



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

THE 'PHILOSOPHY OF PERFORMANCE' AND THE PERFORMANCE OF PHILOSOPHY

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The notion of the 'philosophy of x', which has recently tended to become part of many subjects, from music to management, tends to obscure a range of important issues. The idea behind it seems to be that, by designating one's reflections on a subject as the 'philosophy' of whatever it is one is reflecting about, one achieves some kind of higher insight. Such an approach arguably grants too much to a subject whose main manifestation is actually endless disagreement on fundamental issues. In the light of this less flattering view of philosophy I want to suggest that we may sometimes achieve more by thinking of some of our practices, particularly in the aesthetic domain, as manifestations of what philosophy might become, rather than just thinking of those practices as objects of philosophical analysis. If, following A.W. Moore (2011), we think of metaphysics as to do with 'making maximal sense of things' and with 'making sense of making sense', it is worth considering whether the making of sense may in fact not always best be achieved by objectifying what we do in the form of propositional claims. Sense-making may instead inhere in performances which reveal aspects of the world that are hidden by dominant practices and assumptions, including the assumptions of some philosophy as presently practised. Such philosophy can rather unreflectively work on the assumption that establishing what things really are must always be the prior philosophical task, and that philosophy has privileged insight into what things really are. It might seem surprising to question such an assumption, but even a glance at the differences, both during the history of philosophy and in contemporary philosophy, in conceptions of what things really are, can suggest that, rather than just adding another such conception, a meta-reflection on the instability of such conceptions may reveal something important about the role of philosophy.

Questioning of the idea of 'the philosophy of x' is not new. In his *Philosophy of Art* of 1802-3, Schelling asserts: 'it is to be expected that people set up a philosophy of the horse drawn cart as well, and that in the end there will be as many philosophies as there are objects at all, and that one will completely lose philosophy itself because of all the philosophies there are' (Schelling 1856, I/5: 365). Schelling was motivated by the idea of philosophy as a single system which unified the different and increasingly diverging ways in which the modern world was being understood. Philosophy would do so by seeing how these differing kinds of understanding related to 'the Absolute', to the fact that thought and reality could be shown to be 'identical'. The way the world is manifest in such forms of understanding, from the arts to the natural sciences to philosophy, is seen in terms of different preponderances of 'real' and 'ideal' (see Bowie 1993), art being philosophically important because of the way it incorporates 'ideal' intelligibility in 'real' material forms. Such systematic ideas have fallen prey to the advances of the individual sciences, which seem to resist incorporation into a unified philosophical picture, and to the awareness of the danger of neglecting cultural differences via too narrow conceptions of rationality. But Schelling's suspicion of inflating x into something which is a specifically philosophical object is still significant. The need to negotiate the conflicts between different domains of sense-making, rather than just accepting the fact of their differences and trying to establish a philosophy for each domain, remains central to philosophy today, for example in debates over the conflict between the 'manifest' and 'scientific' images of the world, or in debates between analytical and European understandings of key issues.

In the sort of approach to philosophy I am interested in, the apparent failure to achieve the aims of traditional metaphysics itself becomes a major focus of reflection. The crude fact which gives rise to this focus is that in philosophy the investment of intellectual resources leads to wholesale disagreement on fundamental questions, of a kind absent from significant areas of the natural sciences. Disagreement in philosophy has, of course, been constitutively present since its very beginnings, and one should not overestimate consensus in the sciences. However, what most obviously distinguishes the modern from the pre-modern situation is precisely that, at the same time as the sciences deliver more and more practically useable theories in ways they had not done in the pre-modern era, philosophy generates more and more disagreement on the most basic issues, and becomes heavily focused on epistemological scepticism (see Dewey 2012 for a brilliant account of this situation). This eventually leads to questions about the very nature of the philosophical enterprise, including the idea that philosophy has reached its 'end', for example, as the Vienna Circle will suggest, because metaphysical questions will be given scientific solutions or revealed as meaningless.

There is an instructive split in contemporary philosophy, between the aim of reviving some kind of foundational metaphysical enterprise, and the need to come to terms with the possibility that such an enterprise has revealed itself as no longer addressing what matters in the world we actually inhabit. The new analytical metaphysicians, for example, hold to the idea of establishing of 'what fundamental kinds of things there are and what properties and relations they have' (Williamson 2007, 19). Metaphysics so defined can be contrasted with Moore's idea that metaphysics has to do with making maximal sense of things and making sense of making sense, which opens up a very

