The Presentation of Philosophy:
Who Are We Talking to?

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My title asks, who are we (professional philosophers) addressing when we write or teach philosophy? Each other, obviously. And we can all think of cases when the intelligent "general public" (and not exclusively the intelligentsia) has been drawn to the study of philosophy in great numbers, often with embarrassing results, but not always. I want to explore two issues in this talk: the general question, who should we be talking to when we do our philosophy, and the specific question, how should we present philosophy, to whatever level of audience? The specific one is harder to answer, but provides clues for answering the general one, so I need to deal with the question of presentation first.

There are incredibly many ways of teaching and writing philosophy—Donald Palmer's *Looking at Philosophy* (1988) tells the history of Western thought in cartoons; Hofstadter and Dennett's *The Mind's I* (1981) mainly consists of science fiction stories. Television and novels have been used to communicate philosophical positions and arguments—and I am only thinking of cases where professional philosophers have done this, not of "pop philosophy" by the likes of Shirley Maclaine or Richard Bach (or even Steven Hawking). Among all these techniques for presenting philosophy, however, both standard and non-standard, two quite distinct types of presentation occur again and again: often in the same thinker, but hardly ever in the same book (that is rather difficult). Call them "questioning presentation" and "answering presentation."

The first type, questioning presentation (QP), adopts a posture of ignorance, doubt or even bitchiness at the outset, claims (or acts as if it claims) to be starting from scratch, and discovers solutions (or not) in the course of a step-by-step review of problems. Familiar examples in our tradition are Socrates, Locke, the Descartes of the *Meditations*, Marcel and the later Wittgenstein. The exposition will typically contain a number

of wrong turns and roadblocks, not all of which may get disposed of by the end of the trek.

Answering presentation (AP) offers us completed systems, doctrines or accounts. In a word, it offers us theses to be defended, then proceeds to defend them against all comers. Problems are dealt with in the context of the solutions already arrived at—we might say the solutions precede the problems (which are not treated as problems so much as pesky counterexamples). The Predominating mood is serene didacticism. Roadblocks, such as they are, aren't assaulted with frenzied passion but buried under the quiet flood of theorems endlessly spilling from the philosopher's aloof first principles. This mode of presentation is at least as old as the first—we can take as examples Plato, Thomas Aquinas, Kant, Heidegger and the early Wittgenstein.

I need to stress here that the method of presentation adopted by a philosopher has nothing to do with the philosopher's degree of assurance or conviction about his conclusions. Socrates quite probably had his mind made up in advance on every topic he set out to discuss—there is the telling scene in *Gorgias* where, when Callicles refuses to dialogue with him, Socrates simply holds forth (523-27). Descartes' "doubt" is purely literary: he even says in the preface to *Meditations* (Descartes v. I, 143) that the existence of the world is something "no one in his right mind has ever seriously doubted"—including Descartes, who must have been in as right a mind as the rest of us ever are. And we have reports as to the anguish and uncertainty, even despair, of Aquinas and Wittgenstein. There have to be other reasons altogether why QP or AP is selected as a presentation method. How do we understand the difference between the two and the choice of one over the other? A few hypotheses follow.

1. In his *Replies to Objections* (Descartes v. II, 48) and elsewhere Descartes writes that "the method of demonstration is twofold . . . one through analysis, another through synthesis"—and at first blush it may seem we can equate QP and AP with these two types of demonstration, because as described by Descartes, analysis begins with the most basic reasons for a belief and proceeds to construct the belief from its parts, while synthesis begins with conclusions as factors in a completed structure and then presents the arguments that support them. Analysis resembles QP, with its way of assembling isolated discoveries into a structure, and synthesis looks like AP, handing down its

pronouncements.[1] But it turns out the resemblance is a superficial one: when Descartes calls both these approaches "methods of demonstration" he means they both belong to what we call nowadays the context of justification, the grounding or proving of propositions discovered in advance. Both are thus appropriate methods for AP rather than QP, with its wrong turns and false starts, which operates or pretends to operate within the context of discovery. AP can start with the edifice or start with the bricks, provided the edifice is kept in view from the beginning. With QP, it's always uncertain if the "bricks" it digs up will actually fit anywhere.

