

Zen and the Art of Philosophy Maintenance

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One may characterize philosophy as critical thinking applied to a certain set of philosophical problems. But this is prey to the following objection: This characterization is wrong because it leaves Zen and other forms of non-critical approaches to philosophy out of the picture. The critical, argumentative way of doing philosophy applies only to mainstream analytic philosophy, the argument goes, and even other traditions within western philosophy will be left out—Kierkegaard’s philosophy, for instance, or Heidegger’s (or even Wittgenstein’s, although he is deemed to be one of the founding fathers of analytic philosophy). The aim of this paper is to respond to this objection.

The first point to take into account is that some mainstream analytic philosophers do denigrate philosophy based on argument. Analytic philosophy is not just the kind of English-speaking philosophy usual in the 1950s. Many philosophers of this period suffered in various degrees of scientism and positivism. Nowadays, most analytic philosophers are not like that.

Robert Nozick, 1981, pp. 4-24, is a case in point. He prefers “explanations” to “proofs” or attempted proofs in philosophy; and considers it impolite to try to persuade people of one’s own philosophical thoughts. Of course, these kind of statements are usually made at the start of a philosophical work, and when one goes on reading, it is business as usual: argument, counter-argument, objection, counter-example, and so on. It is as if when reflecting on what one is doing one tries to get rid of what one cannot get rid of: argument and critical thinking. I believe trying to get rid of argument in philosophy involves a subtle fallacy, as well as confusion. Let’s start with the fallacy.

Suppose I set myself to teach you astronomy. Well, astronomy is all about facts and law-like connections between facts, one may believe. So teaching this is all about distilling those facts and law-like connections into your astronomically empty mind. All you have to do is understand what I tell you; there is no point in arguing, and I am not trying to persuade you. Let’s assume this is true, although I will later on try to show the confusion involved here.

Even if this is true, philosophy is quite far from this Eden of Learning. Philosophers disagree regarding even the most basic issues. Pretending to be teaching philosophy as if it were astronomy involves a fallacy yet unnamed (I suppose): taking what can only be an argumentative essay as if it were the

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Indisputable Truth. The most common way to do that is trading on the confusion between argumentative language and informative language. When we seek information, as in a newspaper report or an astronomy textbook, we naturally refrain from thinking critically. If something doesn't make much sense, we think it's a matter of poor understanding on our part, and not an indication that something may be wrong with the ideas conveyed in the text. We do not set out to disprove what we have read using arguments; instead, we seek advice and try harder to put ourselves in a frame of mind in which those ideas start making sense.

Any essay that trades on the confusion between argumentative and informative language is fallacious. The most obvious way of doing that—in philosophy and elsewhere—is by presenting one's own insights as if they were not disputable points, but rather as if they were soundly established ideas that only the philosophically empty mind of the reader is not aware of and needs to be informed about. The fallacy is harder to spot than one might think because most texts are not purely argumentative or informative. An argumentative essay does have information that is pointless to argue about (just like the information I've given regarding Nozick's book). And some informative reports do have arguments trying to establish the truth of some fact that can only be inferred from other facts, this inference being open to discussion. Thus, the reader may easily be misled into believing that what he or she is reading is not open to discussion, not because the author is dogmatic about the issues but because the essay pretends not to be argumentative at all—it presents itself as some kind of report about the philosophical realm of established knowledge. The reader's task is not to argue back, but just to understand and bask in the warmth of Revealed Truth.

Nozick's version of this fallacy is to assume explanations are not open to discussion, argument, counter-argument, counter-example, and so on. Of course, this is not the way he is read and discussed. Fellow philosophers and students alike—agreeing or not with his “explanations”—spot arguments, raise objections to them, devise counter-examples, and so on. And he is read as if he were indeed trying to persuade us that his “explanations” hold true or are at least plausible, and not as if he were just reporting his own not-to-be-critically-assessed Deep Thoughts. The same goes for other philosophers who seem not to bother at all with presenting arguments for their views: we just read arguments into them, come up with arguments for their ideas, and then discuss objections to those arguments, and so on.

