META	462	B	Dispatch: 7.9.06 Journal: META	CE: Blackwell
Journal Name	Manuscript No.		Author Received: No. of pages: 23	PE: HVA/Preethi

Published by Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA
METAPHILOSOPHY
Vol. 37, No. 5, October 2006
0026-1068

PHILOSOPHERS, THEIR CONTEXT, AND THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES

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Abstract: It has at various times been said, both before and since the fall of apartheid, that philosophers in South Africa are neglecting to do certain sorts of work. Behind this accusation lies a general claim that philosophers have responsibilities to their contexts. This essay is dedicated to (i) defending this claim against objections, and (ii) offering a positive argument for there being moral pressure on philosophers to increase understanding. My aim is not to accuse any philosopher or community of philosophers of neglect. It is rather to defend an understanding of both philosophy and ethical responsibilities that makes room for philosophers to have moral responsibilities. Whether or not it has ever *in fact* been appropriate to accuse philosophers in South Africa, or indeed anywhere else, of neglect, philosophers do indeed have responsibilities to their contexts.

Keywords: responsibilities of philosophers, nature of philosophy.

> It is best to think of moral progress as a matter of increasing *sensitivity*, increasing responsiveness to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things.
>
> —Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999, 81)

1. The Accusation

I begin with three quoted passages. The authors of the first two, Robert Paul Wolff and Ronald Aronson, are American academic philosophers, writing about their respective professional visits to South Africa in 1986 and 1987. The author of the third, Mabogo P. More, is a philosopher working in South Africa, and his piece was written after the end of apartheid.

> I suppose the most extraordinary aspect of philosophy at the English universities is its total similarity to the philosophy taught or written at American or English universities . . . . I saw very little evidence that English language South African academic philosophy had been affected in any significant way by the fact that it was being conducted in a fascist society

> that is torn apart by the conflict between a repressive state apparatus and a nation-wide liberation movement. (Wolff 1986–87, 96–97)

> Most American philosophers . . . are *professionally* indifferent to what goes on in South Africa today . . . Sadly enough, this seems to be true in South Africa as well . . . Questions about the current social, political, and economic landscape of *apartheid* are probably less pertinent to the teaching and practice of philosophy today than they are to the teaching and practice of, say, literary criticism or . . . engineering. (Aronson 1990, ix; emphases added)

> Lest we think that the Americans (Aronson and Wolff) are arrogant, prescriptive and ignorant of the reality of their subject, I think few persons in this country, if any, would argue that academic philosophy has played any major or significant role in setting and arguing for agendas for the unfolding of the South African political situation today. (More 1996, 127)

Each of these quotations is critical of South African philosophy, as practiced not only before the first democratic election in South Africa but also, in the case of More, after it.[1] The claim is that philosophers in South Africa should have been, or should be, doing something within the context of their profession but were, or are, not. As a philosopher working in South Africa, I appreciate that these allegations are pointed at me and my community, and, as such, they are a primary motivation behind my coming to this topic.

That said, however, my discussion will not be focused on allegations directed at philosophers working in South Africa, or, indeed, on allegations directed at any particular philosophical community, past or present. Defending an allegation of neglect against a particular community at a particular time is an *empirical* claim, requiring a good deal of knowledge about the research and teaching patterns in that community.[2] Rather, I shall be discussing, in abstraction from any particular community, the very *idea* of what I shall throughout this essay call the "Accusation": the Accusation is an allegation of neglect on the part of a philosopher or philosophical community. My concern in the essay lies with what is behind the Accusation: How is it possible for a philosopher or philosophical community to be susceptible to the Accusation? What is philosophy such that the Accusation can be made of us as philosophers?

I have become sympathetic to the thought that philosophers, in our roles as philosophers, have responsibilities to respond to our context, and this essay is a defense of this claim. The upshot of the essay is that philosophers should be aware of, concerned with, and working on philosophical issues that arise in their context, and that this responsibility is a moral one. The Accusation may or may not *in any one case* be

[1] See also André du Toit's earlier, more guarded 1982.

[2] Seumas Miller and Ian MacDonald argue in their 1990 that Wolff did not have his facts right about the English-speaking philosophical community in South Africa.

appropriately targeted at a philosopher or philosophical community, but the idea behind Accusations—that philosophers have responsibilities and are susceptible to a judgment of negligence—is, I shall argue, correct.

The Accusation is only one possible allegation that could be directed at philosophers. If a philosopher's work is unsuccessful or misguided, then she may, on those grounds, be susceptible to criticism. In his article, Wolff also discusses a piece written by the South African philosopher G. J. C. van Wyk, who uses the work of John Rawls to defend apartheid. Wolff clearly finds Van Wyk's endeavor abhorrent, but his response is different to the Accusation of apathy that Wolff levies at South African philosophers in the passage quoted at the beginning of this essay. The two wrongs are distinct; the Accusation contends not that philosophers are saying the wrong thing on certain topics that have arisen in their contexts but that they are not working on these topics at all. A philosopher who, like Van Wyk, advocates an undesirable position may (and should) be up for attack, but the criticism will not be one of negligence. I shall not be discussing allegations other than that of negligence.

In the next section, I respond to various statements of resistance to the thought that philosophers have responsibilities to their context. I shall agree, more or less, with all of them but shall nonetheless contend, in section 3, that a generalized statement of the responsibilities of philosophers to their context survives such objections. In the second half of the essay—sections 4 and 5—I shall offer a positive argument for the responsibilities of philosophers to their contexts; this argument contends that since philosophical understanding per se can improve our lives, philosophers have responsibilities—indeed, *moral* responsibilities—to their nonphilosophical contexts.

2. Resistance to the Accusation

A. It seems plausible that all persons, citizens, and intellectuals have responsibilities to respond to certain contexts. Indeed, perhaps all professionals do as well. There is nothing special about philosophy in this regard.