2. Perhaps the distinction between the presentation methods is merely a difference in the "tone of voice." QP's "tone" is sometimes petulant but most often friendly and patient; AP's is authoritarian and smug. So can we identify practitioners of QP as humble people and practitioners of AP as arrogant? Again no: there are numerous counterexamples, but I will cite just one, from the end of Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism," undoubtedly one of the more modest appraisals of what philosophy can hope to accomplish ever written: "The thinking that is to come can no longer, as Hegel demanded, set aside the name 'love of wisdom' and become wisdom itself in the form of absolute knowledge. . . . Thinking lays inconspicuous furrow in language. They are still more inconspicuous than the furrows that the farmer, slow of step, draws through the field" (Heidegger 242). This from a philosopher notorious for pontifications and claims to have arrived at final truth! The difference between QP and AP lies deeper than a difference of "tone of voice."

3. Maybe that word "deeper" gives us a clue. A third hypothesis would be that QP or AP is appropriate depending on how basic the inquiry is, how deep it goes. "Groundbreaking" work needs to be presented step by step as you go, pausing to tie up loose ends and even getting stuck in deliberate blind alleys to make sure you haven't left anything out; but once the ground is leveled and the foundation laid, once your theories are no longer controversial and shocking, they can be spelled out in a "teacherly" manner, taking the basic work for granted. But this suggestion too is deceptive. Undoubtedly QP is better suited than AP for truly seminal ideas, but philosophers have broken ground using AP and been recognized for it, and QP is often used in presentations where the basic matters are taken as settled (or as impossible to settle)—I

am thinking of Ryle's *Concept of Mind* and other works of the "ordinary language" movement. Anyway, questions that are of central concern to one thinker seem superfluous to another; if no one agrees about what questions are basic, this can't be the criterion that determines the choice between QP and AP.

4. Finally, I am going to argue that the presentation method a philosopher picks depends more than anything on the philosopher's audience: this will involve us in the broader question of who our audience is or should be. But first I ought to deal with an objection I'm sure a lot of you are harboring: maybe the QP/AP distinction is a useful one for historical purposes (though it's almost certainly a gross oversimplification), but why should any of us, as working philosophers, pay any attention to it? The choice between the two "methods" is probably made by accident in most cases: I for instance never knew I was engaged in something called QP or AP. Maybe when it comes right down to it there is just no reason to prefer one to the other!

I want to take this objection seriously, and since it has several parts, let me respond to the parts in order.

First, the QP/AP distinction and whether it is too simplistic. Obviously the distinction as I've stated it is in very rough outline, and obviously more detailed descriptions of the two methods could be given. If we were able ultimately to list all the possible subcategories of each method plus all the possible hybrids of both, would it still be a crude distinction? It would; because rather than functioning most importantly as a hermeneutical tool for the history of philosophy (classifying philosophers with it as I've been doing), it has to make itself felt in the actual reading of philosophical texts, and I think it does. The opening lines of two twentieth-century books will show what the distinction is, and show why it would be a waste of time (at least here) to try to define the two methods exactly.

AP: "The traditional disputes of philosophers are, for the most part, as unwarranted as they are unfruitful. The surest way to end them is to establish beyond question what should be the purpose and method of a philosophical enquiry. And this is by no means so difficult a task as the history of philosophy would lead one to suppose" (Ayer 33).

QP: "An ant is crawling on a patch of sand. As it crawls, it traces a line in the sand. By pure chance the line that it traces curves and

recrosses itself in such a way that it ends up looking like a recognizable caricature of Winston Churchill. Has the ant traced a picture of Winston Churchill, a picture that **depicts** Churchill?" (Putnam 1).

New books that open in these very different ways are likely to arouse very different feelings in their readers, and more pertinently, are likely to appeal to different sorts of audience. Before looking too closely at the differences, we should remark some similarities. I tried not to stack the deck in favor of either QP or AP by selecting texts which would announce themselves as difficult or easy at the outset: both opening passages are I think equally clear and accessible. Both attempt to "hook" the reader in certain ways. And both are somewhat misleading as examples of what is to follow. For all the grandiose "campaign promises" of its first paragraph, which could lead one to expect a deal of technicality, Ayer's book is lucid and easily understood throughout, even by a reader with slight philosophical background. (Since I mean to argue that this is quite rare for AP, I wanted to bring forward one of the best counterexamples to my case, because I see it as an exception that proves the rule.) If Putnam's reader, on the other hand, presumes he or she is going to continue being entertained with charming little puzzles and fancies about ants portraying Churchill and brains-in-a-vat, he or she will be disabused of that in less than twenty pages, when Putnam dives right into the Lowenheim-Skolem theorem to make a thorny logical point. (Even the initial statement of the brains-in-a-vat problem isn't in the most transparent prose a philosopher ever wrote.)

