RETHINKING DISAGREEMENT: PHILOSOPHICAL INCOMMENSURABILITY AND META-PHILOSOPHY

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Set in the context of the current interest among Analytic philosophers in the "epistemology of disagreement," this paper explores the meta-philosophical problem of philosophical incommensurability. Motivated by Nietzsche's provocative remark about philosophy as prejudices and desires of the heart "sifted and made abstract," the paper first outlines the contours of the problem and then traces it through a series of examples. Drawing largely on the tradition of phenomenology and philosophical hermeneutics, a broadly Continental response to this formidable problem is suggested. Disagreement cannot be understood simply in terms of epistemological strategy, but needs to be regarded in a fundamentally hermeneutical light.

An important feature of Australasian philosophy over the last decade has been its contribution to the growing exploration of the methodological divide between Analytic and Continental philosophy.[1] This paper looks to further this discussion through an engagement with a significant thread in recent Analytic epistemology concerning the problem of philosophical disagreement.[2] An analysis of this formidable philosophical issue reveals significant methodological disparities between the Analytic and Continental traditions that, it will be suggested, can only stem from strikingly different meta-philosophical assumptions.

Perhaps the key focus of this newly intensified debate in the Analytic literature regarding the "epistemology of disagreement" is a concern with the rationality of maintaining one's convictions with respect to a particular philosophical issue (or for that matter, any kind of issue at all) in a situation where others—especially one's so-called "epistemic peers," who are as intelligent and informed as oneself—hold just as strongly to a contrary and incompatible position on the basis of apparently similar or identical evidence. In particular, the debate has tended to focus on justifications for "conciliatory" or "permissive" positions on the question as opposed to those that argue for the rationality of a more "steadfast" response even in the face of fundamental

[1] See, for example, the work of Jack Reynolds and James Chase in their *Postanalytic and Metacontinental: Crossing Philosophical Divides* (London: Continuum, 2011) and *Analytic Versus Continental: Arguments on the Methods and Value of Philosophy* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2011), as well as Marguerite La Caze, *The Analytic Imaginary* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002). This scholarship is part of a growing field of research internationally.

[2] This recent debate in Analytic epistemology might perhaps be traced back to Gilbert Harman's *Change in View: Principles of Reasoning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), though a key founding text for recent conversation has been Peter van Inwagen's oft-quoted little essay from 1996 in which he addresses W. K. Clifford's famous claim announced in his "The Ethics of Belief" and which van Inwagen uses as the title for his own paper: "It is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything upon Insufficient Evidence," in *Faith, Freedom and Rationality*, (ed.) J. Jordan and D. Howard-Snyder (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 137–54. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as WEA. Over the last few years, the literature in this area has grown significantly in prominent journals and edited collections, culminating in Feldman and Warfield's 2010 edited collection, *Disagreement* (New York: Oxford University Press). Debate continues and shows no signs of dissipating.

disagreement. The ultimate aim of much of this debate is to find ways of accounting for stubborn basic disagreements, while at the same time avoiding philosophical relativism or scepticism.

This paper does not seek to engage with that debate on its *own* terms; it is rather an attempt to open a dialogue from a perspective outside the bounds of that discourse. Drawing on some key insights provided by the phenomenological tradition, this paper aims to deepen the Analytic debate and suggests a much larger framework to think again about the conditions of possibility of philosophical engagement. For this reason, it is not so much a study in epistemology *per se*, as much as *meta-philosophy*. Moreover, this paper takes as it its starting point the phenomenon of "philosophical incommensurability," a theme with which the current Analytic debate, at least in its more lucid moments, has been essentially concerned. However, what is ultimately at stake here are not just strategic argumentative considerations concerning stubborn philosophical disagreements, but the very possibility of disagreement *or agreement* (the possibility of taking and maintaining a position) at all. The problem of incommensurability of viewpoints in philosophical dialogue provides a privileged window on the enterprise of philosophy in general by highlighting the vastly complicated context in which philosophical discussion occurs. This is a context that is easily overlooked in the case of philosophical *agreement*, yet it is no less relevant there also. In brief, this is an investigation into the very possibility of philosophy—of how philosophers come to adopt the basic positions that drive their philosophical projects in the first place, and which their philosophical arguments are marshalled to defend—albeit one that makes use of the leverage provided by the phenomenon of intractable disagreements that can emerge even in the case of seasoned and attentive philosophical debate.

Philosophical Incommensurability

Philosophical incommensurability is a name for an aporetic experience that, while relatively familiar to most philosophers, has, until quite recently, been infrequently named in any explicit way and even more rarely made the subject of serious philosophical consideration. References to the phenomenon are rarely more developed than passing remarks (often in the mode of vague lament); references "in the margin" as Derrida might put it, and almost never "the matter itself" for investigation. In this context, Peter van Inwagen's 1996 paper, "It is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything upon Insufficient Evidence" was something of a break-through in the Analytic tradition. However, as subsequent scholarly discussion purportedly inspired by this paper has shown (discussion that has largely lapsed into considerations of logical and strategic matters in debate theory), that tradition lacks the resources to respond appropriately to the problem as van Inwagen sketched it. What are needed are not still more attempts to dissolve the problem once and for all in a blinding flash of logic, but redoubled efforts to build a critical understanding of the philosophical task as a distinctively human act.