Why this obsession with argument and counter-argument? Isn't this even impolite? One may argue, as Nozick does, that this kind of persuasive philosophy is at odds with each person's freedom and right not to be forced into either agreeing with us or responding with appropriate counter-arguments, refutations and this whole business of critical thinking.² Why not a gentler kind of philosophy?

² I am not making this up.

To argue with someone is to attempt to push him around verbally. But a philosophical argument is not like that—is it? . . . A philosophical argument is an attempt to get someone to believe something, whether he wants to believe it or not. A successful philosophical argument, a strong argument, forces someone to a belief. . . . Why are

Here is the confusion involved in this kind of view: the strange thought that people are forced into something if we address their own intelligence and reasoning abilities. In fact, it is the opposite that forces people into what may very well be against their better judgment if only they were given the chance to think critically. A “suggestive” kind of text consists in not presenting our own ideas as open to discussion but rather as reports on Higher Truths. One “gently invites” the reader to put him or herself in the frame of mind appropriate to accepting our views. Calling this a “suggestive”, “gentler” and “inviting” kind of text is just a way of not calling the beast by its name: manipulation. We try to manipulate others when we try to persuade them against their better judgement and interests, usually hiding the very fact that we are trying to persuade them. It is thus a confusion to believe that presenting arguments to people is impolite or an attack on their freedom. What really is rude and an attack on other’s freedom and autonomy is trying to spoon-feed them ideas they are not given the chance to challenge. Most analytic philosophers just ignore this kind of “suggestive” and “inviting” strategy and carry on with the old business of assessing ideas critically.

The history of this 2,500 years-old “business” of assessing ideas critically is revealing. It was first invented by the Ancient Greeks, when they started to rely on argument and evidence instead of authority and tradition. And this was a novelty. For millennia, human beings relied on tradition and authority. Systematic reasoning, argument and autonomy were not common practices, if practices at all. G. E. R. Lloyd sums up the novelty thus:

The extant remains of Egyptian and Babylonian medicine, mathematics and astronomy can be combed in vain for a single example of a text where an individual author explicitly distances himself from, and criticises, the received tradition in order to claim originality for himself, whereas our Greek sources repeatedly do that.³

Systematic reasoning and argument constitute a new attitude, and not a very natural one. It’s natural to trust older, wiser people. It’s confusing and frightening to challenge old beliefs, however ill-founded. It’s dangerous. It takes us out of known territory and sends us into the unknown. Who knows where that might lead us? Thinking freely is a daunting task. People who enjoy the risk may very well take this as an argument for critical thinking. But that’s just because

philosophers intent on forcing others to believe things? Is that a nice way to behave toward someone? Nozick, 1981, pp. 4–5.

And Nozick quotes approvingly what Hannah Arendt says of Lessing:

He not only wanted no one to coerce him, but he also wanted to coerce no one either by force or by proofs. He regarded the tyranny of those who attempt to dominate thinking by reasoning and sophistries, by compelling argumentation, as more dangerous to freedom than orthodoxy. Nozick, 1981, n.1, p. 651.

Note the fallacious lumping together of (physical) force and proof, the failure to distinguish correct reasoning from sophistries, and the suggestion that arguing is all about compelling others against their will.

³ Lloyd, 1989, p. 153.

they may be thinking about the mild risk of thinking when thinking has not much to do with anything else. Risk is less attractive when one considers thinking that affects our lives because it affects our decisions, thinking about matters of life and death, thinking that may make the difference between a happy life and a miserable one. It's not absurd on the face of it to prefer tradition and authority to evidence and reason. It looks more promising and less risky.