So much for the similarities. But there are evident differences, and these have to do more than anything with the reader's probable reactions to the two passages, and that depends on what kind of reader it is. What reader will want to read further in Ayer's book? Probably someone who'd enjoy seeing the "traditional disputes of philosophers" ridiculed, and who'd like a short, uncomplicated statement of philosophy's "purpose and method"—both which desires Ayer meets, and neither of which demands that the reader actually do any philosophy. Ayer's "hook" is the tacit promise that those who accept him will be on the winning side, with lots of convenient ammunition to chuck at those retrograde metaphysical types. Putnam's "hook" is to get the reader immediately engaged in philosophic inquiry, little more than a "brain teaser" at first (or maybe I can't say that in Vat English) but progressing

quickly to serious and timely questions. The point is, the class of readers who are averagely thoughtful and so are likely to get involved with Putnam is likely to be much larger than the class to whom Ayer's iconoclasm and the attractiveness of controversy appeal. (Plus, there's enough of the latter in Putnam too, for those prepared to follow him through the thickets.) Whether this is deliberate or not, then, Ayer is writing for a narrower audience: or, since the truth is most readers of these books will have been assigned to read them, a narrower sympathetic audience.

The next part of the objection I mentioned awhile back said: why should I, as a working philosopher, care about the choice between QP and AP? And a partial answer is, because this choice is equivalent to a choice of the audience you wish to address. There are always going to be philosophers who write primarily for other philosophers—pick any logician as an example—and I don't mean to imply there's anything wrong with that but do we also feel we have something to say to the world at large? If we do, isn't it advisable to use presentation methods that allow as many as possible to absorb what we say, rather than restrict our audience to those with an axe to grind, which means, with some exceptions, philosophers and upper-division philosophy students? (A book like Ayer's is one of the exceptions; but he succeeds with the general reader only because he's able persuasively to misrepresent contemporary philosophy as opposing camps of heroes and villains.)

But the final part of the objection is more specific and more serious: what if there are good reasons not to have a "method of presentation?" What if consciously deciding how to present a train of arguments actually weakens their force? There is something to this. Students of Descartes frequently get disillusioned with his doctrines when they discover he didn't really sit in his oven, doubt everything he knew and recreate the world in six days. The method of presentation—QP in this case—seems sneaky to them, or at least distracting. And similar reactions occur in people who see through Socrates' "ignorance." But with QP we have to reply that it's worth the risk, because QP has the advantage of allowing readers and students to begin philosophizing on their own (whether they actually do it or not), to grapple with the questions under consideration and arrive at their own answers, and this is always more valuable than being lost in admiration for a "great thinker"—in fact it's precisely the

purpose of Descartes' doubt and Socrates' "midwifery." Even when QP is a sham, it works.

Against AP it might be claimed that what we have here is a system, and a systematic knowledge of the world is just impossible for human beings. This is of course Kierkegaard's point against Hegel. "The System" of Hegelian idealism, which never quite seemed to get finished, struck Kierkegaard as an absurd and blasphemous attempt to usurp the place of God, who alone has truly "objective" knowledge. And one might level a toned-down version of this criticism against AP in general. But in defense of AP, it needs to be said that not every "systematic" philosophy implies this Hegelian "God's-eye view." Paul Tillich writes, "It is the function of the systematic form to guarantee the consistency of cognitive assertions in all realms of methodological knowledge. . . . One could say that in each system an experienced fragment of life and vision is drawn out constructively even to cover areas where life and vision are missing" (Tillich 58). Tillich, in other words, sees "system" as a purely methodological term, as I am doing here. To present one's philosophy in terms of a series of answers is not necessarily to regard these answers as final or complete. Since, then, the benefits of both QP and AP outweigh their critical drawbacks, there are no compelling reasons why philosophers shouldn't consciously choose between them.

