

Are you *Serious*?¹

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Abstract: Extreme specialization will require us to replace generic conceptions of autonomy with discipline-specific methods of assessing whether one has matters in hand, is acting in earnest, and can be taken seriously. The uniform personality structures predominantly discussed in recent moral philosophy will not do; however, solutions to the problems of cross-disciplinary quality control will have to figure into those assessments. This sort of quality control cannot be managed by having experts explain themselves to nonexperts, but checking for refractive equilibrium across areas of expertise may do much of the job.

Keywords: autonomy; specialization; seriousness; quality control; refractive equilibrium

1.

The harder you stare into the Great Endarkenment, the more you have to rethink – or that seems to be the takeaway from these insightful responses.

The book of this name, to remind you, addresses itself to what, almost two centuries ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson understood to be already a state of crisis.

Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all. Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier. In the *divided* or social state, these functions are parcelled out to individuals, each of whom aims to do his stint of the joint work, whilst each other performs his. The fable implies that the individual to possess himself, must sometimes return from his own labor to embrace all the other laborers. But unfortunately, this original unit, this fountain of power, has been so distributed to multitudes, has been so minutely subdivided and peddled out, that it is spilled into drops, and cannot be gathered. The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters, – a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man (Emerson 1971: 53).²

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² The passage seems to have made a strong impression on Friedrich Nietzsche, who appropriated

Things have progressed much further since then, and it is too late to rue our fall from an earlier, simpler collective existence, or to long for a return to it; we have no alternative but to face up to the sort of life we are going to be leading from here on out.

As was perhaps inevitable for a volume that treats the philosophical upshots of extreme specialization, *The Great Endarkenment* traverses a number of discussions usually placed in very different philosophical subspecializations. So at first glance it's a surprise that three of the responses here converge on a tight cluster of closely related concepts: agency, autonomy, action, and what it is to act seriously or in earnest. The convergence is revealing; the Endarkenment threatens us with, in the first place, *helplessness*, and so our philosophical priority is correctly felt to be making sense of what it would be, in our altered circumstances, to take matters in hand, stand up for oneself, and proceed deliberately, resolutely, intelligently and responsibly. While these commentaries broach other topics as well, I will focus my discussion on this theme, together with the related question of what it takes to manage the sort of quality control that, in our hyperspecialized world, is a precondition of adopting courses of action we can reasonably stand behind.

2.

If you come to realize that the decisions you make on your own are worthless, soon enough you will not be doing much more than just going through the motions. So if autonomy as philosophers have been trying to understand it is becoming less and less of an option, what we are after will be putting people in a position to do better than *that*. Presumably the successor concepts to autonomy that we seek should capture what it takes for the decisions that you make, albeit no longer on your own, to be choices you can believe in.

Now, in the hyperspecialized world, specialists internalize very different standards for information, for assessment, and even for reasoning proper. *The Great Endarkenment* proposes cognitive-function analysis as one way of figuring out what we need to know to manage the transfer of information and guidance across disciplinary boundaries, and so improve the selection and execution of courses of action. A couple of illustrations of the style of analysis, just to give you the idea: think of *oughts* as a way to mark a practical directive as supported, without stating what that support is; necessity tells you to ignore anything incompatible with it, so think of necessity as an attention management device.

Because Kenneth Walden agrees that different specializations take very dif-

ferent approaches to what they do quite broadly, he objects that cognitive-function analysis will not be fair to, or in the spirit of a good many of them. (“What do you *mean*,” we are to imagine the artistic director complaining, “by treating light opera as a functionally characterizable product?”) As an academic philosopher, I’m quite sympathetic; I have an analogous reaction myself, when I interact with outsiders who try to construe philosophy as a science (a failed one, of course, because we don’t do very well by those lights) or a oddly dry branch of literature.

Walden proposes instead that “philosophy of logic [...] ought to begin as an exercise of taste”: when we are considering what to make of a differently trained expert’s reasoning, we should rely on our aesthetic judgment, where that is to be understood in something like the way that Kant would have meant it. And I’m sympathetic on this point as well; when we are amused by a Rube Goldberg machine, we are having an aesthetic response to the inept roundaboutness of what is formally correct means-end rationality, one which raises the hard-to-answer question: what *is* wrong with it? Such reactions can be entry points into various problems of philosophical logic, and we should pay close attention to them. However, if I’m reading it right, Walden’s proposal will itself have to face the very objection he deploys against cognitive-function analyses.