Yet, this is an illusion. The alternative to evidence and reason is not very commendable. People make mistakes; and older, wiser people are still people. Furthermore, what may go unnoticed when one is tentatively thinking about something for the first time may be readily spotted by the neophyte building on previous learning. But for the neophyte to be able to spot it, critical thinking must be not only accepted but also encouraged. The neophyte must be trying not just to understand previous learning; he or she must engage also in the search for truth, assessing the ideas of previous philosophers. Otherwise, he or she will just dully repeat previous philosopher's ideas as if they were sacred texts. This is something that indeed happens when universities and scholars abandon critical thinking. As Charles Freeman says:

While Al-Razi declared that he was a disciple of Galen, he also wrote books criticizing some of Galen's precepts; he was the first to distinguish between smallpox and measles. Ibn al-Nafis also directly criticized Galen, noting how the blood passed through the lungs, not between the cavities of the heart as Galen had claimed. By contrast, Galen's works were at this time being treated as sacred texts in Christian Europe and no attempt was being made to progress from them.⁴

Imagine that Galen's writings are devoid of argument or evidence. Imagine that they are presented as Ineffable Insights into Truth, hiding any arguments and pretending to be just reports not open to debate. Does this really matter to teaching and research? Well, not much. Our task is to read arguments into those writings, discussing Galen's ideas critically despite all his pretence. And we do that because any argument for the conclusion that Galen's thoughts are beyond error is weaker than the argument for the conclusion that people make mistakes, and even very smart and wise people make mistakes. Only if we don't consider these arguments explicitly do we accept uncritically, against our better judgment, that Galen's ideas are The Truth.

Therefore, when it comes to characterizing philosophy it's not relevant that Zen philosophy or Kierkegaard's or Heidegger's philosophy is presented without arguments or hiding the arguments. Our task in learning to think philosophically is engaging in critical discussion, and not reporting other people's ideas. Reporting other people's ideas is not philosophy at all; and proposing philosophical ideas without arguments or hiding any arguments is just bad philosophy. However, even bad philosophers may have important insights—and that is why one bothers to read them. But we will never know whether their ideas are important if we do not submit them to our best critical assessment.

⁴ Freeman, 2003, p. 331.

One argument against the need for critical thinking in philosophy is the following: You are assuming that Zen masters or Kierkegaard or Heidegger actually make mistakes like ordinary people. But this is a false assumption. Truth was revealed to these people, not via argument and evidence, but by Religious Experience. Therefore, it's wrong to treat their pronouncements as if they were on the same level as anyone else's.

The problem with this argument is that, again, any argument for the idea that Religious Experience reveals truth—and not, say, deep psychological illusions—is weaker than our arguments for the idea that people make mistakes. And these mistakes can include believing they had a genuine Religious Experience (assuming there is such a thing) when all they had was a hallucination.

Furthermore, the idea that Zen philosophy or Kierkegaard's or Heidegger's philosophy is all about engaging in life's activities, existential and emotional attitudes, and not cold, logical reason does not take us very far. The fallacy involved here consists in restricting reason at the outset to reasoning about facts and truths, leaving emotions, practices and attitudes towards life out of any rational deliberation, and then complaining about reason's limitations. But this is a mistake.

The best argument for John to marry Josephine is that he is in love with her and she is also in love with him and there is no strong reason for them not to marry. Compare this with the case in which Peter is madly in love with Mary, but she couldn't care less about him and uses his love to torture him emotionally. The best course of action is for Peter to try to get out of his feeling, and we rightly consider him unreasonable if he doesn't even try to do precisely that. Of course, we understand that in the heat of the situation he may not see it that way. People make mistakes, even regarding their own happiness and well-being. That's why good friends will try to persuade Peter that his best interests demand a change in his attitude. And if they are his best friends they will not try to manipulate him. They will try to reason with him and discuss alternative courses of action and expected outcomes, trying to help Peter to see more clearly all the options available, and choosing the best ones, taking his feelings and emotions into account.

Therefore, even if philosophy is all about practices and attitudes toward life—and I do believe part of philosophy is precisely that—that doesn't mean we have to suspend critical thinking and embark in dogmatic Zen pronouncements, trying to manipulate people to blindly accept practices they would probably not accept were they given the opportunity to think critically.

