

On Making Everything Boring

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I

The occasion of a Presidential Address seems to call for talk on grand themes: perhaps the nature of philosophy, or its value, or the significance of devoting one's career to it, or the like. It might also call for a comment on the larger world, one that is often far from supportive of our enterprise; it would be easy, indeed, to rant a bit about the forces arrayed against us. It would be less easy, but I think manageable, to talk about why I think philosophy is worth doing nonetheless, and why it remains important to expose students to its challenges and joys.

Of course, the Address can also be used as a platform for the comedic. We've seen our share of that, surely, over the years. And I will make an immediate confession: I could not resist my title once it occurred to me, simply because of its potential for comedy. Am I, in speaking on the activity of making everything boring, thereby making everything boring? Well, actually, the answer is *No*. And not because I'm not a boring fellow. The answer is *No* because I could not even hope in just one small talk to make *everything* boring. At best, I can bore my audience. My chances of doing that, I think, are relatively good, especially as they've just consumed a meal, which may incline them to a sleepy state fitting for the content of my talk.

Of course by "making everything boring," I do not mean "make everyone bored." The relevant sense is rather: make it clear how one ought to be bored by everything. Or, at least, how one ought not to be excited by anything. This hardly suffices to zero in on my topic, of course; I can imagine—I cringe in doing so—someone reacting to what I just said by predicting that my talk will enjoin us all to have a Stoic attitude of being permanently unruffled by the events of the world. That's definitely not what I have in mind; indeed, the promise of a tranquility brought on by Stoic resignation is itself too exciting to be believable. In any case, let me work my way to my topic in an indirect fashion.

II

In considering a topic for the Presidential Address, I spent some time thinking about the more predictable grand suggestions, especially those concerning the nature of philosophical method. I could have decided to address some current controversies over the use of thought experiments, the significance of “experimental philosophy,” the domain of philosophical questions and how it may or may not be distinctive, and so on. But it seemed to me I should take the opportunity to do something of a sort I wouldn’t do in a more ordinary venue.

Well, *that* leaves things wide open. After all, the things I wouldn’t do in a more ordinary venue are legion. I wouldn’t, for instance, dance a jig. And I won’t now, either. Nor will I put on a funny hat, as our illustrious previous President did. Anyway, doing such things wouldn’t exactly be in keeping with my theme of making things *boring*, would it?

In any case: I wanted to do something different, but I still wanted to think about the grand topics in some fashion; and so my attention turned to a more psychological, speculative topic: how should we understand the impulse to do philosophy? What drives us to pursue it, or at least gets us started, leading us down the garden path to its gaping maw? And more: what sort of skills, or perhaps just temperament, might be involved in this seduction and subsequent compulsion? In thinking about these questions, I have felt free to rely on my own case, hoping it is not *too* terribly idiosyncratic.

It is said that philosophy begins in wonder. We find this remark in many places, but it can be traced back to comments in both Plato and Aristotle.¹ The slogan in English at least suggests that the drive to philosophize begins in some psychological state that encompasses curiosity of all sorts. Consider someone saying to herself:

I wonder how far away the sun is.

I wonder whether there is a way for humans to fly.

I wonder why the ocean rises and falls.

But these are not philosophical questions; they express a kind of wonder, but not one that seems especially relevant to philosophy.

Another kind of wonder is what we might think of as a variant of being awestruck, or perhaps being appreciative in some fashion. This kind of wonder is nicely evoked by Kant’s famous remark:

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more frequently and persistently one's meditation deals with them: *the starry sky above me and the moral law within me.*²

If one associates philosophy with a sort of religious attitude of appreciation of the world, one might think philosophy involves wonder of this sort. But this has little to do with the philosophical impulse that actually drives us, or at least many of us, to pursue philosophy as practiced in the academy.