Specialists in different fields internalize area-specific aesthetic sensibilities that are as different from one another as are their other standards. For instance, you have to be a programmer to see code as kludgy; you have to be a barista to look at the shot someone has pulled, notice that it’s thick, creamy, and golden brown, that it’s settling near the bottom, that it doesn’t have a pungent odor but instead goes smoothly through the nose and glides across the tongue... and find yourself approving of it as *just perfect*. But that point goes for specialists’ responses to reasons and reasoning also. I have noticed, for example, that what to a philosopher is an elegant and compelling argument can to an historian seem circuitous and fragile; and that, conversely, what to the historian is a decisive case is, to the philosopher, clunkily stacking evidence in piles. You can see the difference in sensibility on display in the use of what you’d have thought was a basic logical connective: the “if” of apposition is almost never used by philosophers but frequently by historians, and here’s an illustration for the philosophers. In one of many similar remarks, Jonathan Israel tells us that “if Spinoza’s friend Tschirnhaus, and the minor Berlin court official Friedrich Wilhelm Stosch [...] had presumably been contaminated in Holland rather than Germany [...] such notorious personalities as Gabriel Wagner [...], Lau, Wachter, and Edelmann [...] were, like Knutzen, incontestably all products of German-Scandinavian academe” (Israel

2006: 167f).³ That “if” is not a truth-functional connective, nor even a conditional of any sort. Philosophers rely heavily on arguments whose spines are built from conditionals, and they generally reserve “if” and “then” for that purpose; historians don’t exclusively construct arguments of that form, but need ways of presenting the evidence that they, rather, *amass*. Aesthetics, and even the aesthetics of argumentation, is very often niche-bound; the upshot is that an appeal to any particular reference class of aesthetic responses is likely to be just as unfair, by the lights of this or that particular discipline, as deploying cognitive-function analyses. And that’s a sign that we’re onto something: a society of serial hyperspecializers is philosophically interesting in part because the management challenges it presents don’t get fixed by what look to be workarounds. Rather, the problems are *reproduced* within what was supposed to be their solution.

3.

Switching gears for a moment, Benjamin Crowe warns us against being overly dismissive of the half-century of attempts to make sense of a family of related distinctions: between wanting something, and *really* wanting it; between kind-of-believing something, and *really* believing it; between *really* doing something, and its just kind of having happened.⁴ Perhaps, as *The Great Endarkenment* argues, the idea of cashing these distinctions out in terms of policies that form stable and structurally central features of one’s personality was indeed misguided. But the thing these philosophers were after was understanding what it is to be in earnest and to take what one is doing seriously; surely, Crowe shows us, there was enough of the way of nineteenth-century literary exploration of the prospect of being in earnest about nothing at all to make it convincing that taking things seriously is something that we should take seriously indeed.

Philosophy is the specialization likely to be most familiar to readers of this journal, so we can reinforce our impression that seriousness cannot be reduced to policy by contrasting philosophy with the practice of what Thomas Kuhn called ‘normal science’ (1970). In a science that fits his description of it, practitioners are trained in routinized approaches to problem solving that might as well be formulated as policies; unless the scientific enterprise in which you are involved is in a state of crisis, proceeding on the basis of such policies is part of what makes you a serious scientist, rather than a crank or dilettante. To do

³ Notice the ellipses; it’s no accident that it was necessary to excise largish parts of the sentence to make it, by a philosopher’s lights, stylistically acceptable.

⁴ For a relatively recent representative example, see Raz 1999.

philosophy, however, is to be rethinking things from scratch, on an ongoing basis; that would include whatever policies or ‘paradigms’ you use to approach philosophical problems, and so if you merely proceed on the basis of your policies you are not philosophizing in earnest.