Cases of philosophical incommensurability occur when one philosopher's basic reading of the reasonableness of a particular claim or interpretation—and, indeed, often her basic reading(s) of reality—fundamentally differs with those of her interlocutor. What is at stake is not the simple *fact* of disagreement. Philosophy is, after all, filled with differences of position, and it is the task of the philosopher to carefully and patiently offer her interpretation while, just as carefully and patiently, listening to differing views of others. Negotiating complexities is at the very heart of the philosophical task. Rather, at issue are situations in which this process reaches a kind of terminus without resolution, and in which the possibilities of resolution seem to be indefinitely stalled neither due to a particular concept being insufficiently understood by one of the parties, nor a particular point at issue being in dispute, but due to fundamentally different interpretations of reality. In such cases—of the sort van Inwagen describes between David Lewis

and himself (WEA, 138)—it is not so much the quality of the engagement between philosophers that is at fault, but rather the very different set of assumptions that are brought to the table in the first place. In such situations, more dogged interlocutors will attempt to revisit first principles in a renewed search for common ground, but yet find themselves bemused, or even aghast, that the other could possibly see things as they say they do. And even if one comes to understand something of the foreign ground on which one's interlocutor stands—something that would require genuinely suspending one's disbelief and considering the odd (perhaps even repugnant) viewpoint long and conscientiously enough to sense its own strange logic within the floating bubble of its worldview—even then, there is still the lingering incredulity that anyone would ever really take such a view of the world seriously, subscribing to it and standing passionately for it. We are left with what seems like the 'brute fact' of a heterogeneity of basic assumptions between individuals with implacably opposed views who nonetheless share much intellectual ground in common.

One way of framing this problem is to ask, how it is that philosophers come to adopt the basic positions that drive their philosophical projects, and which philosophical arguments are marshalled to defend? Where do the basic intuitions come from that are largely assumed in the crafting and staging of arguments? This is an issue that Aristotle pointed to in laying out his *organon* for thought, for logic can only be applied on the basis of premises that are *brought to* the task of thinking, and are not themselves supplied by the logic. Of course, the premises of any argument can themselves be made the subject of inquiry, but the *prima facie* infinite regress this introduces was a problem of which Aristotle himself was very aware. Where is the ground, the mythical linchpin of *prima philosophia* that provides the ultimate foundation and secures all knowledge? In a sense, this is *the* methodological problem of philosophy that all of the great philosophical systems (perhaps most famously and programmatically those of Aristotle, Descartes and Kant) look to answer in their distinct ways. From whence come our most basic and hitherto unexamined assumptions? Are they merely expressions of "common sense"? Groundless impressions? Desires of the heart?

The last of these options comes, of course, from Friedrich Nietzsche. According to one of his most incendiary passages on this theme, philosophy is best understood as "a prejudice, a notion, an 'inspiration', generally a desire of the heart sifted and made abstract, [and] defended…with reasons sought after the event."[3] The English playwright and novelist W. Somerset Maugham made a strikingly similar comment a half century later in his meditative little vignette about meeting with an old Chinese Confucian philosopher who, he says, confirmed his suspicion that philosophy is "an affair of character rather than of logic: the philosopher believes not according to evidence, but according to his own temperament, and his thinking merely serves to make reasonable what his instinct regards as true."[4]

A few years ago, Simon Blackburn—in one of his more Nietzschean moments—made a highly complementary point in asking how it is that "some feature of things weighs with people in their deliberations," so that they come to "see it as a reason" for or against a proposition. From what mysterious source does this "weight" arise? Arguing against those who would see philosophy as requiring the pre-eminent dominance of reason over the passions—of Apollo over Dionysus—Blackburn points out (inspired by the unlikely pairing of David Hume and Augustine)

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[3] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, (tr.) R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), 36.

[4] W. Somerset Maugham, "The Philosopher," in *On a Chinese Screen* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1922), 164. Confucianism, says Maugham on the same page, "gained so firm a hold on the Chinese…because it explained and expressed them as no other system of thought could do."

that on such an account "Apollo's control is unintelligible." What is needed is a motivational account of the *weight* we experience in rational deliberation, a weight that can only be explained in terms of the fact that "we *already* care."[5]

This "already caring" is what is at issue here. While the tools of argumentative reason are routinely used to defend philosophical positions and their importance, there is a sense in which logic comes too late to explain our commitment to such views in the first place. This is neither to say that these views are *ir*rational (or *anti*-rational), nor that there is a lack of substantial rational subtext to the way we intuitively see things. It is to say, however, that the formal reasons produced to justify commitments to propositions are effectively posterior to the commitment itself: they come "after the event," as Nietzsche put it. And if one is willing to grant as much, then it is a very short leap to Blaise Pascal's famous twist on Aristotle: "We know the truth not only by reason, but by the heart; it is in the latter way that we know first principles."[6]

How then do we understand the contingency and the contextuality of philosophical thinking? The basic problem of philosophy is that it is done by philosophers: that is, it is always already a dialogue between individuals who—*as* people—are situated in the world, are products of all manner of individual circumstances and influences through which their basic intuitions are shaped. As Thomas Nagel long ago pointed out to the Analytic philosophical community[7], has not the lack of a privileged standpoint for the practice of philosophy been *the* elephant under the philosophical table all along?