I'm nowhere near a scholar of ancient philosophy, but from what I understand, it seems plausible that the "wonder" that both Plato and Aristotle mention as leading people to philosophy has more to do with *perplexity*, where perplexity is quite different from both curiosity and awestruck contemplation. Perplexity is a kind of irritation, and the drive to philosophize is aimed at getting rid of that irritation.

Famously, it has been suggested that the desire to get rid of another kind of irritation is instrumental in scientific progress. I have in mind here C. S. Peirce's account of doubt in "The Fixation of Belief." Doubt is not perplexity, of course. You doubt something when you take seriously the chance that it is false; but this need not involve the slightest bit of perplexity. It may be that perplexity always engages doubt, for the sense of confusion may require that one take seriously that a false belief is leading one into such unhappy waters. But in the typical philosophical case, the worry that one is victim of a falsehood seems less important than the sort of frustration one can feel at—let's put it this way—a failure of *cognitive mastery*. In my own case, what bothers me is not so much the worry that I might have some false views; what bothers me is rather the thought that I'll find myself in a cognitive fog.

The claim that much of philosophy is driven by perplexity is a familiar one, but my hope here is to say something about how one might emotionally engage with that perplexity. Let me begin by pointing first to a kind of engagement that is the *antithesis* of what I see as the philosopher's usual engagement with such.

This contrary attitude is one that sees the relevant sort of irritation or cognitive failure as an occasion for intellectual *excitement*. Allow me to share an anecdote that (I hope) illustrates this. Several years ago, I was visiting a friend who was taking classes at a curious institution I won't name; the program in question was in psychology and counseling. I was invited to attend one of the classes with her, and one of the few things I remember about it is the following. The professor talked a bit about "meaning" and the importance of thinking about the meaning of things. At one point, however, he seemed to surprise himself by noting that you could ask the question: what is the meaning of meaning itself? The class tittered in appreciation. *Neato*, they seemed to be thinking.

We've just been exposed to some deep thought, and it was exciting and cool. The professor then made a dismissive remark to the effect that we can let philosophers knock themselves out trying to analyze such a thing—which his tone made plain he thought was a silly thing to do.

Here, we had a feeling of perplexity, and it was *celebrated* as at the very least titillating and perhaps as evidence of the depth of the material being discussed. What is perhaps most offensive here is the sense that the valuable thing would not lie in the labor needed to remove the perplexity but in the experience of perplexity itself. It is here where the sense of wonder as awestruck appreciation connects in an unfortunate way with perplexity. It's a kind of gee-whiz experience in the face of confusion, a kind of delight in those mental cramps that afflict the philosopher. The philosopher, by contrast, wants to remove those cramps, tamp down the excitement, make things seem mundane, unperplexing—*boring*—again.

III

When I teach an Introduction to Philosophy course, I take pains to make clear early on what philosophy is *not* about. One thing I do is make use of some all-too-familiar koans. We all know these two. First, there is the question “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” Second, we have one closer to a real philosophical question: “If a tree falls in the forest, but nobody is around, does it make a sound?”

As depicted in popular culture, anyway, these questions are meant to shock the mind into a state of enlightenment. It is a decidedly non-rational process, a kind of short-circuiting of cognition meant to propel one into some more valuable state—a state allegedly desirable. My point in looking at these is to steer students away from any such cognitive misfires. Rather, I aim to dampen any excitement over the prospect of being shocked by such perplexities; my goal is to motivate them to reach a state impervious to Zen machinations, as it were, where perplexity is seen as a call for more work and not as cause for celebration. I then, of course, put them to work figuring out how one ought, rationally, to answer our two questions about clapping and sounds.

My suggestion tonight, then, is just that it may be useful to think of philosophers as driven (often, and in significant part, but not exclusively or always—I will no longer bother to add these rather predictable, indeed boring, qualifications) by the desire to do away with perplexity and to ensure that everything is, in a sense, safe and boring. If you incline towards psychological explanations of a less than flattering sort, you might say that we want to make things flat and boring because anything perplexing threatens our sense of cognitive control. Attending to these psychological factors might yield a few benefits. For one thing, of course, it may shed some light on whether there is in fact a kind of personality that is more likely attracted to philosophy—which

would be at least of anthropological significance. For another, arguably more important benefit, it may help us in thinking about what sorts of things *deserve* to be taken as problems to be solved, or perplexities to be tackled.