The nature of philosophy is its openness to critical discussion. It does not matter whether the ideas under scrutiny were presented critically or not, as long as we assess them critically. But if one does not examine ideas critically one stops doing philosophy, even if one is repeating the best critical ideas of the best philosophers. One who starts repeating philosophical ideas without critically examining them is stopping doing philosophy; he or she is starting a religion. And that is a different matter altogether.

It's not just philosophy, however, that should always be open to critical discussion. Any academic subject should be so. That it is not always so is an unhappy reality. People tend to accept uncritically what they have learned with some effort, closing their minds to new ideas, refusing even to consider them seriously. David Hume and René Descartes are but two of the many examples of innovative philosophers who never found a place in the academe; and the same is true in other areas of inquiry. It's a shame that this is so. This happens when universities relapse to the uncritical acceptance of some set of preferred ideas, betraying the very heart of academia: the rational search for truth and value.

This is why it is a mistake even in the case of astronomy to suppose teaching it is just a matter of transferring Fixed Knowledge into the student's empty mind. If we do that, we will misguide the student, making him or her believe astronomy has nothing to do with critical discussion and evaluation of opposing theories and views, presenting what we take as established knowledge as if it really were knowledge. But history has shown time and again that what the smartest and wisest people take as established knowledge sometimes is just sophisticated illusion. Shouldn't the student be aware of that right from the start? It seems reasonable to believe so.

Two deeper objections to the centrality of argument and evidence in philosophy remain. The first goes like this: reason is not the only tool in the search for truth. And indeed it's not possible to defend reason as the only or best route for truth without arguing in a circle. All we can do to defend reason is to call upon reason's own principles; and all we can do to raise objections to other routes to truth is again to call upon reason. But that is circular. Therefore, whether or not we accept reason and critical thinking is a matter of personal and arbitrary preference.

People who accept this kind of argument may see reason and critical thinking as important and interesting. But they also see it as some kind of ultimately groundless "game" on the same level as other "games" in town (like tradition, authority, and religious revelation); and there is no principled way, they believe, to decide between those different "games". I believe this kind of argument is wrong because it fails to run through all available alternatives. The argument focuses on the supposed dilemma of defending reason (and raising objections to unreason) either by reason or by some other means. The first horn of the dilemma is circular, the second arbitrary. Therefore, the argument goes, one cannot defend reason (or raise objections to unreason) in an appropriate way.

Usually, the argument stops here. But surely we have to consider the alternative: how are we to defend unreason or tradition, authority and religious revelation? Once again we have a dilemma: either we do it rationally or not. We cannot defend unreason using reason because that is self-refuting. If there are good reasons for tradition, authority and religious experience, then these are not irrational or a-rational ways to search for truth. In that case, we have just enlarged the domain of reason.

If, on the other hand, we defend unreason using unreason, we are using the

very circular mode of reasoning we used to defend reason. So, what's best? Defending reason circularly or defending unreason circularly? Defending unreason circularly is worse because it is not only circular but also arbitrary. Defending reason circularly is not arbitrary. The circularity here is very general and is not uninformative. Any student of the history of logic knows how we go about evaluating critically the very rules of inference we use to reason. We have to use some set of rules to critically evaluate another set, but any set can and has been critically evaluated. We just cannot evaluate all rules of inference at the same time using no rules of inference. But the same is true of any analysis of unreason: that too will have to use rules of inference, which is self-refuting if we are trying to argue ourselves out of any rules of inference (this does not even work by *reductio*, since *reductio* arguments themselves are just one kind of rule).

The choice, then, is not between two equally groundless and arbitrary "games": reason and unreason. The choice is between circular arbitrariness (unreason) and circular non-arbitrariness or critical circularity (reason). Of course whenever one presents a reason for something, including a reason for preferring non-arbitrariness to arbitrariness, one can—and should—challenge that reason. But that is critical thinking in action, and therefore, by itself, a refutation of uncritical thinking.