But how is this finitude of perspective to be understood? What the epistemologists of disagreement refer to as non-identical *expertise* and unequal access to relevant *evidence* are clearly key factors, but they are just as clearly the tip of a very large iceberg. Affective factors are central (Nietzsche's "desires of the heart"), for what might be called *philosophical affectivity* plays a key role in the formation of contentions that individual philosophers are moved to defend as well as their motivations for rationally defending them. We might also speak of *philosophical intuitionality*, for beyond affectivity alone (though doubtlessly including it in various senses) lie the 'gut intuitions' (Nietzsche's "prejudice[s], notion[s], inspiration[s]") out of which complex philosophical arguments arise.

I will turn to some key phenomenological-hermeneutical insights that vastly deepen this picture in the subsequent sections. For now, it will suffice to simply name some of the multitude of "ontic" factors involved in profoundly shaping how we filter evidence, and how we then rationally interrogate it; factors that are instrumental in making us the kinds of thinkers—indeed, the kinds of *people*—we are. I refer here to factors that include: genetic constitution (with its vast influence on both cognitive aptitudes and temperamental characteristics); early experiences and traumatic events throughout the lifespan (which mediate themes and narratives that often dominate future thinking); cultural influences (which, while often invisible, can profoundly shape attitudes and frameworks of meaning and significance); the conceptual and affective possibilities opened by one's mother tongue/s (for the words, syntactic and semantic structures, and the paradigmatic connections of language provide the very stuff of thought, constituting the world for us); one's socio-political, geographical and historical context (with their enormous implications for the formation of worldview); and one's religious convictions or lack thereof (which even

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[5] Simon Blackburn, 'Am I Right?' *New York Times Book Review*, 21 February 1999, 24. Here, Blackburn reviews Thomas M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999).

[6] Pascal, *Pensées*, (tr.) A.J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 282. Or as he otherwise famously puts it in the same text, "the heart has its reasons that reason does not know." (277)

[7] I refer here, of course, to Nagel's famous phrase "the view from nowhere." See Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

when brought within an intellectual frame can significantly influence thought in profound ways). The range and depth of such influences are enormous.

One way in which this whole area has received some attention of late concerns observations about the relation between the philosopher's life and his/her thought. Bruno Clément, for example, recently argued that "biographical events determine the nature, the scope [and] the acuteness of philosophical questioning," citing various cases in point.[8] Among the most interesting of these he highlighted was the competitive animosity between Voltaire and his elder brother Armand during their childhood. Clément traces the echoes of those years in Voltaire's later attitude to brotherly love, and more strikingly, in his method in *Lettres philosophiques* where the figure of Pascal is effectively set up in Armand's place in such a way as to reproduce the structure of the verbal jousts he once shared with his brother. Another example of this line of inquiry is Béla Szabados's recent intellectual biography of Ludwig Wittgenstein, through which he looks to elucidate the latter's philosophical commitments. Citing Wittgenstein's own acute remark that "work on philosophy...is really more a work on oneself," Szabados maintains that the reason one cannot simply separate the personal from the philosophical, is that there are "philosophical aspects of the personal and personal aspects of the philosophical."[9]

The work of William James provides another window on the problem, along with some nascently hermeneutical insights. Following Hume's emphasis on custom, habit and affect as being the wellsprings of reason, James argued for the centrality of affect and volition for rational belief formation.[10] James's account of the way in which such factors effectively distinguish at the outset between "live hypotheses" and those that are beyond the pale is central here[11], as are his comments on the continued influence of the passions on more advanced explicitly rational deliberation, especially when such reasoning is insufficient to provide clear guidance either way.[12] For James, rational argumentation *alone* comes too late to explain the basis of our philosophical commitments.

The profound inertia effect of entrenched viewpoints is a widely understood phenomenon, particularly in the context of worldviews inculcated during childhood which have an extraordinary capacity for persistence through a lifetime, or otherwise set the scene for a lifetime of *reaction*. It is of course true that rational argumentation may well be a motivating force for significant changes of established viewpoints. One could imagine, for example, a compelling rational argument playing a key role in the rupture of a long-established interpretive structure, and perhaps also its replacement by a new one. However, it is to be doubted that such episodes are all that common, or that they are ever a purely rational event devoid of any passional element. The potential for logical propositions alone to get beneath and radically reshape mature outlooks

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[8] From an unpublished lecture by Clément (Paris VIII) delivered at the University of Western Sydney, in association with The State Library of New South Wales, 2 August 2006.

[9] Béla Szabados, *Ludwig Wittgenstein on Race, Gender and Cultural Identity* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2010), 60.

[10] See William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Charleston, SC: Nabu Press, 2010). In this work, James explicitly argues against van Inwagen's interlocutor, W. K. Clifford. On this, see Christopher Hookway, "James' Epistemology and the Will to Believe," *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2011): 30–38.