Now, you might react to what I have said thus far in the following, perfectly appropriate way. Look: when you say that philosophers are driven by the desire to make things boring, do you *merely* mean to point out that philosophers dislike mystery, that they strive to make things comprehensible or non-puzzling? Is that all your point comes down to?

Before I address that question directly, please note: *this very complaint* exemplifies the impulse that is my theme. The complaint exhibits a happy skepticism about the significance of whatever thesis is put forward, the expectation that it is really some banal truism being dressed up as something profound or insightful. I'm sure everyone here recognizes the trope: is it a tedious truth or an exciting falsehood? We certainly don't expect the exciting truth.

But now to address the question directly: *Is* my point only that philosophers are driven by the desire to demystify? Well, that's one point. I hope to say a little more than that regarding what light this point may shed on various phenomena with which we are all familiar—regarding the culture of philosophy, the character of those attracted to it, the way it is taught, what is regarded as a problem, and so on.

Am I, then, trying to make what is really a very mundane point interesting, contrary to what I am describing as an important philosophical impulse? To be clear: not every way of being interesting is contrary to the sort of boring status that is at issue. The way of being interesting that arouses the philosopher's wrath—or at least the wrath of a certain kind of philosopher, or at least *my* wrath—is a very specific kind of perplexity that doesn't attend every kind of interesting point. Of course.

So—again, *of course*—I can admit that my own comments here are interesting in some other, less aggravating sense. I don't mean my comments to be perplexing, or—if I do find in myself such an impulse—it is an impulse independent of the philosophical impulses that have done so much to lead me to where I am. It is perhaps a playful impulse that is usually set aside as best left for those times I want to irk or tease. Perhaps there's an element of such in this venue; the occasion does tempt one to do odd things, after all. But let me quash this playful impulse and lunge forward in thinking about the character of this impulse to make things boring, to be able to stand back afterwards and say: *Now it all seems so obvious.*

IV

What exactly is this perplexity that we want to eliminate? What can we say about the sort of thing that raises our hackles, or helps lead us into this most curious profession?

The simplest model of perplexity might just be this: we become aware of some inconsistency in our beliefs and struggle to decide what to retain and what to reject. But that is, I think, too thin a model; it makes perplexity too close to the irritation of doubt, as the problem is then just that one has to take seriously the possibility that something in one's belief set is false, and the task is the straightforwardly epistemic one of figuring out what one has best reason to believe and getting rid of the least well supported belief. (You might guess from my remark here that I think the currently rather popular idea that philosophy is straightforwardly analogous to the sciences is mistaken, and that guess would be correct.)

What is it, then, to be perplexed? I suggest that the best broad characterization is that the perplexing is that which *resists cognitive mastery*. It resists our ability to find a way to describe it, or, perhaps, to think about its truth or falsity, to classify it as kin to other things, to get a sense of what it implies or is incompatible with, and so on. In other words, we are perplexed by something when we have trouble finding rational ways of assessing it among many dimensions: truth-value, significance, implications, how it may be described, and so on. The point I want to stress, though, is that the problem here has to do with the failure of our usual cognitive *skills*. Philosophy is, one might say, that which makes you feel stupid and incapable, even if normally you find yourself to be quite competent and intelligent. Stupidity is not a lack of knowledge, it is a lack of ability, and philosophical perplexity is that which makes one fret that one's very ability to assess things is in jeopardy.

I take it as some evidence in favor of this account that it explains a common phenomenon with which you are all surely familiar. Here is what I have in mind. At the start of a project, the issue you are addressing seems compelling, and you think you may have something significant to say about it. If all goes well, and you become convinced you have things right, you find ways of mapping out the terrain that make it easier and easier to see what to say. And as you near the end of the process, your energy flags, as the points you make begin to seem *too obvious* for anyone ever to give a damn about it. With success comes boredom.