It may be correct that we have responsibilities in our broader roles as persons, citizens, and intellectuals, but this is not inconsistent with the Accusation. Just as I can have (say, ethical) responsibilities as a person, father, or neighbor while at the same time having (say, political) responsibilities as a citizen, I can have all of these responsibilities and have responsibilities qua philosopher. The Accusation regards only the latter—our responsibilities to perform in a certain way tasks that are inherent to our profession: teaching, presenting, discussing, writing, and publishing in the subject matter that constitutes our field.

Among academic fields and vocations, philosophers are not unique in being susceptible to an allegation of neglect *in virtue of* their profession. It is common for writers to be accused of neglect. In a contemporary review of Arthur Miller's 1968 play *The Price*, Robert Brustein took Miller to task for writing "a social-psychological melodrama of family responsibility at a time when our cities are burning."[3] Whether or not Brustein was right to accuse Miller of neglect, it is clearly not incoherent to levy such an accusation at a writer or other artist. We can equally imagine situations in which a scientist or scientific community is susceptible to allegations of neglect. Meteorologists could be accused of ignoring particular changes to or worries about our atmosphere; chemists could be accused of not researching the nature of some chemical that is making people ill. Considerations like these suggest that every field—and perhaps every vocation—has its own responsibilities.[4] If this is true, it may be that philosophers are no *more* susceptible to accusation than are people in any other vocation. None of this, however, is inconsistent with our having responsibilities that are unique to our status as philosophers.

B. Philosophers should not be obliged to act in any way, and, a fortiori, they should not be obligated to act as a unified group.

This is correct. Philosophy is a theoretical discipline, and qua philosophers we should not be called to certain actions *other than those*—like writing, teaching, and discussion—that are inherent to our discipline. Insofar as the Accusation calls us to act, it must do so within the confines of our theoretical discipline.

It immediately follows from this that philosophers should not be expected to act outside their discipline *as a body*. Our methodology is inherently one that requires discord, disagreement, and discussion in order to progress. As André du Toit perceptively observes, "Say, for example, that a group of 50 or 100 philosophers would succeed in organizing themselves effectively as a social or political pressure group—in such a case there would undoubtedly be every justification to cast serious doubts on the *philosophical* quality of their activities!" (Du Toit 1982, 155). Du Toit's point is not that it would be *wrong* for a group of philosophers to do this but that it cannot be something that we are called to do *as philosophers*.[5] Were we to perform actions that do not fall within our discipline, we would be stepping outside, and perhaps shirking, our responsibilities as philosophers. A declaration of *philosophical* responsibilities must be one that calls philosophers to act within the constraints of their field.

[3] In the *New Republic*, 1968; quoted in Allen 2003, 15.

[4] Imagine, for example, a plumber being accused of neglecting to help his poor neighbors fix a broken pipe.

[5] One exception to this: philosophers should respond, as a group, to injustices suffered by individual philosophers. See McCumber 2001.

C. Philosophers should not be pressured into working in political, social, or moral philosophy.

This is correct. While it will often be political and social circumstances that raise the Accusation, the responsibilities of philosophers do not entail the requirement to work only or largely in political or social philosophy. There are bound to be issues relevant to one's local context—issues that a community can be Accused of not working on—that do not fall within these narrow confines.

Here is one example. A few years ago, the president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, was heavily criticized for consulting with so-called dissident scientists in the area of AIDS research. The controversy raises a troublesome and pressing issue with respect to the epistemological relationship between, on the one hand, the public and public-policy makers and, on the other hand, scientists. Do we have reason to believe the Loyalist—who agrees with the dominant position in the scientific community—over the Dissident—who is in some sense a member of that community but disagrees in some salient aspect with the dominant position?[6] This question is intimately related to political and social concerns, and neglect of the question could perhaps justifiably leave the South African philosophical community susceptible to the Accusation. In order to answer this question, however, a philosopher is going to have to do epistemology and philosophy of science.

Here is a more familiar example. Questions concerning sexism, racism, and xenophobia are topics of current social concern in many communities. Such questions, however, inevitably lead to *metaphysical* questions concerning the nature of sexes, races, and cultures. Recent debates concerning the biological and social status of sexes, genders, and races are manifestations of the common propensity for most philosophical problems, including those of pressing social concern, to lead us at some point into *ontological* quandaries. With few exceptions, work on any topic will eventually involve our having to stake out ontological commitments in an area, and this positioning requires that we do some metaphysical work. So, questions of social and political relevance stretch into other, more "remote" areas of philosophy, and it follows that philosophers outside political and social philosophy are as susceptible to the Accusation as those within it.

D. Philosophers should not be pressured to work in a philosophical field that has practical relevance.

This is correct. The Accusation must not dictate that philosophers should be working on matters that have clear or obvious implications as to how we should act, live, or make public-policy decisions.

[6] For a discussion of this question, see Jones 2002.

Philosophy does indeed deal with issues such that, if one were to have certain theoretical commitments rather than others, one would *act* in certain ways rather than others. If it were to turn out that someone standing outside science should only receive testimony from Loyalists, then that would entail that President Mbeki was wrong to speak to Dissidents. Answering such a philosophical question could directly affect the actions that public-policy makers take.

However, many—perhaps most—philosophical issues are such that they would not, if accepted, obviously manifest themselves in one's actions; they are, we might say, "purely theoretical." Nevertheless, among theoretical questions, there are some that we should call "relevant" in the sense that they touch on theoretical issues that are live and important in our nonphilosophical surroundings. Issues concerning the metaphysics of race, gender, and culture are salient in many communities. Yet, in spite of their having *theoretical relevance*, it is far from obvious that work on these issues will have *practical* relevance in all such communities, that answering them in one way or another will justify one sort of action rather than another.