[11] See *ibid.*, 2, 27 and passim.

[12] An interesting contemporary case-study of James's account might consider the rival claims of conservative Christian philosophers of religion and the so-called "new atheist" thinkers, some of whom make use of quite detailed logical argumentation to support their respective positions, but whose "live options" for belief would appear to be utterly divergent.

on the world, passionally-underpinned motivations, and committed volitional structures would appear to be very limited.

Meta-philosophical insight requires that we take seriously the unavoidably human context of philosophy. If philosophy is only ever conducted by people, and if people are profoundly influenced in their thinking by their contingent life contexts, then philosophy is profoundly influenced by the contingent life contexts of its practitioners.

Philosophical Incommensurability in Action

On the basis of this survey of some of the many issues involved in understanding philosophical incommensurability and its place within the broad canvas of philosophical engagement, it will be helpful to turn to some pertinent examples of the phenomenon in action. One does not have to look too hard to find compelling cases across all areas of philosophy, although, given the constraints of space, just a few examples must suffice, most of them drawn (quite deliberately) from debates within broadly Analytic discussions.

Metaphysics is filled with standard problems that seem unresolvable on the basis of yet more rational argumentation. It was to this field that Peter van Inwagen initially turned, in his influential little essay on the theme, with reference to his jousts with David Lewis. Describing Lewis as "a philosopher of truly formidable intelligence and insight and ability", van Inwagen described his astonishment that Lewis nonetheless rejected positions to which van Inwagen himself strongly held, even though he was "already aware of and underst[ood] perfectly every argument that I could produce in their defense" (WEA, 138). How is it possible, in the case of Lewis, to rationally demonstrate the untenability of an approach like modal realism? One is eventually reduced to making protests (some of which Lewis has himself made against his own theory) about its "unreasonableness": about ontological inflationism, catastrophic counter-intuitiveness, and the like. But while such protests pack some punch, they are hardly knock-out blows. One's interlocutor might simply "see things differently." Further, how can metaphysical disagreements concerning the existence of the self, the "fact" of freedom, the independence of the mind, the reality of universals (and so on) ultimately be settled when people have such different intuitions about *how* the available evidence should be assessed; about what *seems feasible* over and above what can be logically asserted; about what—after all rational argumentation is done—strikes one as intellectually *satisfying*?

Areas of philosophy concerned with the discernment of intrinsic value are of course rife with fundamental methodological and intuitional disagreements, the resolution of which seems to lie beyond the resources of rational argumentation.[13] Indeed, within ethics, whole schools of thought—involving theories of moral sentiment and ethical intuitivism—are dedicated to the view that the discernment of moral value is an essentially *extra*-rational phenomenon. W. D. Ross's remark concerning what he calls "*prima facie* duties" contains a particularly striking statement of this position:

> I should make it plain at this stage that I am *assuming* the correctness of some of our main convictions as to *prima facie* duties, or, more strictly, am claiming that we know them to be true. To me it seems as self-evident as anything could be, that to make a promise, for instance, is to make a moral claim on us in someone else. Many readers will perhaps say that they do not *know* this to be true. If so, I

[13] Other than ethics and social and political philosophy (see below), consider also the many intractable disputes in aesthetics and environmental philosophy.

> certainly cannot prove it to them; I can only ask them to reflect again, in the hope that they will ultimately agree that they know it to be true. The main moral convictions of the plain man seem to me to be, not opinions for which it is for philosophy to prove or disprove, but knowledge from the start.[14]

What is intriguing about this passage is not only its unadorned honesty, but also the fact that Ross saw fit to include this key moment in his text in a footnote: as something that in a sense hardly needed to be said, that goes without saying. The things consigned to the margins of philosophy indeed! Yet, this is perhaps the most significant claim of his book: that if the individual cannot already *see* the self-evident nature of particular moral duties, no amount of ethical *reasoning* is going to help. Either you see it, or you don't.

Alasdair MacIntyre has made the whole problem of what he calls "intractable moral disagreements" an area of explicit concern. In this way, he made a very obvious, and yet very significant, point: that the claim of normative ethical models to be based on (universal) reason is undermined by the fact that so many "reasonable people" cannot accept such approaches:

> Utilitarians and Kantians need, just as much as Thomists do, to explain how it is possible *both* that they can claim the authority of reason in support of their views *and* yet be unable to convince certain others who are, it seems, not only quite as intelligent, perceptive, and insightful as they are, but also quite as philosophically skilful and informed, yet who remain in radical disagreement.[15]

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre makes a similar point concerning socio-political philosophy. Taking the classic disagreement between John Rawls and Robert Nozick on justice, he asks how it would ever be possible to decide who is "right" on this issue of fairness versus entitlement. His claim is that these are fundamentally different outlooks on reality and morality and, as such, no "in-principle" resolution to this dispute is possible.[16] On this point, MacIntyre is clearly correct.