different field of questions. The new metaphysical approach spends its time on thought experiments and the like, because philosophy is seen as a conceptual discipline. From the perspective of some versions of the alternative approach, this kind of philosophising is inherently questionable. If, following Kant, a concept is a rule for identifying an object, or, following Richard Rorty, a regular use of mark or noise to coordinate social action, the metaphysical enterprise as seen by Timothy Williamson and others lacks any plausible justification. It fails to connect conceptual questions to questions about what we actually do and what happens in the world, preferring to create abstract scenarios and issues, in the name of a rigour that is largely achieved by excluding the complexity of how the notional metaphysical issue of 'fundamental things' is manifest in the human world. Essentially, the approach attempts to ape the analytical procedures of the natural sciences while excluding those sciences' insistence on detailed observational evidence. That the approach can offer little to virtually any discipline in the humanities almost goes without saying, and is confirmed by the growing split between such analytical philosophers and the rest of the humanities.

It is well known, in contrast, that communication between the humanities and the major directions in European philosophy has become an ineliminable part of the contemporary landscape. The paucity of the actual results of seeking to establish what 'fundamental kinds of things there are' by metaphysical reflection contrasts sharply with exploration, for example, of the nature and significance of things in phenomenology. The most obvious fact about the contrast is that figures in the phenomenological tradition, like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, see art as essential to philosophy, in a way which is inconceivable in the narrower versions of contemporary metaphysics in the analytical tradition. The question is therefore how this philosophical attention to art relates to issues of performance.

So far we have seen a basic division in conceptions that can be summed up in terms of the distinction between the 'subjective' and the 'objective' genitive. In the former the philosophy 'of x' can be seen in terms of how x itself makes philosophical sense, meaning sense that discloses the world in ways that affect, illuminate, change, and reveal what we care about (on this with respect to music, see Bowie 2007). In the latter, the philosophy of x makes x the object of conceptual determination: this can be exemplified in the way that the analytical philosophy of art is often just an exercise in ontology, which seeks to establish the criteria, for example, of a 'musical work', on the basis of whether it is the score, a performance, all performances, etc. Such objectification can all too easily be inimical to the kind of sense that is central to art, where, as the case of music makes clear, the resistance to conceptual determination may sometimes be precisely what makes something aesthetically significant. Does this mean, then, that there is no value in conceptual reflection about issues in art? That would evidently be very mistaken, but conceptual clarification may fail to get to the heart of the philosophical import of art, because the sense characteristic of art is inseparable from its manifestation in the specificity of art itself. The question is what philosophical significance is to be attributed to such sense. Stanley Cavell's idea that knowing things is not the only way to relate to them points in a different direction and to more productive possibilities for philosophical exploration. Axel Honneth suggests that Lukács, Adorno, Heidegger, and John Dewey seek an alternative to the epistemological model that privileges the 'ruling idea,

according to which an epistemic subject stands opposite the world in a neutral manner' (Honneth 2005, 31). For Heidegger such a neutral stance only reveals the world of 'entities', when the vital issue is how the 'being' of the world is understood, and how it is that philosophy has lost sight of this in the name of objectifying the world.

It is in this perspective that reflection on philosophy and performance can best be located. The idea is to engage with the practices via which we make sense, not primarily as objects to be given a philosophical characterisation, but rather as ways in which the blind-spots in other practices, including in philosophy itself, can be made manifest. Heidegger's insistence on a radical introduction of finitude into philosophy involves a reminder of why many things we do make little sense, and a call to attend to the real sources of how meaning arises (see, e.g., Heidegger 1979). The focus on the aspects of art which can be objectively grasped, as though only truths that are immune to history really matter, draws attention away from the fact that the meanings which sustain our lives are more often embedded in practices whose significance we may come to ignore. Getting to the point of being aware of that significance may not best be achieved by discursive means, which points to why the role of performance in human culture can be so central. Therapeutic progress, for example, may not consist in new discursive self-knowledge but rather in a transformation of our ability to inhabit our world that comes about through performative articulation of the source of one's neuroses.