Theoretically relevant questions pervade philosophy. A philosophical topic may be salient simply because it touches on issues that a given public is worrying about. Or it may be relevant because it is closely associated with pressing policy decisions, though it has no effect on those decisions. For example, a philosophical question can be theoretically relevant without being practically relevant when we ask *why* some phenomenon is right or wrong without ever questioning *whether* it is right or wrong. For example, everyone knows that holding racist beliefs is wrong, but what, precisely, is wrong with simply holding a belief about someone else? While such questions are important and closely related to pressing practical concerns, it is not obvious that answering them will have any practical implications at all.

I do not claim that every subfield of philosophy will contain theoretically or practically relevant issues; that will be contingent upon the concerns and nature of the surrounding nonphilosophical community.[7] The important point is that the relevance of such questions may not depend upon any effect that answering such questions may have on actions undertaken by persons in that context. So, a philosopher's responsibilities should not be understood as being limited to such concerns.

E. It is too strong to demand that (i) EACH member of a philosophical community devote (ii) ALL of her time to working on issues that are salient in her surroundings.

I agree with both parts of this claim.

[7] Nor do I claim that the absence of "relevant" topics in a subfield is a reason not to work in that subfield. The opposite of "relevant," as I am here using it, is not "trivial."

It must be recognized that philosophical work on topics that are in no way pressing or of concern to the population at large can still be of value. While there may be philosophical issues that are not worth exploring *at all*, this is not the concern of those who make the Accusation. The Accusation is not a negative injunction to give up on certain topics but a positive injunction to take up topics that are salient in one's surroundings.

If directed at an *individual*, the Accusation dictates not that responding to one's context should take over one's professional life but that the philosophical concerns and needs of nonphilosophers should in some way be manifested in one's professional behavior. It may be, however, that the Accusation is directed not at an individual but at a philosophical *community*. In the quotation from Wolff, for example, he finds it "extraordinary" not that *each* of the philosophers in South Africa is little affected by his surroundings but that *more* of them are not affected. Wolff appears to think that the community at large has a responsibility to its context. This is consistent with the denial that every philosopher in that community should be working on a particular topic, and even with the denial that every philosopher has a responsibility to be professionally responding to her context.

F. The Accusation is in conflict with the nature of philosophy.

Du Toit explains resistance to the Accusation as deriving from a conception of philosophy as conceptual analysis (1982, sec. 2); More suggests that resistance to the Accusation comes from a conception of philosophy as "detached" and "neutral" (1996, 127–30); Seumas Miller and Ian MacDonald discuss the complaint that analytic philosophy cannot be relevant because it treats all topics as "timeless and ahistorical" (1990, 449–50). Each of these three supposed features of philosophy—as conceptual analysis, as nonjudgmental, as timeless and ahistorical—may indeed be in tension with the Accusation. However, each of these alleged qualities of philosophy is implausible, and a philosopher's attempt to resist the Accusation by appealing to such a conception of his field would carry little weight.

A more plausible property of philosophy, however, its *universality*, might be taken to be in tension with the claim that philosophers have responsibilities to their context. Philosophy is a theoretical endeavor studying certain features of all human beings; philosophers discuss certain kinds of universal aspects of persons. This universalist scope of philosophy appears, at first glance, to be in tension with the Accusation. While the Accusation is concerned with the philosopher's response to her surroundings, the philosopher's job is concerned with understanding aspects of human beings in general. The directive that philosophers pay attention to their surroundings, on the one hand, and the universalist

nature of philosophy, on the other, seem to be pulling the philosopher in opposite directions.

This tension is illusory. Just because a problem is of particular concern to a community does not mean that the problem will be a problem only about the members of that community. Even though certain issues may be salient in a particular culture, there is no reason why the discussion of these issues will not concern all human beings. A philosophical problem may *arise* or be *salient* in only one community, but it will, qua philosophical problem, not be *only* about the members of that community. Behind the Accusation is the claim that although philosophers should work on problems that are especially salient in their surroundings, the problems themselves will be ones whose scope concerns all human beings.[8]

G. The Accusation conflicts with academic freedom.

As I understand it, academic freedom dictates not only that philosophers not feel explicit pressure to adhere to certain positions but also that they deserve to be allowed to work on issues that interest them. This must be right. Someone who dedicates her working life to theoretical endeavor should not be constrained by explicit pressure to work on topics other than those she values. Central to the worth and importance of an academic life must be the freedom to pursue one's own concerns.

The Accusation, understood merely as the claim that philosophers should be working on certain topics, appears to violate academic freedom. But this conception of the Accusers's opposition is too simplistic. Those who Accuse philosophers of neglecting their context do so not only because the philosophers are not *working* on certain topics but also because they are apparently not *interested* in certain topics. Philosophers, says the Accuser, should be more *concerned* about the philosophical issues that arise within their nonphilosophical contexts, and that concern should lead them to work on—discuss, research, teach—such topics. To the Accusers, philosophers (or philosophical communities) ignoring philosophical issues of pressing importance in their surroundings appear callous and insensitive.

The Accusation is not in tension with academic freedom, because Accusers do not deny that philosophers should work on what interests them. For the Accuser, though, the interests of the neglectful philosopher are themselves a point of contention; she criticizes philosophers and philosophical communities *precisely because* their interests are not responsive to philosophical concerns in their surroundings. The negligent

[8] For more discussion of the universality of philosophy and its relationship to local issues, see Eze 2001 and Jones 2001.

philosopher, says the Accuser, does not care enough to work on topics of relevance to his community.

3. The Responsibilities of Philosophers: A Statement

I have considered seven sources of resistance to the Accusation. I agreed wholeheartedly with the first five and accepted the spirit of the last two. The question now is whether a statement of the *responsibilities of philosophers to their context* (RPC) survives such concessions. I believe that one does.

