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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE INTRODUCTION

Lorna Finlayson

What can examining the introductions to books in philosophy tell us about those books, and about that discipline? This article begins by differentiating 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives on the discipline of philosophy, questioning the most likely understanding of this division as one between professional and 'layman', and emphasizing instead a basic distinction between 'affirmative' and 'non-affirmative'. The introduction, I suggest, is productively symptomatic of the character of contemporary philosophy. Like an owl pellet, it can tell us a lot about the kind of creature that philosophy is and the environment it inhabits.

Nothing could be more at odds with our stage technique than the prologue of the Euripidean drama. Having a character at the beginning of the play tell us who he is, what has preceded the action, what will happen in the course of the play – a modern stage-writer would describe this as a wilful and unforgivable repudiation of the effect of suspense. We know what is going to happen, so why should we wait until it actually does?

Nietzsche

Things rarely look the same from the inside as they do from the outside. This is as true for human groups as it is for other objects. We know it in the case of the groups and settings we pass in and out of, like childhood and adolescence. And at the very least we strongly suspect it even in the case of the groups that we never leave – for most, our families and for many, our social class or even our neighbourhoods. It applies to professions, political and religious

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groups, fan clubs and sports teams as it does to diseases. It applies to my field of study, political philosophy, as much as anywhere. But it's not always so straightforward a matter what these words, 'inside' and 'outside', really mean. You can be 'inside' a discipline (or club, or team, or school) in the sense of being physically or officially there – in person, or 'on the books'; and then you can be 'inside' in the sense of *really belonging* (whether you are 'inside' in any other sense or not). We have all been places we did not – or felt that we did not – belong.

So, when we talk about the 'image' or 'impressions' of something – such as an academic discipline, such as political philosophy – we have to distinguish not only between the view from inside and the view from outside, but also between views from 'inside' and 'outside' *in different senses of those words*. Academics, or those recognized by society or by themselves as 'experts', like to talk about 'the layman', and his (or, at a push, her) point of view. But in reality, there is no such thing as 'the layman'. And here I do not intend merely another philosopher's (and layman's) platitude: i.e. 'we're all individuals', 'people are all different, aren't they?' (or in a passage by de Maistre, which philosophers seem fond of quoting: 'In the course of my life, I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, etc.; I am even aware, thanks to Montesquieu, that one can be a Persian. But, as for Man, I declare that I have never met him in my life' (*Considérations sur la France,* 1797)). It is not just that there are lots of different kinds of 'laymen' (short ones, fat ones, clever ones, female-type ones …). The point is that the divisions seem more salient than the feature that 'laymen' have in common, i.e. the negative property of not being formally employed or trained in academic philosophy. There are those who see philosophy as something above them (without necessarily claiming to have much idea what it is). And there are those who wave it away as so much hot air. Often, an uneasy mix of these two attitudes is combined in the same gaze. A more fundamental division, perhaps – and one which has much to do with education,

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with class, and with a few other accidents of birth – is between those who basically see established society, with its constitutive structures of power and authority, as their friend or even as part of themselves, and those who know it to be an enemy, something both hostile and alien. That difference is the more telling. For among 'insiders', in this fundamental sense of the word, it may not matter much whether or not a person happens to be a philosopher or to have studied philosophy: barring some unsurprising differences owing to differential familiarity, the view of a discipline like philosophy may be much the same – and the best word for that view, I suggest, is 'affirmative'. Professional philosophers, like most human beings, are inclined to place a relatively high value on their own being and activity (they *affirm* it). The 'establishment' (in the loose, everyday sense of the term), to which academic philosophy objectively belongs (the occasional subjective discomfort of philosophers notwithstanding), *affirms itself*: the existing social order presents itself as something good and rational, and those individuals and institutions in positions of dominance within it do the same. Those who identify with and affirm the establishment affirm political philosophy, and political philosophers affirm themselves. The basically affirmative view of the discipline of academic philosophy, shared by the insiders within and the insiders outside, is of a free-wheeling, questioning, creative practice of inquiry, far too profound and difficult for most mortals to understand. It has faults, of course: it is often too abstruse, too abstract, too deep – murky at times – and, at its worst, indeed has a habit of melting into hot air. But those faults are thought to be minimized in the branches of philosophy which deal with real, human problems. Ethics and political philosophy, for example, purport to apply philosophical rigour and relentless questioning to things that matter; their contribution is to shake up old dogma, to put pressure on the pockets of irrationality remaining in social attitudes and societal institutions, to offer imaginative glimpses of another world, and to nudge civilization, slowly but surely, in the right

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direction. Those who cannot take this sort of view seriously, who regard it as at best naïve and at worst deliberately dishonest as a description of the discipline (it perhaps describes an *aspiration*, but that is all), are in a sense outsiders, whether they find themselves inside academic philosophy or not.