What explains this? If what made the topic of interest in the first place was not the subject matter on its own but its resistance to cognitive mastery, once it is mastered, the subject is no longer of interest. Indeed, it may be that once one has gained such mastery it will be very difficult to imagine one's way back into the perplexed state of mind, and an inability to do so could contribute to finding the material now objectionably tedious or obvious.

This doesn't mean that the material is in fact insignificant, since there are different ways in which something might be significant; it means rather that the material will no longer be interesting in the sense of resisting cognitive mastery. The results of the work may still be significant in any number of other ways. Still, it seems to me that I've heard enough people report this syndrome—of becoming bored with the work after a certain stage—that some explanation is called for. And the explanation on offer concerns the philosopher's emotional engagement in the project; what drives us, or some of us, to some significant degree, is precisely the dislike of those things that threaten our cognitive mastery over some material.

V

Let me turn to a somewhat different question about perplexity, philosophers, and the urge to make things boring again. Why is it that some sorts of people are more prone to be irritated by such perplexity and respond to it with the kind of commitment to rooting it out that we see in philosophers?

It is a familiar observation that philosophers tend to be less than perfectly socialized. For lack of a more diplomatic description, we are, of course, a bunch of weirdos. (I must admit to a certain horror at the idea of the *well-adjusted* philosopher.) But—let's be more precise, if not more diplomatic. What I have in mind is that we—or, at least, a large portion of us—are not so quick to pick up on social cues or expectations. Often, conventions are flouted not out of deliberate rebellion but a kind of cluelessness that takes time and energy to overcome. (And, of course, in many cases it may not be worth the trouble to overcome.) This is hardly unique to philosophers; nor is it universally true of them; but it is common enough.

The sort of not-so-adjusted person I have in mind is someone who differs from many others in the following way. What others apparently find perfectly *natural* or *intuitive*, the misfit finds foreign, puzzling, alien. How others talk to each other, how they decide what to do next in a group setting, how they know what will strike others as “cool” or whatnot—all of it is rather strange. (I hope I am not drawing *too* much on my own experience here. But if I am, so be it.) Other people seemingly know just how to behave, how to talk, how to interact, but I don't; what is going on? For this sort of misfit, anyway, the social world is often just perplexing. It resists mastery, and this is maddening.

I am reminded here of a mild joke told me by a friend of mine in graduate school. We had an interest in philosophy of language and were working through some work by Michael Dummett, in particular his papers on what a theory of meaning needs to accomplish. As you know, Dummett's writing can be extraordinarily cumbersome and difficult. My friend's remark: The reason Dummett

is so obsessed with the skills needed to understand a language is that *he has yet to figure out English for himself!*

The sort of misfit at issue indeed has trouble talking, or, at least, talking with others, or finding what is said easy and sensible. Think of what outsiders will often say about philosophers when they say that we lack “common sense.” If common sense is understood as the ability to find easy and intuitive what society expects one to find easy and intuitive, that is exactly right. Things don’t appear easy and intuitive; we struggle to make sense of things—but this struggle helps shape the interests and skills of those who are inclined to do philosophy.

There are really two points I want to make here about this sort of alienation or lack of “common sense” and its effects. The first is that it steers us away from the kind of *enjoyment* of perplexity that I described earlier. Strangeness is not associated with a luxury or a special treat; it is associated rather with practical impediments—those that go along with being the sort of social misfit I’ve described. As a result, such strangeness is *not* seen as a novelty to celebrate; it is rather a loathsome itch that must be scratched, and scratched, until entirely worn away. If one is lucky and succeeds at this a number of times, the feeling of accomplishment can be very gratifying, and this can drive one to examine that which resists cognitive mastery even when there is no practical urgency to confront such things.

