). Yet the insights of feminist philosophy are almost always primarily aimed at those doing mainstream philosophy rather than other feminist philosophers. So publishing these papers in, say, *Hypatia* (a well-respected specialist feminist philosophy journal) implies that they are papers in 'feminist philosophy' rather than papers in, say, epistemology or ethics. It is not entirely clear what we should do in response to this, given that it is clearly appropriate for the discipline to retain a mixture of specialist and general journals. Perhaps recommendations are best aimed at those journals that purport to be for all forms of philosophy. The *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, for example, includes the following on its website:

> The *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (*AJP*) is one of the world's leading philosophy journals. It is recognized as publishing the very best work in the analytic tradition, but is not narrow in what it regards as worthy of acceptance. (AJP website, http://www.ajp.aap.org.au/)

The AJP wasn't included in Haslanger's data, and I don't have any data of my own on the basis of which to make claims about what it does and doesn't publish. But it seems that journals like this, under the auspices of national philosophical associations, are the ones that we should expect to genuinely consider a wide range of material for publication.

§6

I have argued that it is more difficult to challenge those with authority in philosophy than it is to challenge those with authority in (at least some) other disciplines. And, I have argued that it is – for the same reasons – more difficult to establish oneself as an authority in philosophy. The reasons for this are that the raw data of philosophy – taken to be intuitions – is not objective or independently accessible in the way that the raw data of (at least some) other disciplines is. In addition, the methods of philosophy are more varied than those of other disciplines, but they are

often learned only implicitly. Philosophical methods are not articulated and examined as widely by philosophers as they could be and nor are they taught as rigorously in undergraduate programmes as they could be. I suggest that more research and explication of the multifarious methods of philosophy could mediate these difficulties. I furthermore argue that ensuring that a wide range of methods are recognized as valid within philosophy (and understood by as many philosophers and philosophy students as possible) will help to mediate the tension between authoritative structures within philosophy and the role that philosophy plays as a critical discipline. I also suggest that we should reconsider the way in which our discipline is partitioned, because this seems to perpetuate the authoritative structure of the discipline at the expense of its ability to be critical. I suggest that a first step would be to ensure that our most general journals are indeed as general as they can be.

I began the paper by quoting Quine. Quine stated that philosophy suffers, as other disciplines do not, from a wavering consensus on questions of professional competence, and that identifying who are the sages, or first-rate philosophers, and who are the 'cranks' is particularly difficult within philosophy. I have attempted to offer an account of why this might be the case, and I have argued for an expansive conception of philosophy that nevertheless retains an ability to distinguish between good work and poor work. In my view, this issues I have been exploring in the paper also comprise one of the reasons why it has been possible in the past to deny credibility to members of some groups for the wrong reasons – to claim, for example, as Sally Haslanger's graduate school professor did, that women are not capable of being first-rate philosophers because they are not capable of having influential ideas. This claim may indeed have contained some truth – perhaps the ideas of some individuals have not been influential because it has not been possible for those people to establish their authority within the discipline.

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