Such a view involves taking seriously the performative status of whatever we mean by philosophy. J.L. Austin, and, later, Jürgen Habermas offer a philosophy of performativity which reveals the way in which whole dimensions of language had become hidden to many philosophers by the predominant analytical focus on the semantics of constative utterances and the failure to see communication as the performance of an action. We should, though, also think in terms of the performativity of philosophy. The contentious point here is that in this view anything can be 'philosophical', if it makes the kind of sense that enables us or compels us to orient and conduct our lives in new ways. By making new sense or making sense where there was none, any cultural practice may do what we ask of philosophy in this respect. At this point one has to stress that the sense in question should not be trivial – Moore, as we saw, thinks of metaphysics in terms of 'maximal' sense-making – which is one reason why Heidegger and others focus on important art to suggest the significance of 'world-disclosure' for philosophy. Art is here a 'happening of truth' that 'unconceals' an otherwise hidden aspect of a world or changes the very sense of what the world is. The rigour required in such views comes about via the realisation that making sense is both massively conditioned by our location in historical horizons over which we have no final control, and by the fragility of sense-making in the face of the end of metaphysics in the 'Platonic' sense. Transcendence, which was sought by traditional philosophy in a timeless view of fundamental truths about the world, can now be sought in different ways. Heidegger claims in 'The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking', and Dewey implies in *Experience and Nature*, that the physical sciences are becoming the modern form of traditional metaphysics, because the mathematical account of the functioning of the physical world is inherently a-temporal. This situation leads to a questioning of philosophy as it is traditionally conceived, and points to other ways of conceiving the philosophical task, such as seeing transcendence as linked to practices that

are often not essentially cognitively oriented, and so are not necessarily subject to the same kinds of contradictions that are the primary feature of so much academic philosophy.

Some of Habermas' recent work has focused on ritual in relation to the limitations of the thesis that secularisation is a universal accompaniment to modernity. What is at issue in ritual can be seen as the performance of sense, because the meanings which rituals engender are inseparable from the performances of the rituals themselves. By analysing the sense enacted in a ritual in objectifying terms, ritual can - as modernity shows - often be destroyed as a sense-making practice. This situation is a version of what lay behind Max Weber's idea of 'disenchantment' (see Weber 2004). Something analogous is implicit in Hegel's idea that art no longer 'fulfils our highest need' in the way that he thinks philosophy, which he links to modern science and modern law, can, because it is less tied to the specifics of the empirical world (Hegel 1965 Volume 1, 25). However, in a manner related to the way religion seems to resist secularisation, art in modernity does anything but disappear from the repertoire of sense-making practices, as the development of music in particular shows (see Bowie 2007). With respect to performance the link to ritual lies in the shared irreducibility to discursive cashing-out of all the sense generated in performance. Habermas suggests that

Reasons and discursive thinking admittedly form the centre of mind that operates in dependence on language, and above all they form the vehicle of the learning human mind; but the space of meaning incorporated in symbols still stretches into a periphery of dimensions of sense which extends beyond the space of explicitly available reasons (Habermas 2012, 76).

This is because 'the space of reasons is embedded in a horizon of sense which is not verbalisable or is pre-predicative' (ibid.: 74), which can only be manifested in things like performance, where one participates in sense, rather than seeing it as something fully realised in the ways we talk about that sense. The question is what significance this horizon has, and how best to understand it in relation to the dominant forms of philosophy. This is territory most effectively - and often problematically - opened up by Heidegger, and we are far from an adequate understanding of how Heidegger can be used to shift the boundaries of philosophy. That seems to me one major task for 'performance philosophy'.

Philosophy, then, is not to be regarded solely as mapping out the space of reasons: that it must attempt to do this is obvious, and I am not arguing for a wholesale abandonment of discursive rationality, just trying better to assess its status in the light of the failure to arrive at anything resembling definitive theories. The point is that the content of reasons also depends on horizons of sense that are not grasped by inferentially articulated claims, and are, for example, embodied in the performance of ritual and aesthetic practices that are constitutive of a culture. The idea that performance can open up philosophical space which discursive philosophical approaches cannot should not be seen as involving a new metaphysics as a characterisation of 'entities' in the analytical manner. Instead, it should be considered as an exploration of horizons of sense that can be obscured by dominant cultural forms of attention, in the way that the work of Heidegger and others in the phenomenological tradition can be used to suggest. Habermas' awareness of the

neglected elements in his previous accounts of communication, and his consequent attention to participatory sense-making has to do with a lack in his earlier work of an adequate approach to what makes us invest in sense. Heidegger and Wittgenstein regard sense-making as rationally groundless (see Braver 2012): much that makes meaning possible can be hidden by the ways in which philosophy has tried to ground meaning, and therefore must be sought in non-discursive forms of the kind associated with performance.