The second point I want to make about this is that the feeling of alienation from an early age can make us considerably more adept at *managing* perplexity, since we’ve involuntarily had a great amount of practice. This skill is, of course, something we hope to impart to our students, and I think it is one of the most valuable benefits of studying philosophy, something that is genuinely transferable to other areas. It is the ability to deal with unprecedented cases, unfamiliar phenomena, and in general anything for which one lacks a pre-existing intuitive grasp. As I like to think of it, philosophy is a kind of intellectual no-man’s land, and someone who gets used to fighting for his cognitive survival in such a land will be better equipped to deal with perplexities of a lesser order.

The non-philosopher will, I think, be more apt to be thrown for a loop by such obstacles. When he encounters something for which there are no established rules, he may be unnerved or agitated—and fretful if no familiar route of escape presents itself. What we hope to instill in our students is something very different: the ability to take such oddities *in stride*, to see them as kin to any number of puzzles they’ve earlier tackled and found to fall apart, eventually, into matters unremarkable, things more happily manageable.

VI

Ironically, of course, many outsiders to philosophy think of it in terms that seem entirely opposed to the way I am describing it. Students may even be attracted to philosophy precisely because the ideas leave them, as they might say, with their minds completely blown. Detractors may put a rather different spin on things, grumbling that philosophers take such simple, easy things and make them all much more complicated and difficult than they need to be. And yes: we focus on the perplexities and things that resist rational mastery. But that is the *starting point*, not the desired endpoint. Hopefully, what the student eventually comes away with is not a love of intellectual titillation but a love of the achievement she experiences when she finds that she can, after all, reduce the sense of confusion, and do so using her own skills as opposed to simply taking cues from others.

A crucial part of that achievement is, of course, learning to write as simply and clearly as possible. This is something we need to tell students constantly: it's a good idea to make their language as plain and as easy to understand as they can. Their impulse is often directly to the contrary of this. They struggle with the language of philosophy, finding it terribly foreign. (One might say that the tables are turned; the misfit philosopher who couldn't figure out how to talk in the social group now puts the ordinary student in a situation where she doesn't know how to process what is said and feels awkward in venturing to speak. But set that aside.) When they try to imitate the philosophers they read, when they are asked to write on the material, they end up producing ungrammatical, awkward prose—but so far as they can tell, that's on target, because, after all (they think), it's *supposed* to sound weird.

This is, unfortunately, the sort of thing that goes along with the tendency to celebrate perplexity. To combat this, we advise students to avoid jargon when possible, to illustrate points with mundane examples, to keep an eye out for possible ambiguities, to distinguish their claims from others with which they might be confused, and illustrate points with mundane examples. To repeat the advice an old professor of mine from New College of Florida told me long ago (Doug Langston, thank you!)—we advise them to *never underestimate the potential stupidity of the reader*. In addition, we might even give them some samples to illustrate how someone could write in a way that makes it plain how he is striving to reach those ideals. We might, for instance, give them some G. E. Moore to read.

But what is the complaint that we hear so often from students we force to read Moore? It's that he's *boring*. He's *tedious*. He spells things out with such painstaking care that students are apt to think he can't really be a well-respected philosopher. When we aim, then, to enable ourselves, and others, to find things boring, we also aim to enable them to *present* things in a way that *avoids undue*

excitement. I am reminded of a blurb appearing on the back of Paul Grice's collection *Studies in the Ways of Words*. Jonathan Bennett was quoted as saying that Grice

is without peer as an example of how to do philosophy directly, simply, and without idiosyncrasy. The special flavours of ... our other leading philosophers are valuable, but they should not be copied. Grice is the only leader of whom it is true that the level of the discipline would be raised if most philosophers took him as a model of how to think and write.

The special styles or flavors are nice, but what *improves* the discipline is a style that is devoid of such niceties.

