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The Case for Impurity in Philosophical Writing

John D. Sommer

One is devoted to purity in philosophical writing in so far as he judges the value of that writing by its conformity with a model. A prevalent model is that which is distinguished by clear statement and precise use of terms. I do not wish to criticize this kind of writing. My purpose is to show that such writing should not be used as a standard for judging philosophical writing. I want to show the need for a distinction between two kinds of valid philosophical writing—the pure and the impure. Pure writing is that which conforms to standards, such as clarity and precision; impure writing is that for which such standards are secondary. Philosophy is largely promoted by the writings of other philosophers. I shall argue that philosophy will be curtailed, and many thoughts which deserve development will be lost, if philosophers habitually judge the writings of others by pure, professional standards. Where clarity and precision are secondary, it is difficult to recognize the value of philosophical writing. I shall suggest how the value can be discovered in ways that do not depend on comparison with a model.

I do not know how many philosophers are devoted to purity in philosophical writing, but I have heard statements from them and from others connected with their work that indicate the devotion is widespread. Here are some examples from colleagues in philosophy: (a) “No one writes books in philosophy anymore—only articles.” (b) “Philosophy is done piecemeal nowadays.” (c) “It seems you can publish any article if only it’s clear—no matter what it’s about.” (d) “The mainstream of philosophy is analysis,” or “philosophy is analysis.” (e) “What is the *point* of the paper?” From editors who know something of philosophy I have heard these statements: (f) “There is no market for this book.” (g) “This work does not fit in any category that we publish.” (h) “It is difficult to see what the argument of the paper is.” I often hear students claim that philosophy is “irrelevant” or “abstract”, and one university president told me, “it seems philosophers only argue about words.” Of course, some of these statements are vague, some are false, and some are not worth answering, but all of them indicate something about the speaker—he is judging philosophical writing by means of a model. Whether he is contemptuous of philosophy or devoted to it is another matter. Insofar as he makes his statement with conviction and expects his hearers to understand it, he is at least devoted to his *model*, if not to what it is a model of.

It is more important for the philosopher to discover whether or not an argument is valid than it is for him to compare it to a model argument. One discovers validity in a pure argument by comparing it to a model, such as a syllogism or an ordinary language analysis. But how does one discover validity in an original

argument? Are we to assume that the forms of all valid arguments are already known, and that no argument is valid unless it conforms to a known model? These assumptions are defensible. Suppose there is a science of philosophical argument; call it logic or epistemology. Suppose, also, that this science deals only with that aspect of arguments which is separable from their subject matters. Then, the subject of the argument is irrelevant to that science. It is likely that such a science will claim to have discovered one or a few arguments to which all others can be reduced. If it did not make this claim, it would lose its name of science and degenerate into a study of an indefinite number of particular arguments. But suppose we want to maintain that valid original arguments may yet be discovered. Then, where in the preceding defense of the science of epistemology did we go wrong? My assumption is that the study of philosophical arguments is not a science and is not comprehended in logic. This study is of both pure and impure arguments. If it confines itself to pure arguments, separable from their subject matters and capable of becoming models, then it looks very much like logic or a science. But if this study extends to original arguments, not yet classified, then it must find criteria for validity that are not capable of becoming models and are not separable from the subject matter of the argument. It is such criteria I want to suggest in making the distinction between pure and impure philosophical writing.

What are the differences between pure and impure writing in philosophy? I have already stated two differences, but they need more explanation. Pure writing conforms to a model, which is different for the analyst, the Marxist, the phenomenologist, or any other adherents to a school of philosophy. For the purposes of this paper, I shall simply identify pure writing with the analyst's model distinguished by clear statement and precise use of terms. Impure writing recognizes these standards and may to some extent conform to them, but they will always be secondary. They are not secondary to another model of argument but to something that is not a model at all. In pure writing it makes sense to distinguish between the method of an argument and its subject matter. The method can be examined independently and become a model of argument. With impure writing the subject matter is primary, and the argument cannot be separated from it. Impure writing cannot become a model because the validity of the argument depends upon its truth. The argument is impure because it is integrated with the facts, their consequences, and the way to understand them. In Hegelian Idealism the facts are interpreted as products of dialectical thought. In Positivism scientific hypotheses are interpreted as products of the empirical investigation of facts. But impure arguments do not conform to either the idealistic or the positivistic model of the relation of facts to theories. Impure arguments, when they are valid, discover original and unique requirements for thought within the complex of facts that constitute the subject of the argument.