It will already be clear that I see myself as more or less an outsider on the inside: 'political philosophy' is officially what I do for a job, but I cannot affirm very much of what goes by that name. To explain why would be no short business. But it is fair enough to ask – and all the more understandable, I think, the more the asking is done by the outsider (in the sense of the 'layman'). There is no particular reason why those not familiar with academic political philosophy should anticipate quite how far it falls from the affirmative view I've just sketched. Nor, for that matter, is there any particular reason why they should care. And so it's probably just as well that the phenomenon I want to explore now is not peculiar to my own discipline, nor something that will take long to describe. And yet it will go some way to conveying what it is that I find so impossible to affirm in my own discipline. It is the phenomenon of the introduction: those first pages of a book – an academic book or other non-fiction book, that is (there is usually nothing comparable in a novel) – which are meant to lead the reader in to the main body of the book (etymologically, *introducere* just means 'to lead in', which looks like a pretty straightforward and promising metaphor for what the opening section of a book does to a reader – as well as for other common uses of the term, e.g. to refer to the initiation of an acquaintance between two or more persons). In particular, I have in mind introductions to books in political philosophy, but there is considerable continuity between this phenomenon, the phenomenon of the philosophy introduction more generally, and the introduction more generally still.

Why would anybody be interested in *that*, you might reasonably ask? Of course, there are geeks for every subject,

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no matter how apparently unpromising – and no shortage of them in academic philosophy – but the interest of the introduction is not only of that kind. We probably all have one or two words or concepts which, for some reason, made such an impression on us when we first learned them that we remember the event itself. I have this experience with the concept of a *microcosm*: I still remember discovering that there was a word for it, i.e. for the relation that one thing bears to another by being a model in miniature of the first thing – and since the term literally means 'little world', the suggested image is of the second, smaller thing being *inside* the thing of which it is a model. There is something pleasing about this relation, whereby the whole is reflected in a part (perhaps even a part so tiny as to seem insignificant). More generally, there is something satisfying about the detective work of approaching something via the traces it leaves. When I began to lecture on political philosophy, on the Marxian concept of 'ideology', I used the example of dissecting owl pellets as an analogy for studying the way in which the material conditions of life lodge themselves in our thought and language. The owl pellet, like the microcosm, is a little thing that tells a lot. And it is also something which, like the introduction, is spat out at some point and thereafter regarded as of fairly little interest (at least by the owl). But as any Sherlock Holmes fan knows, one of the first principles of detective work is that the apparently insignificant things are the most significant of all. Holmes, famously, can read a person's state of mind, family history and travel plans from the brim of a hat or a discarded cigarette butt. Such examples may be a little farfetched, but the same principle is central to the real practice of the detection of art fraud: you don't look for the obvious things, e.g. the main subject of the painting, to determine whether it is a forgery; you look at the tiny details, the dark corners, the places where forger and viewer alike are least likely to focus their attention.

Applying this principle of attending to the small and apparently insignificant things, with a particular eye out for

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microcosmic relations, I suggest, serves us well in the case of the philosophical introduction. Very often, the introduction sums up the book, which sums up the discipline to which it belongs. And the relation is 'transitive': *because* the introduction sums up the book, and the book sums up the discipline, the introduction sums up the discipline – if we look closely enough.

You might be forgiven for inferring that the authors of books on political philosophy (and in certain other academic disciplines) purchase their introductions in kit form, expressing their individuality by assembling the components in subtly different ways. The contents are familiar:

(i) A few sentences, usually at the beginning or end, where the author gives us a glimpse of him-(or occasionally her-)self as a human being, by letting in a tastefully constrained amount of biographical detail: *the invariably difficult genesis and gestation of the book's main idea; compulsory self-deprecating quip; romantic moment* (see (vi), (c) below).

(ii) A declaration of the inestimable importance and daunting complexity of the author's chosen topic, plus either (a) its previous heinous neglect, or (b) the reams of paper that have been thrown at it (. . . *though never quite getting to the real heart of the matter*).

(iii) An admission of doubt as to whether the book should really have been written at all, *given the vastness and difficulty of its subject* – which makes it impossible for the author to do it justice in this short work – coupled with the (obviously unnecessary) announcement that the author has found some pretext for putting this qualm aside.