This does not mean, however, that the ideal philosopher is one who has no capacities for writing beyond that which displays this boring virtue. It would do us no good to have philosophers who themselves can only understand the simple, straightforward text. Rather, to philosophize one must be able to move back and forth from the flailing, confusing verbiage to the clear presentation in light of which the sense of perplexity melts away. A certain literary sensibility is important for this task, the sort of skill that enables one to find ways both to capture what is elusive and to work one's way into the heads of others who are trying to find ways of capturing their own elusive points. Philosophers with such skills may, of course, be tempted to write in a way that is more evocative and exciting than clear, simply because it is enjoyable to exercise such skills. And some of us will no doubt give in to that temptation at various times—especially when given a venue that invites such playfulness—such as, say, the occasion of a Presidential Address.

It is also true in the classroom, however, that one may be inclined to present philosophical ideas in a way apparently designed to maximize perplexity. After all, when teaching epistemology, when I initially present arguments for skepticism about the external world I do so with an eye towards maximizing student discomfort, with the goal of shocking them out of their ordinary complacency about such matters. Might this not sound objectionably similar to those koans that I mentioned earlier? If reducing perplexity is the goal, why proceed in this manner?

Well, the answer is simple. People often start off being bored, but they're often bored *for bad reasons*: in particular, they may think they have cognitive mastery over the material when they don't. For too many people, they find things boring and obvious because of a *lack of attention* to those things. They gloss over apparent problems because an intuitive feel for things keeps their practical dealings with these matters running quite smoothly. Those of us who do find things perplexing hopefully do so for good reasons—even if, ultimately, we want to get rid of that perplexity. The

point is that the initial feeling of perplexity can be a matter of picking up on features that really *ought* to make one feel confused, at least on the face of it.

It's important to stress this, as the picture I've painted so far may suggest that the philosopher is someone who simply lacked the requisite cognitive skills to grasp what others so easily grasp, and the value of philosophy would then lie primarily in enabling the naturally incapable. But this is not so. The philosopher naively finds strange what the ordinary person finds familiar. He then can go on to help the ordinary person find it strange, *so that* when it again seems simple, boring, this comes with a greater knowledge of how things *can* be understood. If the problem were a simple incapacity, philosophical perplexity would not be *contagious* in the way it evidently is.

The point here can be related to a useful notion from literary theory. When I started college as an undergraduate, I at first planned to major in English and had vague hopes of becoming a literature professor. I recall being fascinated at the idea I'd heard that literary work was aimed at *defamiliarization*: taking the everyday and making it seem foreign, askew, new, or otherwise out of place. I was struck by this account of literary ambitions given that, in my own case, little effort was needed for things to seem to me foreign, unfamiliar, and too often alarming. Philosophy also engages in such defamiliarization, though the goal is not, as it is with literary efforts, to make odd in the service of pleasure or appreciation. The point is to help us pay attention to what is right in front of our eyes, to make strange so that we see more of it. *Seeing more* is something the aesthetic impulse might aim at as well, but the big difference is that we want not just to see more during the moment of aesthetic appreciation; we want to *wrestle that insight to the ground* and gain, well, cognitive mastery over it. Enchantment might be a good way of opening one's eyes to more things, but our goal is to steal the magic, so to speak, and know the magician's secrets.

Since I fear I've been giving in to the aesthetic impulse as I write, let me restate the point in plainer terms. As I see it, there are various ways of making things seem strange, and this can be valuable in at least two ways: first, it can provide a kind of aesthetic pleasure; and second, it can provide additional information about the thing that seems strange, even if that information can be grasped only in a rather difficult fashion. The philosophical impulse to make things boring includes the impulse to ensure that this information can be grasped in a fashion that is not difficult at all. This surely reduces the first benefit of providing aesthetic pleasure, but that's a price worth paying. It's not about pleasing aphorisms, though slogans, if they prove themselves to be useful shorthands, are certainly welcome.

The point, finally, is that there is reason to make things perplexing or enchanting at the outset, to maximize what may seem strange and out of place, if only because the goal is to flush the would-be magic out of its hiding places and steal from it what is true and digestible. We make things interesting only so that we can have a better grasp of what it is that we are later so blasé about.