Pure and impure writing are not opposed to each other. Impure writing does not reject the standards of clarity and precision so important to pure writing. The writers of one kind have nothing to fear from the writers of the other. The spirit

of the distinction between the two kinds is not that of Hume's *Enquiry*, in which he directs the reader to commit to the flames all books on matters of fact that fail to meet his criterion for validity. The spirit of the distinction is rather like that in Passmore's *Philosophical Reasoning*, in which he separates different kinds of reasoning within the whole enterprise of philosophy without claiming that his list is exhaustive or that some kinds of reasoning are models for judging all others. The spirit of the distinction in this paper is to resolve different parts of a whole rather than to discriminate between good and bad. It is also to emphasize the relative lack of attention among philosophers to one part compared to the other and the need to correct that deficiency.

When both pure and impure writing are well done, the differences between them are not sharp discriminations. Their methods of using terms, for example, are different, but most terms will be used in the same way in both kinds of writing. Pure writing achieves precision in its terms in at least two ways. The writer might make each term congruent with its subject, whether it refers to something or performs an operation. He might, also, discover how the term is ordinarily used and use it that way. By stipulation or analysis or some other means the pure writer uses his terms with whatever precision his method can produce in his hands. Impure writing may use stipulation and ordinary meanings too, but it allows some key terms to develop in meaning throughout the argument to conform to requirements of the subject matter. Many terms have meanings that can be stated in language,¹ and others perform linguistic functions,² but some terms have meanings that direct our attention to subjects distinct from language.³ When a philosopher writes about some unique or original subjects, he needs to recognize their distinctness from language. Such a subject matter continually remains distinct from all statements about it. Impure writing at its best is about a complex subject or situation which cannot be comprehended by names or statements and is not necessarily understood by persons who use terms in an ordinary way. This writing uses terms to point to qualities of the subject, and as the qualities emerge in the argument their terms develop new meanings. Precision is sacrificed for a more adequate idea of the subject. At the same time some more or less private meanings of the writer may be used in his argument to fill his need for terms not existing in his language. This impure writing, which freely mixes stipulated, ordinary, private, and developing meanings of terms, might be called subjective writing. It is subjective in one sense because its use of terms is dominated by the distinct peculiarities of its subject matter. It is subjective in another sense because the character, experiences, and imagination of the writer mix with his reasoning in the construction of his argument. Pure writing might by way of distinction be called clear writing because its use of

¹ e.g., bachelor = unmarried man.

² e.g., and; if.

³ e.g., politics; violence.

terms is dominated by the desire of the writer to be readily understood by his readers. Thus he tells them how he will use a term in other terms, or he uses it as they ordinarily use it, and he tries to guard against expanding the meanings of his terms by imaginative figures of speech or descriptions of concrete experiences.

Clear and subjective writing also differ in their purposes. Clear writing is better for communication. It stimulates debate and the discovery of models for comparison with other cases of philosophical writing. Clear writing is better for making rules which others must follow; thus it is especially valuable for some kinds of teaching. It gives direction to thought and speech. It is especially valuable for refuting a complex claim, as clarity directs the readers thoughts with greater force than does curiosity about a complex subject. Where the writing is clear the reader is inclined to accept the claims of the writer, for clear language has something of the quality of an argument in itself. To be able to state a claim in clear language seems to be an argument for its truth, especially among men who depend upon language in their work.¹ Subjective writing may not communicate readily because its first concern is to render the subject matter into language, without trying to simplify the subject and often by using extraordinary terms and unique experiences. It requires study by persons more interested in its subject than in its method of argument. Philosophers often claim to be less interested in the subject of discussion than in the arguments concerning it. They often make the arguments the subject of their discussions. Insofar as they are interested only in the argument they will prefer clear writing in its pure sense. For persons interested in subjects not reducible to language, subjective writing performs several purposes. It stimulates wonder about subjects that are not readily comprehended by established concepts. In teaching, it provokes the student to question rather than conclude. When the subjective writing deals with scientific problems, it promotes the formation of original and paradoxical hypotheses. When it deals with moral philosophy, it aims at solving problems with actions as well as theories. After completing the distinction between pure and impure writing, I shall show how solving problems with action is a necessary contribution philosophy must make for its own preservation.