The policies – or more generally personality structures – that exhibit seriousness in certain kinds of specialization exhibit lack of seriousness in a specialization like our own. So being in earnest about what one is doing cannot be the same thing as having a specified personality structure. But perhaps more interestingly, we are seeing that just as aesthetic responses are inflected by disciplinary affiliation, what it is to be in earnest also differs from place to place.

4.

Let’s turn now to the problems of cross-disciplinary quality control taken up by Heather Douglas and C. Thi Nguyen; because we depend on specialists and experts in almost everything we do, this sort of quality assurance is normally a precondition for being able to take what we are doing seriously.⁵ Douglas suggests that once we are beyond the range of visible, cut-and-dried successes and failures, the work will have to be done by explanation: that is, experts explaining themselves to one another, but more importantly, to nonspecialists.

But by now we’ve been primed to ask whether we are inadvertently projecting the local standards of a familiar specialization onto the world-at-large. The commitment to explaining oneself to nonexperts does seem to me a further mark of seriousness about doing *philosophy*; indeed, that was why I did my very best to write *The Great Endarkenment* so as to be accessible to the nonspecialist reader. And if that is right, it is a puzzle – a specifically philosophical problem – to explain why this kind of explanation is a demand that real philosophy must meet. However, I doubt that it is reasonable to insist on it across the board.

Taking our cue from Walden’s turn to art and aesthetics, the track record shows that outsiders can’t tell, anyway in a timely manner, whether cutting-edge painting is any good; e.g., we are broadly appreciative of impressionism today, but most of Monet’s contemporaries were decidedly unappreciative. The accompanying explanations are no substitute, for as reviewers who have had to wade through piles of artists’ statements know, there is very little connection between the plausible-sounding explanation of what the artist is doing, and whether it *works*. And one thing I have gleaned from conversation with

⁵ For some earlier discussion of the hard problem of policing the quality of specialized research, see Funtowicz and Ravetz 1990.

artists in various fields is that when an artist spends too much time explaining his work, that counts against taking it seriously: the work has to speak for itself. At least until art education catches up with an innovation, the assessment has to come from other painters – or perhaps from what we can construe as two related groups of specialists, the art critics and the full-time connoisseurs.

And here is a bit of additional anecdotal support for resisting the insistence on explanation in this particular class of cases. Around about two decades back, I convinced an artist to meet me for lunch in Manhattan, and I should say up front that the reason for my interest was that his paintings have consistently displayed humorous and well-informed intelligence on specifically philosophical topics. Over the course of our conversation, in which I was asking him to spell out the thinking that had gone into particular canvases, I found him to be remarkably inarticulate – and, I slowly realized, for good reason. As a painter, he thought in terms of images and painterly process, rather than the sort of arguments we philosophers dish out in our classrooms. These are different modes of reasoning, and his work was successful precisely because the mode appropriate to it was native to him. Asking him to explain his paintings in a completely different intellectual idiom was inappropriate and unfair – rather, I ended up musing, in the way that Socrates had been to his own professional interlocutors, back when philosophy was just getting going. Someone can be fully competent at what he does, without exhibiting the competence, so prized by philosophers, of explaining himself to others.

Once again, a response to challenges of hyperspecialization turns out to be trickier than one might have anticipated; the appropriateness of the demand for explanation varies by discipline and, I should perhaps add, what counts as a successful explanation is field-specific as well.

5.

Given how hard it is for a nonspecialist client to do quality control for the products of a specialized discipline, it's tempting to think that the seriousness with which the specialized enterprise is conducted could serve as a usable proxy. We can't tell if the advice the doctor is giving us is any good; that's more or less why we go to the doctor in the first place. So we look into his eyes in the hopes of telling whether he's taking his job seriously, and it's become notorious that patients largely assess the quality of the medical care they receive on the basis of their physicians' bedside manner.