> RPC: Philosophical communities and individual philosophers should be sensitive to—attuned to and concerned with—the practically and theoretically relevant issues that are salient in their nonphilosophical surroundings, and at least some of their work should be motivated by a concern for those issues.[9]

RPC is admittedly vague, and it contains no clues as to what, precisely, a given philosopher should be doing at a given place or time. Can we fill in any details? Can we not state, with more particularity, a philosopher's responsibility to her context? I am skeptical that we can, for several reasons.

First, the notion of a philosopher's "context" must be left vague and fluid. I assume that the Accusation can be appropriately leveled against philosophers for ignoring their cities, their countries, or even the world itself. At one end of the spectrum, the international philosophical community could be coherently Accused of neglecting to address philosophical issues that concern the world at large, while at the other end of the spectrum, a single department could be Accused of neglecting to address an issue that concerns its university or local town.[10] It is a platitude that philosophers, like everyone else, exist in various nonphilosophical contexts, and if they indeed have responsibilities to their contexts, they will have responsibilities to all of them.

Similarly, we must leave somewhat vague the notion of the "work" of a philosopher. A philosopher may respond to his context by working toward publications, but his work may also take more transient and/or less public forms: teaching or supervision, reading groups, consulting, or informal discussion. It would be appropriate for someone to respond to an Accusation by pointing out that she, or her colleagues, are working on relevant issues in ways that are less conspicuous than publishing.

A third way in which RPC cannot be made more precise is reflected in the fact it is not just individual philosophers but also philosophical

[9] More comes close to this statement at the end of his review of Aronson's book (More 1996, 134). I have adopted his notion of "sensitivity," a notion also used in the quotation from Richard Rorty in the epigram to this article.

[10] Miller and MacDonald (1990) discuss the case of a lecturer at the University of Cape Town who was not allowed, for political reasons, to present a lecture.

communities who are Accused of neglect. Indeed, as we have seen, one might think that while it is true that the community as a whole is neglecting its responsibilities to its context, it is not true that *each* philosopher in the community is neglecting his individual responsibilities. Certain familiar difficulties arise here: if a community has responsibilities, then what, if any, responsibilities fall on each single individual who is a member of that community? Who, if anyone, is to be blamed for neglecting those responsibilities? I shall not address these issues, but I do wish to note their contribution to the vague nature of RPC.

Perhaps the strongest reason why we cannot state RPC with any precision is that the relevant issues that arise in a philosopher's context cannot be predicted in advance. We cannot predict from what part of our lives—political, social, medical, spiritual, and so on—philosophical issues will rise to salience in a nonphilosophical community. Nor can we predict in which subfield of philosophy these issues will properly belong. Recognizing a salient philosophical topic in one's surroundings may take a good deal of attentiveness and ingenuity, and I think that they will in many cases surprise us when they appear on the philosophical scene.

In sum, I suspect that it is very difficult, and perhaps impossible, to state a philosopher's responsibilities in any more detail than RPC does. Is this a worry? Does the vagueness of RPC make the responsibilities of philosophers too *undemanding*? I shall return to this worry below, but I repeat here that in this essay I am not concerned with defending any particular instance of the Accusation. Rather, my aim is a more general one: if you find yourself Accused of philosophical neglect, then you cannot appeal either to the nature of philosophy or to ethics to argue that such Accusations are incoherent or generally misguided. My aim is to (i) form and (ii) defend a statement of the responsibilities of philosophers that *lies behind* Accusations, one that is consistent with the nature of both philosophy and ethics. I have now completed task (i), that of stating RPC; the next two sections will be concerned with task (ii), its positive defense.

4. Philosophical Understanding and Well-Being

The Accusation is a *moral* accusation, and the claim behind the Accusation is that the responsibilities of philosophers are *moral* responsibilities. Philosophers have responsibilities such that they can be guilty of a neglect of their fellow human beings, animals, and other things of value. This raises a large question: What are philosophy and morality, such that the former is in the realm of the latter? In answering this question, I shall offer something that this essay has hitherto neglected, namely, a positive argument for RPC. In this section, I shall gesture at some of the ways in which philosophical understanding can and does improve the lives of

philosophers and nonphilosophers. In the next section, I shall argue that this in turn reveals the existence of philosophers's moral responsibilities.

My argument depends upon philosophy's having two contingent features, both of which I hope are fairly uncontroversial. The first is that philosophy seeks, and more than occasionally delivers, improved understanding. When a philosophical community works on a problem, those who are acquainted with the work come to have a better understanding of the topic at hand. In spending time reflecting, discussing, defending, and criticizing "around" a particular philosophical topic or problem, one comes to have a better understanding of the nature and depth of the problem, of the nature of its possible and acceptable solutions, and of the nature and importance of finding a solution. And this is so *whether or not* any of the particular solutions that one considers are, all things considered, acceptable. Sometimes philosophical discussion will deliver a product, a firmer or more informed answer. However, increased understanding is not dependent upon this sort of consensus. To see that this is true, one need simply reflect on one's own engagement with any of the more intractable philosophical problems. Working on epistemological skepticism, free will, consciousness, intentionality, meaning, and the nature of goodness and beauty (to name just a few), leads to a certain increased appreciation, put most generally, of the difficulty and perplexity of the human predicament, and it does so even if none of the positions that one considers, much less endorses, are the right answer to these or any of the other difficult problems with which one deals.

Second, my argument assumes that any increase in philosophical understanding can and does spread beyond the philosophical community itself. It is clear that the work of certain philosophers has made its way into public attitudes: even if we were to restrict ourselves—misleadingly—to the work of particular recent individuals in the realm of English-language philosophy, we could name Thomas Kuhn and John Rawls as philosophers who have had an unequivocal effect on how their wider communities see their world. However, there is a wide range of mechanisms by which the philosophical understanding that belongs to *each of us* is spread beyond the philosophical community: classroom teaching, popular publishing, public speaking, and professional collaboration and interaction. It would take enormous sociological and psychological work to trace and describe the distribution of philosophical understanding, but even without such formal investigations I take the existence of such distribution to be backed by a good deal of evidence.