The second deeper objection goes like this: Zen and other sorts of non-analytic philosophy such as pyrrhonism should not be compared with anything that resembles the search for truth and value. The point is rather to learn how-to—how to achieve perfect bliss or *ataraxia*. Therefore, teaching Zen is not like teaching astronomy, but rather like teaching how to ride a bicycle or to speak a language.

The first thing to note is that any analogy between Zen or any kind of philosophy like Zen and speaking a language is misleading because there is not much debate about, say, English grammar or phonetics, nor is it hard to critically assess the quality of teaching by its results in the case of teaching a language. Zen or any kind of philosophy like it is one philosophy among many other competing philosophies and it is much harder to assess the quality of its teaching. Still, the point is that Zen is more like learning how to prepare food, for instance, and not like learning some propositional content. Certainly one cannot learn any practice if one is asking questions all the time, driving the instructor mad with demands for constant justifications for everything.

I believe this objection is based on a twofold confusion. First, the point about paralyzing the process of learning-how if one demands constant justifications for everything at the same time applies also to learning-about. This suggests that learning-how and learning-about are not that different when it comes to critical assessment. Of course, if someone is teaching me anything at all, I take many things for granted—that the person really knows-how or knows-about what he or she is teaching, that he or she does not want to deceive me, and so on. However, this does not and should not preclude me from critically assessing what that person is teaching me. This is the second part of the confusion: the critical

attitude the Ancient Greeks introduced in the world demands a delicate balance between trust and openness to criticism. I have to trust my masters and teachers to some degree, but at the same time I have to critically assess what they are teaching. It does not matter whether I'm learning how to cook or how to Zen or about epistemology—I have to ask myself whether what I'm being taught stands up to criticism. Is it true that preparing food in a certain way makes it delicious? Is there a better way to do it? Is it true that makes it nutritious? Is it true that one can achieve *ataraxia* in this way? Is there a better way? And is it a good idea to try to achieve *ataraxia*? Is it true that knowledge is justified true belief? Is all knowledge based on experience?

Excluding human practices from the purview of critical thinking is a confused and misleading impoverishment of human experience. Very much like the ideas that argument and reason are obstacles to people's freedom and autonomy and that when it comes to emotions and attitudes reason is silent, this thought is confused and misleading because what makes human experience so rich is precisely our power to critically assess our own practices. And this sometimes demands a change in our practices. Should women vote and have the same rights as men? Should slavery and homosexual practices be allowed? These are all practices, like Zen, and they are all the better off when one assesses them critically. Likewise, Zen and any other kind of practice should be critically assessed. And if we are to understand Zen as philosophy and not as just one more religious practice, then it is Zen's own masters that have to think critically about their practice. Otherwise, Zen is not philosophy. In any case, characterizing philosophy as thinking critically about a given set of open problems seems appropriate.

Let's return to Nozick's ideas about this subject. He argues (p. 5) that we should use arguments just in "self-defence" (my term, not his)—a kind of "intellectual karate" (his term, not mine). The idea is that one could argue and use the powers of reason just to defeat those that are using those very tools, although one did not believe, so to speak, in the proficiency or foundations of those tools.

This idea is once again plagued with confusion. For a start, it's just not true that karate can be used only in self-defence. Fighting techniques are neutral regarding their uses. We might and perhaps should have an ethics in martial arts—"use them just as self-defence and never as an attack weapon" might be the motto. But this says nothing of the self-standing status of fighting techniques; actually, they stand on their own. They can be used either to attack or as self-defence. They are not like magical powers that one person drains from others to use against them without that person having those powers. This is just nonsense. Likewise, reasoning is not a magical power only the "opponent" has, and that I will use without relying on, just to refute the other person. To show that someone else's views entail inconsistencies one has to rely on reasoning. First, because one has to reason to show that the entailment holds. Second, because one has to draw some conclusion from that inconsistency (namely, that the opponent's views are not true). In both cases, one is following rules of inference. Those rules of

inference stand on their own and can equally be applied to assess everything, including Zen guidelines to achieve perfect bliss. Reasoning is not a magical tool that can be used just to refute those ideas one does not like.