Turning to philosophy of religion, it is possible to find cases of enormous and seemingly unresolvable divergence of opinion even among those who share a great deal in common, including a commitment to the primacy of reasoned argument. For instance, in describing his efforts to convince contemporary followers of Francisco Suárez (and thus fellow Christian intellectuals) of the metaphysical error of their ways, Étienne Gilson, the 20th-century existential Thomist, provides a wonderful statement of the frustration ensuing from basic differences of perspective. It was like, he says,

> …one of those conversations in which one man says to another, "Don't you see it?" "No." "Well have a better look." "Do you see it now?" "No." Then what? All that is left to do is for the man who thinks he sees to account for the fact that the other does not.[17]

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[14] William D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1930), 20–21.
[15] Alistair MacIntyre, "Intractable Moral Disagreements," in *Intractable Disputes about the Natural Law: Alasdair MacIntyre and his Critics*, (ed.) L.S. Cunningham (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 2–3.
[16] Alistair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 248–49.
[17] Étienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952), 104.

More basic still are disputes between theists and non-theists about the rational tenability of religious belief *per se*. Perhaps the best known recent example of philosophical incommensurability in this area is the stalemate reached between Bertrand Russell and Frederick Copleston during their famous debate on BBC radio concerning the existence of God. After some forty minutes of erudite, exhaustive, and quick-fire discussion regarding the argument from contingency (discussion already well-honed to address key issues, and filled with logical arguments of many kinds), Russell and Copleston reached an exasperated impasse in which each could simply not see how the other could possibly be rationally satisfied with the view he had taken. Memorably, they simply needed to agree to differ:

> *Copleston:* So your general point then, Lord Russell, is that it's illegitimate even to ask the question of the cause of the world?
> *Russell:* Yes, that's my position.
> *Copleston:* Well, if it's a question that for you has no meaning, it's of course very difficult to discuss it, isn't it?
> *Russell:* Yes, it is very difficult. What do you say—shall we pass on to some other issue?
> *Copleston:* Let's…[18]

More recently, the view that that rational arguments concerning God's existence and nature are by definition effective only for those who *already* believe, has gained increasing levels of support among both theists and non-theists. Steven Cahn, for instance, has argued that all such arguments are "irrelevant" in a strong sense to religious belief, and that to attack (or presumably also to defend) religious belief on the basis of the unsoundness of these arguments is "an instance of *ignoratio elenchi*."[19] Cahn's position can be compared to that of William Wainwright who has argued for the importance of *existing* faith in the assessment of rational argument. Wainwright understands this "passional reason" in the context of the need to have a "properly disposed heart" in order to grasp the strength of rational arguments concerning God.[20] His claim is both normative and dialectical: if you are to understand the strength of these arguments, you must first be properly disposed in an affective sense; yet such understanding itself undergirds the affect. (Of course, whether such a notion is seen as straightforwardly circular, or as wondrously paradoxical, is itself a matter of philosophical affectivity and/or intuitionality!) A compelling further case in point is Rudolf Otto's claim, early in his landmark *The Idea of the Holy*, concerning the futility of reading further unless one *already* has a clear experientially-based and affectively-rooted sense of the reality and the significance of what it is that he is talking about.[21]

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[18] The transcript and audio to this discussion is widely available on the internet. See, e.g., "Fr. Copleston vs. Bertrand Russell: The Famous 1948 BBC Radio Debate on the Existence of God" at [http://www.philvaz.com/apologetics/p20.htm]

[19] Steven Cahn, "The Irrelevance to Religion of Philosophic Proofs of the Existence of God," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1969): 170–72.

[20] See William Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995). Given the proximity of his notion of affectivity and incipient faith here, his vision is tantamount to the Augustinian-Anselmian notion of "faith seeking understanding," where understanding is possible only on the ground of an existing (if yet inchoate) faith.

[21] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, 2nd ed. (tr.) J. W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 8.

The preceding examples drawing on debates in metaphysics, ethics, political philosophy and philosophy of religion give only a sample of the phenomenon of philosophical incommensurability. As van Inwagen has pointed out, it is "a fact about philosophy" that philosophers rarely agree about too much at all. (WEA, 137) Indeed, many of these disagreements, I submit, are of this "incommensurable" variety. What is to be made of this?

On the Hermeneutics of Philosophical Incommensurability

The task is to elaborate a meta-philosophical account that explains the prevalence of philosophical incommensurability, without thereby reverting to a mere scepticism concerning truth that would utterly deny the enlightenment project by portraying us all—philosophers no less than others—as the playthings of all manner of a-rational (if not *ir*rational) forces and motivations. I suggest that a great deal of insight into this formidable question is already available to the Analytic philosophical community on the basis of well-established work in phenomenology and philosophical hermeneutics. The remaining space is devoted to sketching out, in an inevitably cursory manner, some key themes that contain the seeds for a transformation of the regrettably narrow confines of the current Analytic discussion.

