
EDITORIAL**PROGRESS AND AUTISM**

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Abstract. *Despite the fact that today the world of academic philosophy seems to have very precise rules and instruments for measuring the true success of authors, books, journals and so on, an impartial observer would get a feeling of deeply dysfunctional community. I go as far as asserting that our field (as well as other sciences taught in higher education) is showing clear signs of autism. With communication at extremely low levels and a high degree of isolation in small communities, people involved in academic philosophy are obsessively required to produce progress in their field, as it happens in applied science. It seems rather clear that if things continue this way the final result cannot be other than the total rejection of what drove philosophy onward for more than two thousand years.*

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One of the most iconic characters of postmodernity in television, Eric Cartman from the animated TV show *Southpark*, can be seen in one particular episode (episode 5 of 12th series) repeatedly asking himself “How do I reach these kids?” while in the position of being a teacher for a struggling inner-city classroom. What has this got to do with the world of higher education and academic journals? Well, not only from my recently acquired position of chief editor for such a journal but from all my experience in the field of academic philosophy (and higher education, in general) I cannot help noticing (and the conversations with my peers have confirmed me time after time that it is more than a singular subjective opinion) that we need (I would say “desperately” if contemporary boredom and platitude would not automatically exclude such big and passionate words) a “Cartman moment”. What does this mean? That sometimes we should stop from our daily routine, take one step back, look at all our work so far, at all the massive stacks of recent books and journal issues surrounding us and ask ourselves “How do I reach these peers?”.

Beyond the fact that most of today's academic journals (and, therefore, authors) do their jobs with the highest respect for professionalism and for the "rules of the game", you cannot help sometimes but wonder if this big scene – and let us stick for now only to the scene of academic philosophy – isn't showing to everyone who cares the clear signs of an acute communication or even self-identity disorder. On a speedy and somehow shallow analysis, most of academic philosophy (this is a redundancy since today philosophy is almost inexistent outside the academia) shows some serious self-identity and communication problems. Although these problems seem to be recognized by those involved, they (the problems) appear to be considered either unsolvable or unimportant. Otherwise, it would be very difficult to explain why there isn't some sort of collective initiative in order to deal with them. I admit that my analysis cannot be other than purely subjective, especially since one could not find infallible arguments in this respect; still, my conclusions are not drawn only from my experience and from my personal relation with contemporary philosophy, but also from extensive talks with several of my peers who seem to be observing similar things.

First of all, one of the most visible handicaps of the global philosophical community is the fact that ... it doesn't exist. Ironically, in the age of instant borderless communication philosophers¹ seem to fall more and more apart from each other, forming small communities (either geographically or according to their specific interests) and showing little or no interest at all to connect with fellow philosophers outside their community. In the same note (and, maybe, as a consequence) it is becoming more and more difficult to describe what is "the current state of affairs" in philosophy, who are the "leading figures" in our non-existent global community. If one of us (and I mean by this someone objective enough to observe the dozens of parallel lines of interest in contemporary philosophy) would have to explain to an outsider what is the latest trend in philosophy, this someone would be behaving real difficulties in mentioning the latest developments for each of these parallel communities. What is the "latest hit" for those who feel that phenomenology, for example, is the main core of contemporary philosophy? What is the "latest hit" in the philosophy of language? What is the "theme of the day" in ethics (presuming that ethics is still a part of philosophy) or in the philosophy of mind, science, aesthetics, medieval studies, philosophy of religion etc. (this could go on for at least a page)?

I feel that one of the most important causes of this exaggerated fragmentation and lack of knowledge in what it concerns fields of interest outside our own is the fact that the members of these small communities are not at all preoccupied in communicating with the rest of the world but, instead, are satisfied with sharing their achievements and dilemmas only inside their own group and in doing so are using a somehow technical jargon and an idiosyncratic language impenetrable by the non-initiated public. It is true that every once in a while one or more of these initiated people finds the time to "translate" his/her work to the rest of the world, but such endeavors are usually criticized by the members of the community who regard them as being "commercial" and too simplistic. If the author is unlucky he/she will be effectively shunned and considered, ultimately, a persona non grata within the community.

¹ Although one could speculate much about the proper names for those related in some way with philosophy (be they teachers, readers, commentators or – more and more rare today – actual creators of philosophy) I use the generic term of "philosophers" in order to shorten my otherwise long phrases.