As you might by now expect, however, the deeply different orientations of various specializations mean that even knowing that the standards of the disci-

pline were taken fully seriously and the work done in earnest is not enough to certify it for use by a naive client. Our own specialization, philosophy, can once again serve as a slightly exotic illustration. It's easy to think of examples of very high quality philosophy, executed to the most stringent standards and displaying impressive purity of heart, but that one is almost certain are mistaken, and that, even were they not, would be useless to someone who does not have an understanding of what philosophy does. When I advise my students to read Thomas Nagel's *Possibility of Altruism*, that is not because I think its conclusions are anything like established results – results that a nonphilosopher could proceed to use as premises in his own reasoning. The New Riddle of Induction, that is, Nelson Goodman's observation that inductive reasoning involves discriminating between the regularities it is reasonable to make a basis for inference and those it is not, and that we have no idea how we do it and ought to do it, is important and deeply right; however, Goodman's contribution was to make us aware of a hard problem, not to supply a result that nonphilosophers could then apply (Nagel 1978; Goodman 1983).

We said that a serious philosopher will do his best to explain himself to nonphilosophers. But those explanations will not certify the quality of the philosophical product to outsiders. Such explanations can generally be recast as arguments; my own experience is that when you present such an argument to a reasonably bright classroom and ask them to think up objections to it, they will, and they will keep coming up with objections until you announce that it's time to move on. (In philosophy, objections don't run out on their own.) Now, some of those objections have to be treated as pressing; if they cannot be met, the position can't be sustained. Others are less urgent; still others are beside the point. It takes a great deal of philosophical experience to distinguish among these; without being able to triage, you can't tell whether a philosophical argument – thus, whether an explanation – is something you can run with, because you can't decide whether you've considered the objections that you *need* to. It follows that philosophers explaining what they are doing to nonphilosophers doesn't serve as the sort of quality assurance program that the outsiders can rely on, on their own.

6.

Nguyen's proposal, or rather, one of them, is to look downstream: do the clients of a specialization – where we are to think of these as other specializations, each one taken as a whole – get into trouble or not? I expect that we will rarely be in a position to conduct arguments that are both as straight-

forward and as local as his exemplar: most of what you do will draw, at one or more removes, on the work of many different specializations, and when something goes wrong, it may well not be obvious what was responsible for the failure; you can think of this as a discipline-scale version of the Duhem-Quine Thesis. Likewise, when something goes right, there is the problem of determining how far responsibility for success spreads. That's especially dicey for downstream clients to figure out. Most disciplines are divided into subspecializations whose demarcations are typically invisible to outsiders. (Even philosophy, nowadays, although I agree with Douglas that in our field, the trend can and should be to a great extent rolled back.) If the nuclear engineers rely on the physicists, and their devices seem to work, should we conclude that physics as a whole is in a healthy state? (What about those string theorists?) But unless we are physicists ourselves, we probably have no idea which parts of the field the engineers are actually drawing upon.

When faced with the difficulty of certifying inputs from any particular expert, Nguyen's move was to back off and consider certification for entire fields. If that turns out to be too tricky, perhaps we need to back off still further: we can look at the way a specialized discipline's outputs are refracted, so to speak, not just through one adjacent discipline, but through its various clients. For instance, if we see what looks like a pattern of problems across a number of different fields, we might first inspect the field that is their least common ancestor (I mean, in the graph of dependencies between fields), considering as we do so both methods and institutions properly within a discipline, and how it packages its exports. As we survey the often dense network of interdependencies between specializations, we could look to see whether it is in, and let's make up a label for the condition we seek, *refractive equilibrium*.

(Why *that* label? First, think of specializations as choosing what other specializations they accept inputs from; then we can say that a constellation of specializations is in equilibrium when no field arrives at the view that it would do better to change its list of provider disciplines. Next, exports from a specialization are typically simplified, but anyway adjusted to the capabilities and training of its out-of-discipline consumers; as information or guidance crosses a disciplinary boundary, it's natural to think of it as metaphorically coming out askew: the angle of incidence is not the angle of refraction.)

