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SYMPOSIUM

Philosophical Embarrassment

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Abstract
Philosophers are often embarrassed by philosophy, or at least write as if they are. But what should we make of this connection between philosophy and embarrassment? Taking a cue from sociologist Erving Goffman, this paper treats embarrassment in general as revealing of social phenomena and then considers the case of philosophical embarrassment from that point of view. As we will see, this allows us to formulate and explore several hypotheses about the discipline of philosophy, why it might be rational to be embarrassed by it, and how this embarrassment might be managed or overcome.

Keywords: progress; embarrassment; emotion; meta-philosophy; exceptionalism; cosmopolitanism; Goffman

1. Introduction

Philosophers are often embarrassed by philosophy, or at least write as if they are. Early on in his recent book *Bias*, for example, Thomas Kelly remarks (2022, 3) that "the historical track record of philosophers who offer very abstract and general theories of this or that phenomenon is dismal to the point of embarrassment." Paul Horwich (2012, 34) likewise says that philosophy "is notorious for…its embarrassing failure, over two thousand years, to solve any of its central questions." And in one of the earliest analyses of the emotion of embarrassment within philosophy, Béla Szabados (1990, 348) puts the point directly; philosophy, he wrote, is "often embarrassing to its practitioners."

How should we understand the connection between philosophy and embarrassment? One might think any relation here is superficial. Yes, embarrassment is a theme in some philosophical writing, but perhaps, this is a function of style rather than substance—interesting maybe from a literary point of view but in the end of no significance.

There is certainly some truth to this. In academic contexts, to say that something is an embarrassment to a theory is commonly an alternative way of saying it is an objection to or difficulty for that theory.[1] If all talk of embarrassment in philosophy could be interpreted like this, there would be little to discuss. A different example: when Hilary Putnam wrote that his concept of an elm was the same as his concept of a beech, he added in parentheses: "I blush to confess" (1975, 226). Since blushing is a typical manifestation of embarrassment, Putnam is conveying that

[1]This use of the term "embarrassment" picks up on older uses on which it means something like hindrance or impediment, for example, to the truth of some theory. According to the OED, the word comes from the Portuguese "embaraçar" which is itself related to "baraço" meaning something like "halter"' (as in a horse). As we will see, however, this overtone is present not only when we speak of embarrassment in academic contexts but also when we speak in social contexts, something much more common in contemporary English, and which will be our concern below.

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he is embarrassed.[2] But here the emotion is incidental—indeed it is parenthetical—since it concerns Putnam's lack of botanical knowledge, rather than anything about philosophy.

While embarrassment is in these ways a stylistic feature of philosophical writing, it is also possible to attach greater importance to it. For the sociologist Erving Goffman (1956, 1959), embarrassment is a central emotion because of what it reveals about social phenomena. The embarrassed subject, Goffman says, has at some level an assessment of the social situation they find themselves in. They represent themselves and others as occupying a set of interlocking social roles or as having a set of identities, which in turn are associated with certain norms of comportment or conduct. The situation the subject is in is perceived by them to involve a violation of those norms. Embarrassment is a response to this apparent violation, and moreover, a response that is often prior in an epistemological sense to the social organization it reflects. Hence, embarrassment can function as a source of evidence for social hypotheses. It might be obvious to a person in the moment that they are embarrassed, but the underlying social facts—the identity or identities they are projecting, and the ways in which the norms associated with those identities are violated—may become apparent (if at all) only later.[3]

Goffman himself does not apply this kind of thinking to philosophy, though there is nothing in his approach that prevents us from doing so. For suppose philosophers are often embarrassed by philosophy, just as the quotations we began with seem to suggest.[4] Then, we can use this fact to formulate various hypotheses about the discipline of philosophy understood as a social institution: about its basic aim or aims, about the social roles of its participants, and about the ways which the norms associated with those roles are apparently violated. We may also go on to ask how the embarrassment felt by philosophers is best undermined or managed. For example, are the conflicts brought to light by embarrassment genuine in the sense that they are generated by a correct appraisal of the discipline? If not, why do they seem genuine? If so, are they endemic to the subject itself or can the discipline be reformulated or reimagined without them?

This paper is an exploration and defense of this Goffmanian point of view on philosophical embarrassment. I begin (Sections 1 and 2) by sketching an account of what embarrassment is in general, an account I take to be essentially Goffman's, but recast within the framework of contemporary philosophy of mind. I then turn (Section 3) to philosophical embarrassment specifically and distinguish two main varieties of the phenomenon: embarrassment that has its source in moral aspects of the discipline and embarrassment that has its source in epistemic aspects. The rest of the paper (Sections 4–9) is an examination of these two kinds of philosophical embarrassment: what they indicate about the social organization of the subject, what the conflicting attitudes underlying them are, and how these conflicts might be overcome or avoided. Overall, my suggestion in relation to both varieties of philosophical embarrassment is that the best response is to refuse to be embarrassed, that is, to critique and reject the assumptions about philosophy that ground them. As we will see, however, this refusal takes a different form in the moral case and the epistemic case.[5]

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[2] A classic discussion of blushing and embarrassment in a literary context is Ricks (1984).