What is meant here can be exemplified by a crucial element of musical performance, but also of most significant art and, indeed, of human life: rhythm. As an 'entity', in Heidegger's sense, rhythm is just repetition that can be described as a temporal sequence of physical phenomena. Such a description does not grasp anything of the 'being' of rhythm. Schelling gets at the 'being' of rhythm when he says it is 'the transformation of a succession which is in itself meaningless into a significant one' (Schelling 1856-61, I/5: 493). Both he and Hegel realise that self-consciousness is therefore linked to rhythm, because if experience is not to be just a chaos of different moments it must unify the multiplicity which the subject encounters. Such unification, especially since Kant, is generally seen in terms of the syntheses produced in judgments on the basis of the transcendental unity of apperception; but even Kant suggests there must be a ground of synthesis which is prior to explicit judgment, the 'schema'. Schemata are 'nothing but *determinations of time* a priori according to rules' (ibid.), which already suggests a connection to rhythm as the creation of significant temporal succession (see Bowie 2007 Chapter 3 for the details, and an account of how the early German Romantics developed the idea of rhythm as the ground of sense-making). David Bell sees the schema as 'a spontaneous, blind subjective awareness of intrinsic but inarticulable meaning' (Bell 1987, 241). If we take rhythm as fundamental to art, as a form of what Adorno terms 'judgmentless synthesis', the performance of rhythm, be it in music, dance, theatre, or any of the other arts – the rhythm of a prose style can, for example, be vital to its success – takes on a world-disclosing function.

Now it is not that we can't analyse and conceptualise the functioning of rhythm in many informative ways: doing that plays a legitimate role in traditional philosophical and critical approaches to the arts. However, the very ability to do so can itself be shown to be grounded in the basic generation of significance by succession that constitutes rhythm: in much music this, crucially, has a somatic dimension, involving libidinal investment, which is largely lost as the significance becomes an object of analysis. The awareness of a loss involved in the generation of objectivity via processes of identification founded on rhythm can suggest why, in modernity, as more and more of the world is objectified, a focus on aesthetic modes of sense-making often develops, in order to counter a divorce between affective and embodied understandings, and the world seen in objective terms. The kind of sense involved in rhythm is not reducible to the ways in which we analyse it, and has to be experienced in the motivated engagement with specific manifestations of rhythm. Such engagement, as the history of jazz shows, fuels a continuing revitalisation of rhythm by innovation which often makes no sense in terms of the existing codified ways of grasping rhythm, and so opens up new dimensions of sense. The drive for innovative sense is what is philosophically most significant here, and such innovation comes about through the nature of creative performance. Honneth's observation, cited above, that modern philosophy needs an alternative to 'an epistemic

subject [standing] opposite the world in a neutral manner' points to a subject whose very capacity to make sense of its world is constituted by its involvement in dynamic practices which are part of the world it inhabits and which are sustained by new developments.

Many debates in philosophical aesthetics endlessly circle around the issue of how much is located on the subject-side and how much on the object-side in our engagement with art: is beauty, for example, a property of artworks or is it just present in the subject contemplating the work? In the model suggested here, this split, which derives from the epistemic perspective, is seen as obscuring the fact that aesthetic sense is generated in the world in a manner which becomes incomprehensible from a perspective focused on the epistemic concern to overcome the notional subject-object split. The very historicity of what beauty is seen to be makes it impossible to locate it either as a purely subjective phenomenon or as some kind of objective property. The idea of a subject-object split should not, as Adorno suggests (see Bowie 2013), just be abandoned, insofar as it is a vital indication of the nature of modern life that, even as we gain more and more warrantable knowledge, our sense of our connection to the world becomes problematic. However, a decisive aspect of performance both for performer and audience is that it enables us to inhabit a world that makes sense by the very nature of our participation in it. That sense may often become ideological or can involve self-deception, but it also perennially involves the possibility of freeing oneself from distorted relationships to one's world. At a time when the legitimacy of the study of the arts is often questioned in the name of the advance of scientific explanation or of economic imperatives, performance philosophy can be a resource for remembering that what constitutes meaningful existence is not primarily dependent on what we know or possess, but depends rather on the quality of our participation in sense-making practices.

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Biography

Andrew Bowie is Professor of Philosophy and German at Royal Holloway University of London. Bowie's research is concerned with core issues in modern philosophy, particularly those explored by the German tradition from Kant to the present. He does not see the philosophical issues in question as separable from other key cultural responses to the problems of the modern world, and has written extensively about music and literature as well as philosophy. His books are: *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: from Kant to Nietzsche* (First edition 1990, second edition 2003, Spanish edition 1996; Iranian edition 2008, Chinese edition planned); *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy. An Introduction*; Introduction to, edition and translation of F.W.J. von Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy; From Romanticism to Critical Theory. The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* (Iranian edition planned); Introduction to and Editor of Manfred Frank, *The Subject and the Text: Essays in Literary Theory and Philosophy*; Introduction to, edition and translation of F.D.E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*; Introduction to *German Philosophy from Kant to Habermas* (which was enthusiastically endorsed by Jürgen Habermas); *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity*; *German Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Arabic edition planned); *Philosophical Variations: Music as 'Philosophical Language'*; *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy* has just been published by Polity Press.

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