With these two assumptions in hand, I can proceed in this section and the next to my (very simple) argument for RPC: some of the work done by a philosophical community can improve the lives of philosophers and nonphilosophers, and so a philosophical community can be coherently accused of neglect should its members be insensitive to ways in which their work can do so.

Philosophical Reflection and Practical Relevance

As we have seen, some philosophical work engages with questions of *practical relevance*, different answers to which will manifest themselves in certain sorts of actions rather than others. As an example, let us recall the discussion of testimony from science in section 2 above; if it were to emerge that there is more reason to trust a Loyalist than there is to trust a Dissident, then the philosophical discussion on this issue might affect public policy. There would be, given such findings, good reason for policy makers to avoid Dissident counsel. Philosophers who neglect such issues are ignoring questions the answering of which one way rather than another will potentially result in public policies that make a difference in the lives of those around them.

Behind this version of the Accusation lies the thought that the nature or outcome of a philosophical discourse may not only *change* behavior, it may also *improve* it. This seems right. Some actions are such that if they are preceded by philosophical discourse, they are, *because so informed*, more likely to be successful. It is not far-fetched to think that an awareness of the respective epistemological positions of a Loyalist and a Dissident will result in policy makers being in a better position to know which scientists to listen to. This is simply a special instance of the more general platitude that, in many situations, an actor who reflects upon what she is doing and why she is doing it, before she acts, is more likely to perform an appropriate action than someone who does not so reflect. This is not always true, of course; many actions are successful only because they are unreflective. Nevertheless, in many cases the actor who has reflected (or who has been informed by someone who has) will have a better sense both about why he wants what he does and how he will best get it, and as a consequence, there is more reason to think that he may be more successful in his subsequent action. If the maxim that *we should think before we act* has any plausibility whatsoever, then there is reason to think that in some cases philosophical communities need to fill the role of doing this prior thinking.

The Value of Reflective Agency

A second reason to think that reflection improves behavior is that reflective behavior—that is, behavior accompanied by the sort of reflective understanding that can be delivered by philosophy—is more *valuable* than nonreflective behavior.

Harry Frankfurt famously suggests that the capacity to reflect on one's values is characteristic of persons. As he writes,

> Human beings are not alone in having desires and motives. . . . It seems to be particularly characteristic of humans, however, that they are able to form what I shall call "second-order desires" or "desires of the second order."

> Besides wanting and choosing and being moved to do this or that, men may also want to have (or not to have) certain desires and motives. They are capable of wanting to be different, in their preferences and purposes, from what they are. (1982, 82)

Second-order reflection on the desires and values that lead you to act does not mean that you will *care* which values are moving you—you may be what Frankfurt calls a "wanton" (86). Nor does reflection guarantee that you can or will *in fact* act in accordance with the values that you reflectively endorse. Nevertheless, reflection upon our values is important to us. We want to be agents who act not simply in accordance with our values but also in accordance with values *that we consider*; we want our evaluative commitments to come from sources and to be of a nature we reflect upon. This does not mean that we do not *ever* want to act unreflectively; many actions are valuable and enjoyable only if they are unreflective. Nor is this to deny that too much reflection can be a bad thing, that reflection can cross the line into brooding. Where that line is, of course, will vary from person to person; we all have our own opinions about how much reflection a healthy life should include. No one denies, however, that our lives should include *some* reflection.

One of the primary reasons why we value reflection derives from the fact that a reflective understanding of one's actions makes possible one's sense of ownership, of possession, over that action. Reflection on one's motivational situation allows for a sense that one's behavior is one's own; one knows why it is something one is doing. This is manifested, for example, in the strengthening of one's emotions toward a reflective action; your subsequent sense of pride, for example, in an action you have performed can often be less if that action was unreflective than if it was not. If I was not aware of what I was doing, I shall tend to be less gratified, subsequently, by my having done it. The accidental hero, unaware of what is at stake, *feels* less heroic after her accomplishment than the person who acted in a perilous situation with a full grasp of what he was doing and why. The accidental hero feels some distance from her behavior; while she can clearly remember acting the way she did, the lack of reflection at the time detaches her self from her own behavior. In the absence of reflection, I give up on a certain sense of association with what I do.

It is here that we can recognize a second place in which philosophy can add value to our lives. The tendency to do philosophy is one manifestation of our concern with reflecting upon what we do, and the academization of philosophy has meant the institutionalization of this tendency. Consequently, as a source of reflection on values, a philosopher's or a philosophical community's work on some topic can provide (members of) the wider community with the sort of reflection that leads to not just more *successful* but also more *valuable* decisions and actions. Philosophy can

aid with our becoming the sort of agents we want to be, agents who have a strong sense of association with their actions.

Understanding and Valuing

I have been discussing two of the ways in which an increased philosophical understanding can make our decisions and actions both more successful and more valuable. However, as we have seen, some philosophical questions are purely theoretical, in that answers to them will not change decisions or actions. But how can an understanding that does not have clear implications for how we act improve our lives and the lives of those around us?

One important—indeed, essential—part of our ethical lives is a matter of *correctly* valuing the things around us. This is one source for our ethical criticism (or praise) of each other. "Rachael does not have her priorities right; she puts her work above her family"; in saying this of Rachael, I am alleging that she needs to reassess her evaluative commitments. I can of course criticize, or praise, myself in the same way. Thinking that I have the correct evaluative attitudes is a source of satisfaction, perhaps even pride, and thinking that I did not *previously* have the correct evaluative attitudes is often a source of revelation: "Going to South Africa was very significant for my sense of my civic self; before then, I did not properly appreciate the importance of the right to vote." Our lives are made better by coming to appreciate the value of things around us.