VII

I've described aesthetic efforts as aiming at a kind of *enchantment*, and the philosopher as hell bent on *disenchantment*. This description seems fitting in light of the fact that one of the worst insults one philosopher can level at another is that of being a mystery-monger, of explaining the obscure by the more obscure, or of countenancing mysteries or the mystical. In particular, in contemporary philosophy, it is often thought important to be a "naturalist": the non-natural, or perhaps the supernatural if there is a difference, is widely thought problematic.

The drive to make everything boring might be illuminated, I suggest, by looking at the notion of the natural and its contraries. What is it that philosophers want to reject when they insist there is no magic, nothing miraculous, and so on?

There is no question that philosophers are often driven by their desire to avoid things that they find weird, odd, or unnatural in some sense. Think of Mackie's famous attack on moral realism, where one of his arguments is known as the argument from "queerness." Or think perhaps of debates about abstract objects, where a number of philosophers want to reject them—not because of the specific epistemic worry that there is no good account of how we could know about such things, but rather because they find them unacceptably odd or objectionable. But there is a danger here: why should certain things be found thus odd or objectionable? Particularly in thinking about what may be called metaphysical naturalism (as opposed to the epistemic varieties), it is quite vexing to see that philosophers often invoke the category of the natural to announce that some entities are in need of special accommodation or treatment while others are not, where it is frankly never very clear what "natural" is to mean.

I am reminded here of some remarks that Nelson Goodman makes in his classic *Fact, Fiction and Forecast*, where he comments on the motivations for various projects as follows:

A philosophic problem is a call to provide an adequate explanation in terms of an acceptable basis. If we are ready to tolerate everything as understood, there is nothing left to explain; while if we sourly refuse to taken anything, even tentatively, as clear, no explanation can be given.³

This leaves us wondering, of course, how we are to decide what counts as already understood, or as an acceptable basis. Goodman's remarks on this are quite unsatisfying. He says:

[T]he individual thinker can only search his philosophic conscience. As is the way with consciences, it is elusive, variable, and too easily silenced in the face of hardship or

temptation. At best it yields only specific judgements rather than general principles; and honest judgements made at different times or by different persons may differ in any degree. Indeed this talk of conscience is simply a figurative way of disclaiming any idea of justifying these basic judgements. Beyond making them carefully and declaring them loudly, about all we can do is to disparage any alternatives.⁴

If the conscience here is taken to issue verdicts on whether we understand something or not, then arguments *can* be given, after all, since one can appeal to claims about when one plausibly understands a term and when one does not. But of course the phenomenon I'm pointing to—of finding something objectionably weird or problematic—need not take the specific form of charging certain claims or alleged entities with being incomprehensible. They might just be found entirely unbelievable for other reasons.

In either case, we should certainly do better than just consult a philosophic “conscience” in deciding what needs special accommodation—in deciding what counts as “weird” and not happily boring. And this brings me to the final point I want to make.

There is obviously a link between what I've described as the perplexing—the things that resist cognitive mastery—and the sort of philosophic conscience that Goodman describes. Consider the example of abstract objects; one might find them in need of special accommodation precisely because one finds it hard to know how to think about them, finding them to resist rational assessment in various ways. But there is a danger that here the perplexity may be entirely misplaced. Above, I said that one may be bored for bad reasons; similarly, one may be perplexed for bad reasons. Sometimes perplexity helps us see something important that may be missed, but sometimes it reflects mere confusion or unhappy analogies. In the case of abstract objects, it has long seemed to me that resistance to them derives largely from trying to think about them *as if* they were concrete objects and then finding this very weird; if a universal were, for instance, akin to a very special particular that ordinary particulars “participate in,” that is certainly apt to make one's head spin. But it may be that a thorough rejection of that analogy is in order, and that the result will be that we find abstracta entirely mundane.