When talking of such an obvious self-isolation and disregard for the whole in favor of the fragment², one could not help thinking of autism. DSM IV, the “Bible” of psychological diagnostic, defines autism through a number of possible behaviors and requires that at least six of them are present in order to diagnose a child with this condition. Not at all surprising, we can find very easily six of these symptoms according to the paragraphs above:

- a. failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level
- b. a lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people
- c. stereotyped and repetitive use of language or idiosyncratic language
- d. encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest that is abnormal either in intensity or focus
- e. apparently inflexible adherence to specific, nonfunctional routines or rituals
- f. persistent preoccupation with parts of objects.

At least apparently the verdict seems to be very simple: contemporary philosophy is autistic. And if this is not very reassuring, there is an even bigger problem: what do you do with it? As most psychologists know, there are two main ways of dealing with an autistic child, two “philosophies” (excuse the pun) concerning autism. One of them, followed by the majority, is that of trying to consider autism a disorder which needs to be cured and does this by trying to bring the autistic child towards the “real world” through different methods (a very large number of methods exist, none of them being absolutely infallible, but all of them report some degree of success). On the other hand, there exists a minority (most notably: many people who are diagnosed with Asperger syndrome – one of the autism spectrum disorders – are a part of this minority) which claims that autism does not need to be “cured” since it is not a disorder but a “difference”. For this attitude towards autism, the answer is not to bring the child towards the world, but to change the world surrounding the autistic person as to fit his/her particular perception and vision.

In the world of academic philosophy (again, this is true for almost all academic fields) we have our own parents and supervisors in the form of funding authorities (government, different committees or private sponsors, companies etc.) which should take notice of the autistic core of our behavior. It doesn’t take too much perception or experience to observe that the above mentioned authorities are not at all concerned with this state of affairs. More than this, I think that they (or, to be less personal, the whole current system of higher education throughout the world) is what causes the appearance of autism in philosophy and the related sciences.

“Progress is everything” seems to be the motto of everyone who has a word to say in the survival of philosophy as an academic area of study, a motto derived – how ironic! – from the deeply philosophical Enlightenment of the 18th century. Not only that progress is possible through each line or page someone writes, but progress is a requirement and can be so easily measured. We all know that we are being judged (severely) through some highly technical methods and evaluation processes (take the infamous Hirsch index for example) and that our

² Let us note that these symptoms can be easily extended to most of the humanities or social sciences of today and, maybe, to most of contemporary sciences in general. Let’s not go further than psychology, for example (since some people still consider it to be rather close to philosophy) and think for a minute at the huge differences between the values and the subjects cherished by those involved in education psychology, for example, as opposed to the epistemological grid of those involved in forensic psychology (this might not be the best example, but I think the idea is rather clear).

survival in the world of Academia depends on how much novelty we can produce. To continue the metaphor of autism, our parents and teachers are not only blind to the special status or gifts of this child, but are pressing him every moment to be the best of his class, to perform exceptionally.

The pressure of having to say something constantly new and constantly worth being noticed is the real cause of autism in today's philosophy. This is what makes people stop listening, write for the sole purpose of writing and fulfilling the "daily quota" of what it is required of them. It is a bit strange that after fifteen years since the symbolic moment of the Sokal affair we are in the position where for many of us the only readers of our pieces are the "peer reviewers" we sometimes blame. Even stranger is the fact that these somehow shallow observations come from the chief-editor of a peer reviewed philosophical journal such as this, but maybe sometimes we all get caught so much in this rollercoaster of required progress that we become immune to the lack of reaction surrounding us.

I know for a fact that, like me, some of my colleagues have some more or less secret phantasy of a genuinely lively global community of philosophers in which, like in the time when Descartes was getting ready to publish his *Meditations*, one could get sincere and in-depth reactions from peers exclusively because a work of philosophy is meant to get such reactions and not because you must do so because of regulations. And after doing so, he or she could take one step back and say with satisfaction like Eric Cartman in the end of the episode I mentioned "I reached my peers". But sadly, almost of all of us know that at the rate things are going this is becoming more and more a utopia and, between each new article, each new citation and each new peer review we receive, we are going to get more and more autistic.