Coming to have a proper set of values is neither easy nor automatic. It is an onerous, lengthy, and perhaps lifelong task. It is, for example, one of the primary marks of someone's making the proper transition to adulthood: "You must excuse him; he is a teenager and does not yet have his values straight." Reflecting on one's values by no means ends at the onset of adulthood; most people ponder and change their values throughout their lives. Furthermore, however—and this is the important point for seeing the role of philosophy here—the task of evaluating is not just a task for isolated individuals contemplating things of significance and their own attitudes toward them. There are many kinds of things whose value is perplexing and difficult to explain and quantify, like biological species, languages, cultures, and works of art. Our properly evaluating these things, of having a proper attitude *toward* them, can be aided by a philosophical community's doing theoretical work.

In some cases, reflection aides one in coming to evaluate something more properly; reflection makes one's valuing more accurate. In other cases, however, philosophical reflection is a process of contemplating the value that one *already* places on something, the importance that the thing already holds in one's life. Here, one's evaluation does not change with reflection; rather, what emerges is quite simply a *reflective* understanding

of a value one already has. A person with such a reflective appreciation not only has an evaluative attitude toward something; she also knows *why* she assigns the thing that value. She understands something of the role the thing plays in her and other people's lives; she understands why such things are good (or bad) things to have around.

But why is this *purely second-order* understanding a good thing, especially when it does not change the value one places on something? One answer to this question can be traced back to Plato. In the *Meno*, he writes:

> Now this is an understanding of the nature of true opinions: while they abide with us they are beautiful and fruitful of nothing but good, but they . . . do not care to remain long, and therefore are not of much value until they are fastened by a reasoned understanding of causes. . . . But when they are bound, in the first place, they attain to be knowledge. . . . And this is why knowledge is more honorable and excellent than right opinion. (1953, 97e–98a)

On one way of understanding this passage, Plato is suggesting that a reflective belief is less likely to be upset by any consideration coming one's way; it is "fastened" by a reflective understanding of why one believes what one does. Such "fastening" occurs because the grounds of one's belief are available to the reflective believer: in possessing a grasp of the source or grounds of my reflective beliefs, I have a grasp of why I believe what I do. That reflection makes available an indication of the truth of what is believed, and in doing so can aid me in determining the conviction that I should place in the belief. Accordingly, we might say that reflective beliefs are more valuable because they "bring their justification with them," and when our justification for a belief is available we can check, and recheck, its truth-value. This openness that characterizes a reflective belief, the fact that its evidence is at hand, provides, and at the same time gives us a sense of the extent of, the belief's security.[11] It follows that insofar as philosophy can deliver an available understanding of what we value, it can increase our assurance in these evaluative commitments themselves.

Understanding and Relationships

As a final area in which philosophical understanding can contribute to our lives, I shall turn to our understanding of other persons. While understanding is not all there is to most personal relationships—emotional attachment, dependence, trust, and mutual support are among the numerous aspects of our relationships—it is nevertheless true that my understanding of another person is one of the elements that partially constitutes my relationship with her.

[11] For more on the value of reflective beliefs, see Jones 1997.

It follows that my relationship with a person can be improved, in many cases, by a better understanding of her. This is most clearly revealed in cases in which we *mis*understand others. Imagine that you and I have been friends for a number of years. I, however, have recently come to realize that you think that you are better than I am. Your immodesty will potentially arouse a range of negative feelings from me—resentment, insult, and affront—and such feelings are even more likely to arise if I think that you are unjustified in your estimation of me, that your estimation of me is a misunderstanding. All of this may ultimately manifest itself in my valuing our relationship less than I once did. Your lack of understanding of me—manifested here as immodesty—may make you someone whom I no longer wish to be friends with or engage with; it can be something that I justifiably take as an affront. Your lack of understanding of me has itself worsened our relationship.

How can *philosophical* understanding be relevant here? How can the increase in general understanding that is characteristic of philosophical work contribute to a proper relationship with others? That it can do so is perhaps most evident in our relationships with those types of persons who are at the "margins" of society: (i) people who are ill or disabled in various physical or mental ways, (ii) young children, who are facing the difficult process of learning our language and values, (iii) teenagers, who are facing the difficult transition between childhood and the responsibility and expected autonomy associated with adulthood, (iv) the aged and infirm, who face death, and (v) the poor. As a reasonably healthy and relatively affluent adult, my relationship with people at society's margins depend greatly upon how I understand what they are going through, how they are different from me, and why they behave in the ways that they do.

Philosophy—alongside work in other fields—can improve this understanding. With respect to the ill and disabled, philosophical work can contribute toward an improved understanding of the very notion of illness, and of the role and significance of the capacities that the ill and disabled lack.[12] There are familiar philosophical issues about young children's development of a mind, a language, and a set of values, of their acquisition of respect for other persons and of character traits (see, e.g., Burnyeat 1984, Pritchard 1991, and Matthews 1994). With respect to teenagers (a neglected philosophical subject, in my opinion), there is a range of philosophical issues characterizing their attempt to achieve autonomy, independence, and assumption of responsibility, and with their nascent struggle with the meaning and point of life (see, e.g., Hare 1981). Thinking about the aged raises philosophical issues surrounding death and our attitudes toward it, leading to reflection upon the narrative of past and life (see, e.g., Kamm 2003). As Amartya Sen's theoretical and

[12] See, e.g., Cooper 2002, and many of the journal articles that appear in *Philosophy and Psychiatry*, *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, and *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*.

empirical work has taught us, the notion of poverty is far more complex than we would have thought, and depends upon one's context, attitudes, and abilities (see, e.g., Sen 1981, chaps. 2 and 3, and Sen 1985).

In each of these cases, we have human beings suffering from or making a transition through poorly understood conditions, often with a limited ability to reflect about their status, and in each case there are philosophical issues that characterize these conditions. An increased philosophical understanding of people in such states and stages of life will result in better attitudes toward them and, as a consequence, in our occupying, *simpliciter*, a better relationship with them.