First, though, it is important to name and address what is evidently the motivational force behind the contemporary Analytic debate concerning disagreement: the spectre of epistemological scepticism. The threat of scepticism has in many ways always lurked at the heart of the philosophical enterprise, as is seen not only in the responses of Socrates and his followers to the challenge of sophism, but even more vividly in the response to the developed sceptical (especially Pyrrhonist) arguments of the Hellenistic period. Philosophy is born in the moment of rejection of sophism and scepticism. Yet, from its inception, the western philosophical tradition has been involved in an ongoing negotiation between, on one hand, the enormous promise of rational debate as a means of uncovering truth, and on the other hand, the acknowledgement (sometimes inadequate or with insufficient honesty) of the limits of this program.

Philosophical hermeneutics inhabits the space of this negotiation. As stated at the outset of this paper, the patient effort to negotiate complexities lies at the very heart of the task of philosophy, and this is a core presupposition of the hermeneutical tradition. Mere relativism is a lazy answer to a profound question. The serious practice of philosophy requires work and a preparedness to adjust one's views in line with new evidence, broadened horizons for understanding, and closer attention to detailed argumentation. This is an essential feature of the philosophical vocation for which no supine insistence on matters being simply "true for me" is any substitute.

Nonetheless—as any serious reading of the texts of Sextus Empiricus will confirm—arguments for epistemological scepticism are such a threat precisely because they contain undeniable elements of insight. The goal, then, is not to merely deny all sceptical interpretations in a misguided circling of the wagons of epistemological realism. It is rather a matter of affirming its important insights while also pointing out its shortcomings and sweeping generalizations, thereby plotting a path between the twin horns of uncritical realism and global scepticism.

If, as suggested above, philosophical hermeneutics inhabits the space of the negotiation between reason and its limits, then early Heideggerian thought provides a privileged place to explore this negotiation, and with it the implicit dynamics of philosophical incommensurability. So many core Heideggerian themes powerfully combine here. Certainly, his notion of

fundamental *attunement* (*Befindlichkeit*) to the world is central.[22] In using *Befindlichkeit* in a way that is closely tied to *Stimmung*, this notion of attunement acquires a strongly affective sense. Concernful engagement with the things of the world is only possible on the basis of things *mattering* to us.[23] But the way in which things matter is something to which we are "delivered over," into which we are "thrown" (BT, 135); our receptive states are not of our own direct choosing. This speaks to our facticity: we find ourselves always *already* within a world of meaning. But further, affect is also at the heart of all understanding (and thus, interpretation and assertion; see BT §§31–33), which is only possible on the basis of our being-attuned. The world is disclosed to Dasein—a disclosure that literally un-covers things to us in the event of truth—only insofar as "it projects itself upon possibilities into which it has been thrown," for "it never comes back behind its thrownness." (BT, 284)

The implications of this Heideggerian notion of "being-in" for understanding the philosophical task are obvious and profound. The "philosopher Dasein," no less than any other, thinks from within and "out of" the context of its thrown attunement to the world, and it is only out of this context that understanding and propositional assertions are possible. But what this means is that the basic attunement of the individual philosopher to the world is something which is not intellectually within her own power. As Heidegger puts it, "the Self...can *never* get that basis into its power"; to be human is "never to have power over one's ownmost Being [*eigensten Seins*] from the ground up." Heidegger is emphatic here: as thrown, Dasein "has been *released* from its basis, *not through* itself, but *to* itself." It is "not itself the basis of its Being...it is the *Being* of its basis." (BT, 284–85)

If understanding arises out of this situatedness in which the world has already been contingently opened to us in our evolving attunements and existing understandings, then truth is the outcome of a dialogue between self, world and others, and, to this extent, (to use a much misunderstood metaphor) it is "negotiated." This does not of course mean that facts are "up to us" to decide or create, but that all understandings of reality have a context, some of which are more comprehensive than others. The world is uncovered in its reality always from a limited point of view that is itself made possible by a vast number of formative shaping factors. Without such shaping and framing, thinking would have no context, no foothold. Truth, then, arises *between* the worldly subject and objects in the world, as an event of the un-covering (*a-lethēia*) of the essential nature of things, albeit from a contingent, finite, situated perspective.

This Heideggerian sense of truth as emergent and negotiated—of being *between* the extremes of objectivism and relativism—is perfectly captured in a passage from his 1927 lecture series, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*:

> [W]hile truth belongs in a certain way to things, it is not present among things themselves as another extant entity [*Vorhandenes*] like them. And on the opposite side, truth is not in the understanding if understanding is thought of as a process within an extant psychical subject…. [T]ruth neither is present among things, nor

[22] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, (tr.) J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), §29, 172ff. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as BT followed by page numbers of the seventh edition of *Sein und Zeit* published by Niemeyer in 1953 and found in the margins of the English translation.

[23] Years later in *Beiträge*, Heidegger emphasized this same point: "All essential thinking requires its thoughts and propositions to be dug out like ore, each time anew, from the basic mood. If the mood fails, then everything is a forced clatter of concepts and word-husks." See Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*. (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1989), 21. Translation from Michael Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary*, (London: Blackwell, 1999), 133.