This choice, I have said already, amounts to a choice of audience: specifically, ourselves or everyone else. Most of us would cluck our tongues at Kant's elitist reference to "the multitude, of whose applause the philosopher is ashamed" (Kant 266)—but some of us would still like to know why we should bother, especially, to make philosophy accessible to outsiders? The answers are simple, even simpleminded: it's how we make a living, for one thing—only a lucky handful can survive on journal articles: but apart from such venal considerations, we seem to think philosophy is worth doing, because here we are doing it. To be permitted to keep on doing it, it's important that we persuade other people it's worth doing, and this requires giving them some notion of what philosophy is. At least part of our work must communicate with the unphilosophical public, and QP is the more effective way of doing that.

How does QP work? It abides by the King of Hearts' maxim, "Begin at the beginning, go on till you get to the end, then stop." Since the philosopher is working through problems alongside the reader, the reader

feels she and the philosopher are on the same footing. (It isn't necessary that Socrates' device of appearing to be on a lower footing be adopted.) The reader will probably appreciate, sooner or later, that they aren't on the same footing, that the philosopher's "companionship" is more or less of a trick: but this shouldn't matter, as the reader's receptiveness will have been won already. it's a commonplace that people are more receptive to presentations that don't start out "over their heads," and the posture of learning alongside the student is a common teaching technique. At the end of the process (or twenty pages in!) you can be talking about matters the reader would have thought **way** over her head if you'd started with them, just because you and the reader have arrived at them together, in the course of presenting and working through the problem.

"Pop philosophy" is rightly disparaged, along with any attempt on philosophers' part to palliate, water down or simplify real philosophy or recast it in "layman's terms." Why? Because these are all presentations which not only begin at the reader's level but remain there throughout. Because the reader receives no challenge, nor is required to follow and confront any previously unconsidered problems, such presentations distort philosophy and give it a bad name—distort it because the reader is likely to say "I could do that!" (if "that" refers to philosophy); give it a bad name because she is likely to resent others picking up fame and money for something so easy for anyone to do. "Pop philosophy," besides, is exclusively written in AP, with the attached commandment "Believe this" (a trait philosophical AP avoids), so any chance that readers will start thinking for themselves is alien to its purpose.

We are not, however, hurt by "pop philosophy" so much as by the fact that our professional journals are only intelligible to philosophers and those intimately acquainted with philosophy. (Most journals that could be cited as counterexamples, such as Phi Sigma Tau's *Dialogue*, are at best para-professional.) This is due, I'm suggesting, to the great majority of our articles being written in the "answering" mode—from the vantage and for the delectation of a private club or clique and in something a lot like a private language. Not to point the finger at anyone in particular, phenomenology, linguistic analysis and process philosophy as movements are equally guilty. (Let's leave post-structuralism right out of it!) No standards need be abolished or lowered to correct this

situation; what is needed is just a broader, more responsible use of QP—someplace else than in intro textbooks. As Hume suggests in his *Enquiry*, where "accurate and abstract philosophy" is seen as "subservient to the easy and humane," and where "nothing can be more requisite than to enter upon the enterprize with thorough care and attention" (Hume 19), accessibility at the beginning is what makes the communication of philosophic ideas possible and generates widespread interest in, even excitement about philosophy.

If you don't think widespread excitement about philosophy is desirable (pointing, for instance, to the sixties), ask yourself whether it's worse than the alternative: to be heard only by, and only accept into our ranks, the sort of arid pedants who lose sleep over the indeterminacy of reference and whether emotive utterances are governed by logical operators. But really, it never need come to such a lesser-of-two-evils choice at all, because such a choice is a false dilemma. We're talking to the arid pedants too. We are the arid pedants. But we can't survive if we continue to emphasize that aspect of what we do: more and more people are going to wonder why they ought to subsidize this kind of impenetrable arcana.

The line between solid philosophy and "pop" is admittedly a tightrope, and takes skill to walk. It isn't clear where the happy medium we require can be found. At the moment there is no philosophical publication comparable to *Psychology Today*[2] or *Discover*; network news has no "philosophy correspondent;" and obfuscatory diction is still for us academics a mark of pride and prestige—we're so much more impressive when we're not understood! But how will we answer the non-philosopher who asks us what our job involves? How, except in terms of questions familiar to that person, questions that person is already asking, by letting ourselves share in the asking? To begin over readers' heads is to shut philosophy off from the ordinary intelligent and thoughtful person, precisely the one who has most to gain from what philosophy has to offer.

NOTES

1. If this seems backwards, it is to be remarked that Kant's use of the terms, fashionable till now, is the reverse of Descartes'.

2. *Philosophy Today* notwithstanding: I doubt its readership is comparable.

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