That the sort of universal understanding that can be gained from philosophy can improve our relationships with other persons is, it seems to me, only partly reflected in the sort of actions that our understanding will lead us to. An increase in my understanding will, I hope, lead to better and more sensitive treatment of these persons, but as the case of immodesty above suggests, an improved understanding of another person improves our relationship with them *regardless* of the fact that a proper understanding will lead us to proper actions with respect to them. Regardless of how I treat, for example, a teenager or a disabled or poor person, regardless of any tangible effect that I can have on his life, my relationship with him can be made better by my having an improved understanding of the sort of transition in life that teenagers are going through, the sort of loss or lack that a disabled or poor person endures. And if it is true that philosophy can contribute toward this understanding, then this is another way in which philosophy can improve our lives and the lives of those around us.

5. The Imperfect Duties of Philosophers

The aim of the previous section was to outline some of the ways in which philosophical understanding can, and I suspect does, improve our lives. The aim of this section is to get from this point to RPC and its claim that philosophers have moral responsibilities to do certain sorts of philosophy in certain sorts of contexts. In order to do this, I shall defend the following claim , which lays out the conditions under which there is *moral pressure* (MP) on us to behave in some way:

> If we can behave in a way such that this behavior can bring about an improvement in some people's lives, then it can coherently be said that we *should* behave in this way, and that we can coherently be accused of neglect were we not to behave in this way.

I believe that a claim like MP is plausible, and I shall spend most of this section explaining why.

Recent debates over the strength of utilitarian obligations are made possible by the enormous width of moral reasons. The objection to

utilitarianism is well known: if the utilitarian says that I am obligated to do what will bring about the most happiness, then it looks as if I may be obliged to give a considerable percentage of my wealth to the poor and needy, however distant they are from me. This inference is intended as a reductio ad absurdum of utilitarianism; we do not have such obligations, and so any version of utilitarianism that says we do is unacceptable. The objection is no doubt correct; it is a problem for the utilitarian if he is committed to claiming that we have an *obligation* to give up most of our time and wealth to the poor and needy.[13]

Whether or not utilitarianism can escape from this objection, it is surely right insofar as it tells us that we have a moral relationship to the needy, whether or not we are acquainted with them, and however distant they are from us. There is, we might say, "moral pressure" on us to improve the lives of those who are needy. If this were not true, if there were *no* moral pressure on us to give to the distant needy, then we would not feel the guilt we sometimes do when we see media images of them, when we pass through their neighborhoods, and when we encounter them begging. If there were no moral pressure on us, we would not succumb to the effect that these images and close proximity can have on us, and occasionally give to charity or to these folk themselves. This moral pressure may not be so strong to count as an obligation, but it is pressure nonetheless, and this is reflected by the fact that we sometimes respond to it when we feel it as such.[14]

That there is moral pressure on me to do something does not entail that I have an *obligation* or *duty* to do it. There may be moral pressure on me to do something without it being true that I *have* to do it. The arena of moral pressure includes our strongest duties to others—duties not to murder or physically to abuse—but it also includes ethical behavior, our reasons for which are less pressing—like giving to charity, recycling, or regularly phoning our mothers. There is moral pressure on us, we might say, not only in the guise of what we *must* do but also in the guise of what it would be *good* or *commendable* for us to do.

The broad realm of moral pressure is perhaps best understood in terms of that which we can be accused of *ethically neglecting*:

> There is moral pressure on you to φ if and only if you have a moral reason to φ, which although it may be defeated or overridden by another reason, is nevertheless strong enough such that if you do not φ, you can coherently be accused of neglect.

[13] There are, notoriously, utilitarians who accept the inference and reject the reductio; see Singer 1972 and Arneson 2004.

[14] Arguably, it is the existence of this moral pressure that makes possible the hardline position occupied by Singer and other consequentialists.

Moral pressure is reflected in the fact that we can be accused of neglect by those who feel it more poignantly than we do. Someone who sees you as having been under moral pressure to φ, but also sees that you did not φ, can accuse you of neglect; "You *should* have φ-ed," she will tell you. You may disagree with her with respect to this accusation, but if you recognize that there is moral pressure on you to φ, you will at least allow that her accusing you of neglect is meaningful. Your response to her will be one of disagreement, and not, say, of bafflement. If she had accused you of "neglecting" to say Happy Valentine's Day to someone you had never met, then you would rightly, I think, respond with perplexity. But if she had accused you of neglecting to give to the local food kitchen or to put up your homeless niece for awhile, then while you might not agree with her, you *would* agree that her accusation was an acceptable move in the "ethical language game." You would feel at least some urge to answer her, perhaps to tell her that you had stronger reason to do something else. This is revealing: your urge to answer her reflects your appreciation that your not giving to the local food kitchen or putting up your homeless niece may *at least arguably* be said to be something that you have neglected.

So, the suggestion is that what characterizes both the morally obligatory and the morally nonobligatory—the entire realm of moral pressure—is the possibility of an accusation of moral neglect: if there is moral pressure on you to φ, then if you do not φ someone can meaningfully accuse of you of neglect. The core of MP, then, is that there is (perhaps defeasible) moral pressure on us to improve other people's lives. If I have the opportunity and means to improve someone else's life in some way, then there is moral pressure on me to do so. Again, the existence of moral pressure may or may not count as an obligation. I am not obliged to improve people's lives at every opportunity that I have to; indeed, so far are we from being obliged to do so, it is not even *desirable* that we do so.[15] However, such pressure exists insofar as it would be coherent for someone to try to convince me to attempt to improve these people's lives, or for someone to accuse me of neglect should I, out of ignorance or conscious deliberation, pass over the opportunity.

