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Introduction to
The great endarkenment

The received view of human beings is that they are autonomous rational animals in search of a good life and entitled to conduct this search on their own terms and understanding. Such a view, which culminates with the age of the Enlightenment, and whose roots probably spread deeper than that, is the target of Elijah Millgram's *The Great Endarkenment* (Oxford University Press 2015). Millgram shows how the view serves as a tacit foundation for large variety of endeavors within analytic philosophy. An attack on the Enlightenment view of rational agency is therefore also an attack on the very basis of philosophical inquiry as it is understood by analytic philosophers. In a way, Millgram is arguing that such a view of rational agency and philosophical inquiry belongs in the past. Humans of this century do not exhibit the defining features of independence, transparency and autonomy that philosophical theories presume. More importantly, this is not because such theories presuppose overly idealized normative criteria for rational agency, which concrete human beings do not meet. Rather, the point is that such theories are misguided, because they endorse ideals of rational agency that are not suited to guide the sort of epistemic agents that we are. The key defining features of human agents as they have developed through time are that they that they specialize in small areas of expertise and move onto other areas, when necessary. They are *serial* hyperspecializers with very limited capacities for understanding one another, and yet are forced to interact, and are thus pressed to search for a shared basis of communication. The facts of serial hyperspecialization undermine individual autonomy, since no one agent has access to all domains of knowledge, and hence must necessarily depend on the expertise of others. Furthermore, while dependent on the expertise of others, no individual hyperspecializer knows how to select the experts on whom to depend. Thus, the virtues of autonomy are never fully exercised. They are useless in the hyperspecialized world. The experts in conceptual analysis, that is, philosophers, are the ones who should be able to navigate from one domain to another. But philosophers have misunderstood the purpose of their inquiry.

Perhaps, despite the gloomy analysis and the impending sense of loss that the readers are bound to feel as they follow Millgram's fascinating argumentation, the book should read as a wake-up call to philosophers to reclaim their function or to adapt to this emerging new functionality of philosophy. It is common to talk of philosophy as living on borrowed time, retreating as science advances, Millgram depicts the fate of philosophy *after* the age of Science, that is, after the illusion of one grand, integrated and unified domain of scientific knowledge, that encompasses, organizes and systemizes all its subdomains, has been set aside. The collapse of this picture of knowledge makes philosophy a necessary and fruitful inquiry.

The authors of this symposium engage different aspects of Millgram's ambitious plan. The first two essays concern Millgram's arguments about agency and his critique of current action theory. In the opening essay, "Nature, Agency, and the Nature of Agency", Kenneth Walden discusses Millgram's account of hyperspecialization, by situating it in the debate about constitutivism and instrumentalism. According to Millgram, mainstream action theory shares the view that the defining features of human agency are more or less fixed. This view explains the predominant position of instrumentalism about practical reasoning, a normative theory that can accompany any sort of plan of life, goal, value or end.

On the instrumentalist view, when humans consider how to live their lives, they already have a given set of values and only search for the most effective way to achieve them. In stark contrast to this view, the view of humans as serial hyperspecializers denies that any material canon or structural feature is a fixed or unalterable aspect of humanity. That is to say that if we are the sort of agents that Millgram describes, then humanity lacks any sort of constitutive structure. There is no one precise program that decides what is best for us. As Walden remarks, this is not a completely novel idea, since Existentialists have underlined that the most salient characteristic of humanity is its malleability.

In the second essay, "Agency in Search of a Function", Benjamin D. Crowe focuses on Millgram's reflections on segmented agency and his critique of Michael Bratman's theory of rational action. The essay centers on the policies that constitute the agent's rational life plan and their relation to the agent's identity over time. Crowe's argument takes up the case of agents who exhibit an "aestheticizing attitude" toward life and lack the sort of fundamental commitments and attachments that current action theories regard to be ordinary features of full-fledged agency. The protagonists of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* and *The Gambler*, as well as Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler, are examined as literary exemplars of this way of living a life, because they do not seem to embody or express any overarching ideal of life, nor do they seem to care for the sort of specific personal relations and values that seem to furnish

life with meaning. Such characters prove to be unreliable partners in cooperative interactions, which might explain why action theorists have a special interest in profiling them. Crowe presses the case that, while current theories of action are misguided in the ways in which Millgram argues, they aim to capture a genuine philosophical distinction, concerning the sort of integrity or earnestness that agents display in living their life and that makes them reliable and trustworthy partners.

Two other essays concern the epistemological relevance of hyperspecialization and its epistemic implications. In the third essay, titled “On the Future of Philosophy”, Heather Douglas concedes a good deal of Millgram’s analysis of the division of epistemic labor, but disputes that humans are serial specialists. She raises some crucial questions about the epistemic definition of expertise that is needed to sustain the picture of serial hyperspecialization and calls attention to the institutional dimension of specialization, which importantly affects communication and, ultimately, the very possibility of a shared human enterprise. The suggestion is that despite their tendency to specialize, human beings possess the resources needed to decisively counteract the bad effects of specialization. The imperative is to design institutions up to the task.

The fourth essay, by C. Thi Nguyen, “Hyper-Specialization and the Fragmentation of Intellectual Autonomy”, shares Douglas’ more hopeful take on specialization and its consequences. In contrast to Millgram, Nguyen argues that the hyperspecialized world is still hospitable to some sort of intellectual autonomy. The focus of the essay is the concept of autonomy, which is shown to have undergone significant transformation since the Enlightenment project.

While the traditional concept is associated with integrity and agential unity, according to Nguyen, the complex phenomena of specialization reveal that intellectual autonomy is fragmented. To show this, Nguyen carefully analyses epistemic practices such as the ordinary reliance on others as proxies, or the way we manage defeaters that exist for any domain of knowledge, which are core phenomena of specialization. The illusion that we need to set aside in the practice of philosophy is that autonomy amounts to full independence of others and an integrated body of knowledge being fully accessible.

In his replies, Elijah Millgram restates the main points and claims of *The Great Endarkenment* in light of his critics’ suggestions. This engrossing exchange makes us appreciate how radical the philosophical proposal is, as well as the challenges and predicaments of what lies ahead.

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