In my own view, philosophy is centrally in the business of formulating, articulating, and investigating consistency regimes. Probably the most familiar illustration will be logical consistency: when someone believes – or is committed to – two propositions of the respective forms p and $\neg p$, that counts as a violation, and when he is called on it, that ought to launch an investigation whose official purpose is to determine which of the contradictory claims

to drop – but the real justification for the norm, if I’m seeing things right (2014), is that these investigations often enough produce other useful findings. Here’s another, more recent, instance: if someone’s preferences don’t induce a utility function, he is said to be inconsistent, where the force of that accusation is made out using thought experiments about money pumps and Dutch books. They suggest that when others start to exploit the inconsistencies in your own preferences, you will find yourself under pressure to rethink your priorities; it’s plausible that side effects of doing so will often enough turn out to be a good thing.⁶

Here we are looking ahead to the exercise of formulating a novel type of consistency requirement: the elements it will govern are, apparently, the methods and procedures of different specialized fields, where that includes importation and exportation protocols. Violations are to trigger an investigation that may eventuate in changes to the structure of the disciplinary graph, to the methodologies of one field or another, and to the protocols used to transfer accomplishments (sometimes results, but sometimes devices or techniques) from experts in one discipline to experts in another.⁷

If we are on the right track, one way for philosophers to take the Great Endarkenment seriously is to attempt to formulate a useful consistency requirement of this type – and then to follow up when it is observed to be violated. And if the proposals of *The Great Endarkenment* are going in the right direction, it would certainly be a good idea to involve philosophers early and often. I should emphasize, however, that the recommendation makes sense only on the revisionist conception of philosophy I am advancing, and then only with a substantial qualification. In *The Great Endarkenment*, I suggested that the special attention which philosophy has traditionally given to argumentation is our special sauce: what gives us an edge in diagnosing and working out fixes for, among other things, refractive disequilibria. But if that is to pan out, philosophers will have to (and here’s the revisionism) take a sustained interest in the forms of argument deployed by *other* specializations. Proceeding to that qualification, recall Walden’s worry that cognitive-function analyses suit some specializations better than others. Analogously, if argumentation as an intellectual medium allows philosophers to leverage their specialized training, and if some disciplines make argumentation more central than others (or depend more on practices that can be cleanly captured via argumentation), then philosophy will do a better job addressing the Endarkenment in some places than others.

⁶ But for an argument to the contrary, see Millgram 2002.

⁷ In the spirit of Nguyen’s black-boxed blood tests, Bruno Latour’s discussion (1987) of Data General’s Eclipse, a 1980s minicomputer, is a useful case to keep in mind.

For what it's worth, but maybe this is my own bias showing, it does seem to me that disciplines in which argumentation (or equivalents) figure largely are important enough for progress on their problems to be progress worth making.

7.

Walden suggests that agency is an essentially contested concept; Nguyen proposes that we can now see autonomy never to have been a unitary concept; I have been suggesting here that even what it is to be in earnest or serious about what you are doing is no longer one single thing, and that explanation is by no means a litmus test that we can apply across the board. Was the enterprise on which we were all raised, that of giving philosophical analyses of autonomy, explanation, and so on a mistake all along?

Not necessarily. Recall that *The Great Endarkenment* argues that the species of serial hyperspecializers that we now are requires a different panoply of intellectual devices than the version of humanity that was its much less specialized and much more stably configured predecessor. Accordingly, as we explore concepts of agency, autonomy, action, and our full-fledged investment in action that are suitable for our new species form, we should not assume too quickly that we are learning much at all about the concepts that our ancestors (and their philosophers) worked out for the sort of creature that we formerly were.

The internet disaggregated newspapers into the classified ads, the comics page, the horoscope, the various news articles and so on, all of which came to be found on their independent and specialized web sites; we now have to think about "the press" very differently than formerly. That turn of events does not show that there never were newspapers, not *really*. Likewise, that we plausibly need more than one successor to the older autonomy concept does not show that we never had that concept. That agency is from here on out a concept that we need to contest – not just because we are in transition to new ways of managing our activities, but because variants on it will have to be renegotiated to meet the needs of new or changing specializations – doesn't show that it always was. Maybe earnestness once *was* the sort of thing for which a formulaic personality structure could have served as a proxy; that's compatible with our now needing to think otherwise about what it is to be serious about something. And maybe, back in the day, it *was* a good idea to try to figure out just which personality structure that was, rather than relying during the difficult passages of our lives on memories of the poses struck by the likes of the young Clint Eastwood.

The headline message of *The Great Endarkenment* is that we had better take the Great Endarkenment very seriously. We can see that to be a more *complicated* demand than we would once have thought, because, within the world of the impending Endarkenment, what that comes to will be a different matter for specialists in different disciplines.

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