Clear and subjective writing differ in the premises of their arguments. Clear writing begins with some distinct operation readily verified by repetition. Presumably, everyone could establish the truth of the premises by performing the operation for himself. The operation is clear because it is abstracted from particular circumstances held to be irrelevant to the argument. For example, to establish a premise we may see a color, use a word, feel a pain, lift an arm, or perform any simple and repeatable operation. Subjective writing cannot begin with such premises because the act of verification is not a model operation—it cannot be repeated at will by most persons. The premises of subjective writing do require verification; they cannot remain debatable points throughout the

¹ The refutations of idealistic arguments by G. E. Moore illustrate this force of clarity.

argument. Instead of becoming clear by abstraction or model performance, they are verified by unusual experiences, often complex, unique, and requiring uncommon abilities and attention to the subject. Subjective writing in philosophy begins with an intuition from concrete experiences having two qualities: the circumstances are relevant parts of the whole experience, and several such experiences bear either a concrete or analogical similarity to each other. No model operation can provide the intuition—it is an act of mind based on like experiences. Unfortunately, the premises of subjective writing remain forever unverified for persons who lack the required experiences and activity of mind. Clear writing can communicate to all who read, but subjective writing can reveal its discoveries only to those who think. It demands study and some experience with the subject.

The differences in premises, purposes, and uses of terms are reflected in the forms of pure and impure writing. The forms of writing philosophy are conventional and may be used by either kind of writing at different times. However, pure writing is usually short, the length of a journal article or a paper presented at a professional meeting. It is abstract, theoretical, professional, and technical; i.e., it is appropriate to all readers regardless of their circumstances; it concludes with a statement about something known; it conforms to the traditional statements of the profession; and it often makes much use of symbols learned in the study of professional statements. Impure writing is usually long, the length of a book or monograph. It is concrete, practical, cosmopolitan, and inventive; i.e., it is appropriate only to readers of some definite experience other than reading; it often concludes with a determined course of action; its statements will be considered interesting, relevant, or even dangerous by persons outside the profession; and it may invent symbols for original thoughts. These formal differences are not essential and are interchangeable.

Why should pure and impure writing be mixed within the profession of philosophy? Why shouldn't philosophers purify their discipline in order to concentrate their efforts and satisfy themselves with their results? These questions cannot be answered by a pure philosophical argument. They require some intuitions from the circumstances of philosophy in the United States. Contemporary philosophy is so rooted in language analysis that it would be absurd to ignore the importance of English usage to American philosophy. I want to argue that circumstances of the American people other than their language also determine the future of philosophy. Although the purist can argue that these other circumstances are not properly the elements of a philosophical problem, they are nevertheless the elements of problems for philosophy and for philosophers who require some institutional support for their work. Philosophers need to deal with practical problems of the American people to a greater extent than they have for two reasons. The problems of politics and ethics (not in the sense of what "good" means, but in the sense of how to make men good) have become the greatest concerns of free people. When people are free from the necessary aspects of production, defense, and education, and the principles of necessity no longer determine their actions, they turn to ideas for direction. If some of the political