If—as I argued in the previous section—philosophical understanding can bring about an improvement in people's lives, then it follows that there is moral pressure to do philosophical work that will increase such understanding. Thus, MP gives us RPC and makes possible Accusations of neglect against philosophers and philosophical communities. In our professional roles as philosophers, we can bring about an increase in important kinds of understanding; philosophical understanding can improve our actions, our attitudes toward things of value, and our relationships with other persons. Given this state of affairs, there is

[15] See, e.g., Wolf 1982; again, this is opposed by the hardline consequentialist.

moral pressure on us to increase this sort of understanding; consequently, something like RPC is true, and philosophy is susceptible to Accusations.

In the vast majority of cases, our responsibilities will lie in the subarea of moral pressure that includes that which we are *not* obligated to do. Although I do not wish to fasten my position with Kantianism, I find it useful to think of the responsibilities of philosophers as Kantian imperfect duties, with which they share several features.[16] What is perhaps most important, the responsibilities of philosophers and Kantian imperfect duties both target not one's *actions* but one's *ends*. One does not have imperfect duties to perform particular actions; rather, one has imperfect duties to act in a way that certain aims are achieved. In section 2, I argued not just that the Accusers should be understood as telling philosophers what they are neglecting to do but also that what we neglect to do reveals our lack of concern for members of our wider community. A philosopher's responsibilities do not dictate that we do particular work on particular material; if they did, then we would be able to formulate RPC more strictly than I found that we could. Rather, RPC dictates that some of our work be motivated by concern, that is, with an eye to improving the well-being of philosophers and nonphilosophers by improved philosophical understanding.

My being concerned for someone who is not an intimate part of my life is rarely, if ever, something I am *obliged* to do. That said, however, for any person it can readily come about that I *should* be concerned with her. When, for example, I come across a total stranger who has hurt herself falling in the street, the situation suddenly arises in which I *should* be concerned for her, and would be rightly accused of callousness were I not to be. The responsibilities of philosophers are similar. As philosophers we should be "philosophically" concerned about the people—in whatever contingent conditions they happen to be—in the wider communities that make up our various contexts, and that concern should be reflected in our work. The philosopher whose work is wholly informed by a desire for fun or fame—whether or not her work increases understanding in relevant areas—is susceptible to an Accusation of neglect, for she is ignoring all of her nonobligatory reasons to help other people. Her lack of any philosophical concern for others deserves our disapproval and condemnation.

Conceiving of the responsibilities of philosophers as imperfect duties explains how it is that a philosophical community—as opposed to an individual—can be Accused of neglect. Were I to say, for example, that wealthy South Africans do not give enough to charities, I would not thereby be accusing any particular person of neglect; rather, I am saying that there aren't enough wealthy South Africans giving enough to charities. In the same way, if a philosophical community is Accused of

[16] An excellent discussion of Kantian imperfect duties can be found in O'Neill 1998.

neglect, then this Accusation will not target a particular philosopher in the community; rather, it says (as Wolff does in the quotation at the beginning of this essay) that there aren't enough philosophers doing enough work in response to their concern for those around them.

6. Philosophical Anxiety

Should a philosopher feel anxious after reading this essay? Well, in one way, I do not expect her to. I have not Accused any community, much less any individual philosopher, of philosophical neglect. That, as I have said, requires the backing of empirical evidence both of what that philosopher or community is doing and of the context in which the philosopher or community is working. This essay includes no such evidence.

That said, however, I would hope that the paper would challenge many philosophers's views of their profession. If I am right, then we should view our philosophical communities and our own careers with RPC in mind. For many of us, doing so will have profound implications for how we judge our own work and that of our colleagues: heeding RPC will entail a change not just of work but also of the standards by which we assess the worth of our work and that of others. We would have an additional set of norms by which to judge, for example, the life's work of a particular philosopher. We would pay more attention to the sort of work carried out by philosophical communities, and we would feel the need to monitor the work being carried out in a philosophical community with respect to its sensitivity to its surroundings. Accepting, and being cognizant of, RPC will bring a whole new set of standards by which we assess the health of our discipline.

If I am correct, then we must never forget that there may be much work, within our field, that we should be doing in response to our contexts, perhaps far more work than we could ever do. It will in many cases be difficult to know what this work is; sometimes, it will take a good deal of reflection, sensitivity, and ingenuity in order to gain a sense of what we as philosophers can and should be doing for our wider communities. This may be especially so for those philosophers whose work does not have obvious manifestations in public or social policy, that is, for those of us whose work is theoretically, but not practically, relevant.

The argument of this essay has been that Accusations against philosophers are consistent with both the nature of philosophy and the nature of our moral responsibilities. Those—like Wolff, Aronson, and More—who Accuse philosophers and philosophical communities of neglecting to do certain sorts of philosophical work should in many cases be seen as being more perceptive than others to the moral pressure on philosophers. While some Accusations may be unfair, the Accusers deserve an answer from the communities that they Accuse, in the same way that the person

who accuses me of not helping the poor around me deserves an answer from me. Rather than heightening our anxiety, it is more fruitful to see the Accusers as aiding us in discovering what we should be doing as philosophers. In any event, and however we view them, Accusations are within the bounds of both philosophy and ethics, and when the Accusers come knocking, they deserve our attention.[17]

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[17] Thanks to Nick Ferreira, Alison Hills, Fela Kuti, Eusebius MacKaiser, Andrew Nash, Charles Olson, Darrell Rowbottom, Tom Stoneham, Pedro Tabensky, Marius Vermaak, Samantha Vice, Francis Williamson, Paul Voice, and Robert Paul Wolff. Thanks also to attendees of the Philosophical Society of Southern Africa Annual Conference in January 2004, especially Gustaf Arrenhuis, Peter Duvenage, Chandra Kumar, Hennie Lötter, David Rodin, and Torbjörn Tännsjö. Thanks as well to audiences at Bristol University, the University of Manchester, and Trinity University (San Antonio).

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