(iv) A statement of the author's intended readership. May include optimistic suggestion that this will include non-philosophers, or 'laymen'.

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(v) Ordered list of the book's contents, including conclusion to be reached,[1] and what to expect at each step;[2] possibly, information about chapters to skip if you know too much or care too little.

(vi) Acknowledgements: (a) unrepayable debts to a long list of White Male European Names for insightful comments that saved Author from some embarrassing blunders, (b) a (less unrepayable) debt to Female Name for skilful and good-humoured typing of manuscript, (c) a touchingly inexpressible debt to Romantic Partner (aka Female Name No. 2) for supporting and tolerating Author through the writing process, suffering his artistic temperament, allowing him to miss the first few years of their children's lives (this last made good by Cute Dedication), and in some hinted-at way *making it all worthwhile*. Plus, finally but inevitably: the many faults that will inevitably remain are the author's alone, and are due only to his lamentable obtuseness in the face of the advice of superior minds.

The little cliché-pellet that is the philosophical introduction can tell us a surprising amount about the beast that produces it, and about the environment in which that beast moves. From looking over the collection of tics and habits laid out above, it seems clear that the introduction has two main functions: (i) *ingratiation*, and (ii) *preview*. The reader is meant to be seduced, or at least softened up, by the author's demonstrations of his humanity, modesty and even vulnerability – the flipside to the impersonality that prevails the rest of the time, under the guise of scholarly 'objectivity'. At the same time, we are given advance notice of what to expect, often to the point of complete elimination of surprise or suspense – which explains why so many people only read the introduction of a book (and maybe the conclusion, which is, after all, usually just the same material in

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reverse order). As one political philosopher, Bonnie Honig, has it: 'To put the last page first is the conventional responsibility of introduction in academic texts ... [this convention] requires that the author tell the reader precisely whodunit, why, and how.' This makes the currently conventional form of the introduction pretty much the opposite of the 'essay' – a term which poet and translator Michael Hamburger reserves, in his 'An Essay on the Essay', for an inherently exploratory, disinterested form of enquiry: 'An essay is a walk, an excursion, not a business trip. [...] One walker is interested in wildflowers, another in the view, a third collects insects. Hunting butterflies is permitted – everything except the intentions of surveyors, farmers, speculators.'

The significance of this is not merely aesthetic. It is indicative of the way in which the function of philosophy books is conceived and, in turn, of the kind of relationship that is posited between author and reader. There are many possible ways of modelling that relationship. There is the model of teacher and pupil, of friend and friend, of interlocutors or correspondents. The model suggested by the functions of the introduction – the author's efforts to make himself liked and his reader receptive, and to display and itemize the contents to come – is none of these. This is more like the relationship of salesman to customer – with the twist that, since academic philosophy is overwhelmingly written *by* academic philosophers *for* academic philosophers, the buyers and sellers in this case are basically the same set of people. From looking at the virtual self-dissections with which philosophers begin their books, a fair inference is that they envisage their readers as having quite well-specified pre-existing agendas: in order either to succeed in their exams, or to compose publishable articles, they require directions to help them navigate through 'the literature', identify the main hazards, and stake out an unclaimed patch of the territory.

And to a large and ever-increasing extent, they are right. The affinities between this 'commercial' model of author and reader and the direction of recent changes to Higher

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Education in the UK are clear. One of the major themes of these 'reforms' has been the attempt to remodel students as consumers, teachers as providers, and education as a 'product'. Against this, voices from inside and outside the sector have protested that education just isn't that kind of thing, that it is something too complex, too variable and unpredictable a force to be described as a 'product' at all, and that it also *forms* who we are, rather than being something that can be delivered to a fully formed 'us'. The configuration of the conventional philosophy text, however, affirms that what it offers is something determinate, describable-in-advance and summarizable-in-conclusion – sealed at both ends like a sausage.[3]

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Notes

[1] Note that conclusions are in many respects just backwards introductions: a summary of the contents of the book, followed by statements of the modesty of the contribution made, the enormity of the scope for further work.

[2] The same norm manifests itself in the teaching of philosophy students, where there is a great emphasis on getting them to 'signpost' their essays. This is not merely a training exercise, stabilizer wheels that will later be discarded, but part-and-parcel of the demand that students be 'mini-academics' (the term used in an induction session to my then-university's master's programme, to convey the ideal to which graduate students were meant to aspire).

[3] This article is an expanded version of the introduction to my 2015 book, *The Political is Political: Conformity and the Illusion of Dissent in Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Rowman & Littlefield International).

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