and ethical problems raised in the deluge of ideas are not solved, the practice of philosophy will be greatly curtailed. Many ideas capable of directing actions are hostile to philosophy. Ideas that foster censorship of written materials, ideas of loyalty and agreement with authority, ideas of preparing young people to take their places in society—all such ideas contain potential threats to the activities of criticizing traditional conclusions and freely examining principles and arguments. Philosophers who pursue those activities will surely be subjected to the disapproval of the majority of people and many officials. It would not be difficult now to find instances where state and university officials have shown their disapproval of philosophical activities. Before the public disapproval of philosophy reaches the more obvious extent of dismissing philosophers from the universities, it will be felt as a decrease in opportunities for them to make a living in teaching. One might argue that philosophy should remain pure and avoid public disapproval by deliberate irrelevance to practical problems. The discrimination between their concrete ideas and their work might be maintained by a few philosophers. With that discrimination rigidly enforced, the practice of philosophy will still be greatly curtailed, not because of public disapproval but because the profession would appeal to so few.

If philosophers succeed in avoiding all discussion of controversial public matters, then philosophy will be curtailed by the loss of all its practitioners who could not succeed in avoiding such discussions. If philosophers do not succeed in avoiding all such discussions, then philosophy will be curtailed by the disapproval of officials and citizens who disagree with its discussions and have some financial control of its opportunities. One way out of this dilemma is for philosophers to solve the controversial public problems they discuss. I propose that the solution of an ethical or political problem that has been marked by public controversy requires a mixture of pure and impure philosophical writing.¹ The solution requires communication, the virtue of clear writing, and a developing understanding of a complex situation, the virtue of subjective writing. A practical problem that concerns the public and officials who have some control over the profession of philosophy is not solved by clarifying a concept. The clarification may be useful to the solution, but philosophy has not exhausted its function by clarifying. Clarity is only a virtue of language, while a practical solution is a virtue of action. The solution to a practical philosophical problem is an action. Philosophers are not rulers; they neither command action nor advise it. They can, however investigate a moral problem, clarify its questions and concepts, and discover how definite actions resolve it. Purists in philosophy believe that this last step falls outside their discipline. How actions become the consequences of statements is not known, especially where the statements are supported only by argument. But there is nothing about philosophy other than professional customs

¹ I have illustrated this method recently in a paper entitled "Violence in Democracy," in which some guidelines for controlling violence are demonstrated by asking a series of questions about the components of violence.

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that prevents it from investigating propositions of action as well as statement.¹ As the arguments of practical philosophy conclude with actions as well as statements, they do not necessarily conform to standards of language behavior, including logic and ordinary usage. Yet, the conclusions are actions which require language, for they are supported by argument rather than by force or propaganda. Clarity and precision in writing temper action, although they cannot discover it. Discoveries of right action require a mixture of subjective and clear writing. Insofar as the argument is clear it communicates and can be verified by logical and semantic criteria. Insofar as it is subjective it is about something to be done in a complex situation and the writer can explain what is new in the situation without being restricted by models. There is no social or natural science that discovers the right thing to do and no religion or ideology that discovers it by reasoning. To discover it by experience is too expensive in human life and goods. Philosophical reasoning can discover the right thing to do, provided the limits imposed on philosophical writing by professional standards do not obstruct reasoning by their insistence on purity.

There are some peculiarities in my case for impurity in philosophical writing. The argument is not entirely clear, because what I am writing about has not received sufficient attention in contemporary philosophy to be marked by clear distinctions and precise terms. The problem I have tried to point out is not that there is too much clear writing, but that the judgments of philosophers about writing are too much devoted to purity. They judge too much by comparison to models of clarity and precision and thereby dismiss from philosophy all those problems which cannot be solved by such writing. My aim is to promote publication of impure writing to develop discussion and discovery of solutions to practical problems. It is to show why professional philosophers should not judge arguments by model standards. Devotion to purity cuts off resources of new ideas and curtails philosophy by restricting its professional interests to academic questions.

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¹ If philosophers propose public actions, they should do it by philosophical writing rather than by passing resolutions with a majority vote. Their attempts to influence public policy by vote are ridiculous, because there are so few philosophers and they are so unrepresentative of the people or their government. The political power of philosophy is in argument—by its clarity and its reflection of complex political subjects.