> does it occur in a subject, but it lies—taken almost literally—in the middle "between" things and *Dasein*.[24]

With this naming of the "between," epistemology is transformed into hermeneutics.[25] In an early essay, Hans-Georg Gadamer maintained that "there is no proposition that can be comprehended only in terms of the content that it presents. Every proposition is motivated. Every proposition has presuppositions that are not asserted."[26] All propositions have a context that is not immediately communicated with the manifest content. Further, as Jean Grondin has pointed out, both Heidegger and Gadamer made the deeply Augustinian distinction between "what [a] statement simply says" and "the completion that it encourages in the understanding person."[27] In other words, understanding requires much more than mere attention to the written or uttered linguistic sign. It requires too a serious openness to the "offer of meaning" that it contains: to "the whole that it opens up."[28] This is at the heart of Heidegger's notion of formal indication which points toward the need for an interpretive "co-execution" on the part of the one looking to understand.[29]

Gadamer saw the enormous implications of facticity in terms of the "pre-understandings" that not only limit, but also fundamentally make possible, all dialogue. Here Nietzsche's claims about philosophy (as driven by prejudices, notions, inspirations, desires of the heart) are brought into sharp focus. It is significant that Gadamer used the term *Vorurteile* to speak of that which we *bring* to the table of philosophical discussion, and which deeply informs what *happens* at this table.[30] His choice of word was as provocative in German as the translation ("prejudice") is in English, for in both cases denotation and connotation diverge. On one hand, both terms carry a negative connotation of bias or illegitimate skewing of one's viewpoint. But on the other hand, both terms mean simply and literally "pre-judgement," and as such neither denotes any inherent sense of distortion or undue slanting; simply of slanting as such. Gadamer's point, of course, is that there *is* no other possibility, no pure state of hermeneutic innocence. But nor should we wish for one, for without prior experience, thoughts and judgement, there can be no context for—and therefore possibility of—understanding.

This is the great paradox of facticity: that that which limits the freedom of our understanding is also that which fundamentally makes it possible. Understanding needs a ground from which to gain traction. And on this basis, the promise of philosophical engagement is not simply a matter of logic and evidence, but also, and perhaps even more so (especially at its more advanced stages) of the challenging and broadening of horizons—both one's own and those of one's interlocutor(s). In this sense, philosophical incommensurability is not so much a matter of the failure of evidence or engagement, but of the lack of co-attunement or "co-execution."

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[24] Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, (tr.) A. Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 214.
[25] For an alternative account of the same point, see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), Chapters 7–8.
[26] From "What is Truth" (1957), quoted in Jean Grondin, *Sources of Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 106.
[27] *Ibid.*, 101.
[28] *Ibid.*, 102, 106.
[29] *Ibid.*, 102.
[30] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (tr.) J. Weinsheimer and D. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), Book. 4, especially 267–306.

In various senses, Robert Solomon absorbed many of the most crucial insights of the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics in putting forward his eminently accessible phenomenological account of affective attunement in its intricate dance with reason. In this he stands very much within the tradition of the later Nietzsche who criticised views that set up reason as "an entity by itself, and not rather as a state of the relations between different passions and desires," and which fail to see that "every passion...contain[s] in itself its own quantum of reason."[31] Fast forward a century and we read Solomon writing of a relationship so complex that he can speak of "the rationality of the emotions and the emotional grounding of rationality."[32] Far from being discrete and isolatable faculties, reason and emotion are deeply interconnected and symbiotic. Hence the futility of any effort to comprehensively understand the epistemology of agreement or of disagreement through an analysis of rational argumentation alone.

On the one hand, Solomon observes the rationality of the passions that involve appraisals of the world, and thus nascent judgements.[33] Such judgements are more or less "rational" depending on the accuracy of the judgement: that is, depending on how well they represent reality. But Solomon goes much further by seeing the passions as a primary means by which we are enabled to engage with the world in the first place, for they give access to the world, opening it up in its meaning. Of course, some emotions are more "justified" and "appropriate" than others: some distort the world (such as a raging temper that colours everything in its hot red glow), while others allow us to enter into and understand reality with great insight and subtlety.[34] Thus, emotion can be a force for rationality or irrationality: it all depends on its aptness or "fit" to the situation. This leads Solomon to describe rationality *as* "emotional prudence," and he approvingly quotes Ronald de Souza's notion that "appropriateness is the 'truth' of the emotions—what makes them rational."[35]

But, on the other hand, Solomon just as strongly wants to stress the emotional context of all rationality, and this is an angle that I think is especially important for understanding what is at stake in cases of philosophical incommensurability. His point is not that logic boils down to emotion; it is that our emotional lives provide the context and directionality for our rational practices.[36] Even when the relationship is not direct, the emotions provide "reasons for looking for evidence of one kind rather than another, or reasons for accepting a conclusion rather than struggling to refute it."[37] The emotions frame, limit and direct attention, giving us a conception of the world and attuning us to it in specific ways, imbuing particular things with value, importance and significance, and casting other matters and perspectives into shadow. Without such attunement, the world would have an immensely open horizon, with the number of goals to which we might direct our attention, the possible strategies for achieving them, and the kinds of evaluations that might be employed, functionally infinite. In providing a clear set of things that we care about, the emotions clear the decks for rational assessment to then do its specialized

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[31] From *Der Wille zur Macht*, tr. by W. Kaufmann in *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (New York: Meridean Books, 1959), 203.