Secondly, the martial arts metaphor suggests a thought that makes perfect sense, but is not an ally to those who dismiss critical thinking and clear argument in philosophy. The thought is that one should keep one's mind as a "blank slate", so to speak, believing nothing, and using only the power of argument to show the rest of the world is mistaken about everything, including the power of argument. I believe I showed why the idea that one can use reason to argue against reason as a whole is wrong, and I will not insist on that now. But there is another thought here: the idea that one should evaluate all ideas critically, even if conditionally. By "conditionally" I mean the following: any argument has to be based on premises and rules of inference (not necessarily the rules of deductive logic). So, in a sense, all argument is conditional: we can always, in principle, challenge either the premises or the rules of inference (or both).

This is a superficial conditionality of argumentation. But there is a deeper one that every good philosophy student should be aware of. For instance, in discussing the problem of evil one does not have to believe that there is a god, neither that there is evil. All one is really discussing is whether evil and the theistic god can go together. This is a conditional discussion in this sense: even if one does not believe there is a god, the issue is interesting because one's belief that there is no god is not more plausible than the beliefs under scrutiny in this discussion. So it's not as if we knew for sure that god does not exist. If we did know for sure, the discussion would be a waste of time. But since we do not know for sure, all we can and should do is discuss those ideas conditionally.

In this sense, all rational activity—philosophy, or physics, or history, or motorcycle maintenance—is conditional. Human beings make mistakes, and smart and wise people make mistakes too. That is why we have to keep in mind that what we believe we know may be wrong. Even if the general belief that all our beliefs are wrong is self-refuting, it's still plausible that for any particular belief, that belief may be wrong. We need the same kind of balance I talked about earlier regarding the attitude towards our teachers: one cannot lucidly disbelieve everything—although one can have the delusional belief one can do it—but one must also not take for granted everything one believes. One of the most dangerous of human delusions is the Cartesian or axiomatic delusion: the idea that we can start from self-evident first principles and advance step by step using only self-evident rules of inference. This is dangerous because it closes our minds to the possibility that those very "self-evident" first principles might be false.

Are we then to abandon all learning and searching for a better understanding of ourselves and our practices? I do not think so. It's absurd to believe that research has to end because we cannot be sure we got it right. It's the opposite that is true: if we could be sure that we got it right—as so many religions claim—there would be no need for further research into truth and value. Modern academia should be—and unfortunately sometimes is not—the embodiment of the

Ancient Greek thought that all is to be critically assessed and no belief is beyond criticism. Philosophy and science and history are not a matter of having The Truth. They are about arguing in order to critically assess what we take to be our best beliefs about everything. And in order to do that we have to rely conditionally on several other beliefs, that we will also critically assess—but we cannot assess them all at the same time. Nor should we delude ourselves into the false belief that we can suspend all beliefs at the same time and live beliefless lives. A beliefless life is impossible because all organisms have to represent the world to some extent in order to survive; the most rudimentary beliefs are proto-beliefs. Relapsing into proto-beliefs is an impoverishment of human experience. One should assess beliefs critically, and be ready to drop those beliefs that do not stand criticism. But pretending to be beliefless is just a delusion, on the same level as the delusion of believing one reached The Truth.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the art of philosophy maintenance demands critical thinking even if we are studying Zen philosophy or Kierkegaard's or Heidegger's philosophy. Critical thinking is the heart of all serious search for truth and value. Philosophy—or indeed any academic subject—dies whenever we accept ideas that refuse to be critically examined. Philosophy would then be just one more religion with its taboos, revealed truths not open to discussion, and the tendency not to evolve in hundreds and sometimes thousands of years. And humanity's understanding of the nature of things would certainly be poorer.

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