One of the reasons I settled on this topic for tonight is that it ties in with work I've been doing lately in thinking about what on earth *metaphysical naturalism* might be, as opposed to physicalism, which I take to be tied specifically to physics as a science. The non-natural or supernatural is thought to be weird in an objectionable way. In fact, it is tempting to suggest that if something genuinely supernatural were to occur, it could never be appropriate to react to it with boredom. But that very point suggests that the category might be confused in some way. How could there be something that, in principle, always resists cognitive mastery?

Let me remind you of a lovely thought experiment due to Wittgenstein. He is discussing ethics and miracles and writes:

[W]e all know what in ordinary life would be called a miracle. It obviously is simply an event the like of which we have never yet seen. Now suppose such an event happened. Take the case that one of you suddenly grew a lion's head and began to roar. Certainly that would be as extraordinary a thing as I can imagine. Now whenever we should have recovered from our surprise, what I would suggest would be to fetch a doctor and have the case scientifically investigated and if it were not for hurting him I would have him vivisected. And where would the miracle have got to? For it is clear that when we look at it in this way everything miraculous has disappeared.⁵

In light of this example, one may conclude that *there is nothing that cannot be made boring*. It may be a mistake to think of any event or entity or fact or whatnot as in principle resistant to cognitive mastery, and the philosopher's task is, in part, to demonstrate this.

I should note, for the record, that I think one *can* find a way of making sense of metaphysical naturalism that serves most of the purposes of those using the term; in brief, I think such naturalism is best construed as the claim that those things that exist that are especially salient to us and our interests are not fundamentally different from those things that are *not* especially salient to us and our interests. In effect, this says that things we are interested in—such as ourselves, our minds, our values—are not fundamentally different from things to which we are normally indifferent—such as subatomic particles. Finally, in yet *other* words, it says that *the things we find interesting are basically the same as those we find boring*. So, defending metaphysical naturalism is yet another way to make everything boring. No wonder I'm so drawn to it.

VIII

Let me wrap up. I am sure by now I have lulled you to a state of satiation. My suggestion has been that much of what drives us as philosophers can be seen as a desire to take what is perplexing—that which resists cognitive mastery—and render it boring, render it something unexceptional, predictable, and certainly not something to find revelatory or apt to confer a blissful state of enlightenment. Detractors of philosophy—especially of that kind that is called analytic, to which I unhesitatingly pledge allegiance—will often complain that we take what ought to be an experience of some great insight or wonder and *flatten* it into a formula or a set of numbered theses. Well, that's right. We shouldn't bemoan this fact. It's *good* to make everything boring—at least, in the

specific sense I've tried to delineate. We should reclaim our status as masters of boredom—take pride in our mission of taking the magic out of everything!

But I should shut up in a minute. I may remind you that in my opening remarks, I made some comments about the fact that the occasion of a Presidential Address affords one some special opportunities. I hope you've enjoyed the way I've taken advantage of those opportunities. Now here is another opportunity that I'm taking, one that I'll enjoy more than any of you. The occasion of a Presidential Address is one of the few times one can give a philosophical talk and then simply forego the traditional post-talk question-and-answer period. I can just shut up, and you can't ask me any pesky questions.

Of course, if my talk tonight has been on target, the correct answers to any questions you raise should be ones that seem quite obvious and trivial on reflection. This is not to say that I'd have an easy time coming up with those answers, and I want to avoid any excitement that may attend your observing my struggles to provide them. So I'll cut off that possibility and end on a flat note.

Thank you and good night.

Notes

¹ In Plato, we find this in the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates remarks that “wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder” (*The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett [Oxford: Clarendon P, 1924] 155d). Aristotle makes a similar claim in the *Metaphysics*: “For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize” (*The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon [New York: Random House, 1941] 982b).

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1778/2002) 203.

³ Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction and Forecast* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983) 31.

⁴ Goodman 32-33.

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Lecture on Ethics,” *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 10.

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