[32] Robert Solomon, *The Joy of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 78.

[33] Such conceptions of the work of the emotions are far from new. While they disagreed on the details, ancient Stoic thinkers such as Chrysippus, Posidonius, Seneca and others wrote with great insight about the subtle work of the emotions as unique forms of judgement with their own native "logic" and which stand in intimate relationship to rational judgement. On this, see Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[34] Hence the enormous significance of what we now call "emotional intelligence."

[35] Solomon, Joy of Philosophy, 82–83, 85.

[36] See *ibid.*, 85–87.

[37] *Ibid.*, 80.

work. Indeed, as the work of Antonio Damasio has shown, there is much neurological evidence (for example, through studies of the effects of brain injury), that the capacity to focus on tasks and make intelligent practical decisions is linked to the capacity to experience emotion.[38] Without the emotional content of our lives, reason would be without context or directionality.

On this account, then, the whole notion of "dispassionate" thought and argumentation (that is, thought devoid of emotional context) is utterly naïve. But, further, to the extent that the philosopher actually believes that she is standing on passionless (that is, ungrounded) ground, it is not only naïve but potentially quite dangerous, for it absolutizes or 'naturalizes' contingent ways of understanding.

Conclusion: Disagreement and Attunement

The problem of philosophical incommensurability cannot be understood purely on the level of rational argumentation and the assessment of evidence, as is overwhelmingly the strategy used in the current Analytic debate concerning disagreement. In speaking over three decades ago against the prevailing "foundationalist" assumptions of the epistemologists of his day—to which he saw hermeneutics as opposed—Richard Rorty provided a fine anticipation of the deeply ingrained assumptions of *present* debates among Analytic epistemologists in their scholarly discussions concerning disagreement:

> [E]pistemology proceeds on the assumption that all contributions to a given discourse are commensurable…[that is,] able to be brought under a set of rules which tell us how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue on every point where statements seem to conflict. These rules tell us how to construct an ideal situation, in which all residual disagreements will be seen to be 'noncognitive' or merely verbal, or else merely temporary—capable of being resolved by doing something further.[39]

As this paper has looked to explore, such assumptions overlook the fact that philosophical engagement is itself profoundly implicated in, and made possible by, affective and intuitional factors; or put in Heideggerian terms, the facticity of our basic attunement to the world. The current debate concerning the epistemology of disagreement is by itself an inadequate response to the significant meta-philosophical issues raised by these matters. Philosophical practice—as a deeply and abidingly human activity—needs to be regarded in a fundamentally hermeneutical light.

It is notable that at the deepest cutting edge of their papers, some contemporary Analytic philosophers working on the epistemology of disagreement can be observed to ask nascently hermeneutical questions that are unanswerable within the framework of that debate.[40] Peter van Inwagen provides a prime example of this when he makes the striking claim (or at least a "best guess"), that since there seems no item of evidence not shared between David Lewis and himself

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[38] See, for instance, Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam, 1994), as well as various more recent works.

[39] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror*, 316.

[40] See, for example, Catherine Z. Elgin, "Persistent Disagreement," in R. Feldman and T. A. Warfield (ed.), *Disagreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). There, she argues that "recent debates about the epistemic consequences of disagreement rest on a mistake." (59) See also Nathan L. King, "Disagreement: What's the Problem? or A Good Peer is Hard to Find," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 85, no. 2 (2012): 249–72, concerning the very notion of "epistemic peers."

that can explain the vast gulf between their respective philosophical commitments, the notion of "evidence" therefore needs to include "'insight,' or some other incommunicable element." (WEA, 138f.) What is this incommunicable element towards which van Inwagen mutely gestures? Rather than understand it as some kind of exotic or inarticulatable form of "evidence," might it not be understood rather as the entire context *through which* the philosopher sees and thinks? The lens through which all evidence is assessed? The vast context of life through which rational thought is first possible? Or might it even be understood as in a sense the very person himself or herself, factically given to himself or herself, and in the same movement given to the vocation of philosophy?

The problem with the current Analytic debate in this area is the narrowness of its vision, a shortcoming that is tellingly exposed by the problem it seeks to address. Philosophical incommensurability cannot be meaningfully addressed on the basis of a false disjunction between epistemological realism and scepticism. What is required is a *via media*: not just a third way between the extremes of objectivism and subjectivism, but a way that acknowledges that truth only ever emerges in the dialectical encounter that takes place in the space *between* the knower (in community with other knowers) and the known, and in the profoundly permeable boundaries between and among them. Such an approach is specifically provided by a hermeneutically-sophisticated understanding of philosophical engagement.

Insofar as the "problem of disagreement" remains a *merely* epistemological problem, it fails to come to grips with the properly meta-philosophical questions it raises, and the vast canvas it thereby opens into. Philosophical incommensurability is a problem that must first come to terms with the metaphysics of the philosopher *in situ* as a thinking factical being, and thus of the place of epistemology within an unavoidably hermeneutical frame.[41]

[41] My thanks to colleagues at the Australian Catholic University, interlocutors at the University of Queensland, as well as two anonymous reviewers from *Symposium*, for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.