[3] A characteristic passage from Goffman is this: "…there seems to be no social encounter which cannot become embarrassing to one or more of its participants, giving rise to what is sometimes called an incident or false note. By listening for this dissonance, the sociologist can generalize…." (1956, 265). For extensive background on Goffman in the sociological literature, see, for example, Burns (1992), Drew and Wootton (1988), Jacobsen and Smith (2022).

[4] To say that philosophers are *often* embarrassed by philosophy is not to say they always are. On the contrary, there are numerous examples of philosophers who are unreasonably optimistic about the epistemic prospects of philosophy and for whom the subject is presumably not embarrassing. For some discussion of this form of optimism, and what is wrong with it, see Stoljar (2017, ch. 1).

[5] Two terms that are adjacent to "embarrassment" and that are also used in philosophy are worth noting, but I will not take them up in the text. The first is "scandal." In a famous footnote in the *Critique* (Bxxxix), Kant (1999) says it "remains a scandal of philosophy and universal human reason that the existence of things outside us…should have to be assumed merely on faith, and that if it occurs to anyone to doubt it, we should be unable to answer him with a satisfactory proof." Frege uses the same word

2. Embarrassment in General

It is common in philosophy of emotion, and philosophy of mind more generally, to think of emotions as typically having a shared abstract structure: one has an emotion just in case one perceives something as having a corresponding property (see, e.g., Scarantino & de Sousa, 2021; Tappolet, 2016). So, for example, one fears something just in case one perceives it as being dangerous, and one is disgusted by something just in case one perceives it as being disgusting. On the assumption that embarrassment is an emotion akin to these others, it too may be understood along these lines. To be embarrassed is to perceive something as embarrassing, that is, as having some distinctive property associated with embarrassment, just as danger is associated with fear, disgustingness with disgust, etc.

Of course, this provides only the skeleton of an account. To understand better what embarrassment is, and how it differs from other emotions, we need to answer a series of questions provoked by the skeleton. These concern the subject of embarrassment, the attitude of embarrassment, the target of embarrassment, and the corresponding property associated with embarrassment. I will consider these issues in turn.[6]

The *first question* concerns the subject of embarrassment: *who* exactly is embarrassed?

I assume that the subjects of embarrassment (and other emotions) are the subjects of psychological states more generally. The subject who is embarrassed is the same as the subject who believes and knows, who desires, imagines, and feels, and who has credence and preference. It will not matter for present purposes how exactly these subjects are to be understood or what their identity conditions are either at a time or over time. Given that our topic is philosophical embarrassment, we will in the nature of things be concerned with human beings with typical human identity conditions, whatever they happen to be—but what these precisely are need not concern us.

Two issues regarding the subjects of embarrassment are worth stressing, though. The first is the relative demandingness of embarrassment as regards other emotions. As noted already, and as we will see in further detail, an embarrassed individual is someone who at least at some level has a reasonably sophisticated understanding of the social situation in which they find themselves. Embarrassment is in this sense different from other emotions, such as fear, that are less demanding.[7]

The second is the possibility of collective subjects of embarrassment. Usually, we attribute embarrassment to individuals, but we speak also of collectives or groups as embarrassed. Sports teams suffer embarrassing defeats. Companies are involved in embarrassing corruption scandals. And, as I have already said, philosophers are often embarrassed by philosophy.

Still, it is one thing to accept that reports like this are true, it is another to offer an analysis of the conditions under which they are true. One is certainly not forced by the truth of such remarks to treat sports teams (for example) as group agents who feel emotions—indeed, it is controversial

100 years later: "It is really a scandal that science is still in the dark about the nature of number" (1984, 249; quoted in Perrine, 2021). "Scandal" is different from "embarrassment," of course, but has something of the same flavor. The second word is "hatred." At several points in *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (pp. 181, 438), Williamson (2021) complains about "philosophy-hating" philosophers, a type I take to be less prevalent than, but still having something in common with, those philosophers who are embarrassed by their subject.

[6]For further discussion of embarrassment and related issues in the philosophy literature, see Benziman (2020), Bortolan (2020), Montes Sánchez (2020), Purshouse (2001), Spiegel (2023), Szabados (1990) and Wang (2026). As noted in the text, my own approach is intended to recapitulate Goffman's as I understand it, but it is different from his, and from existing philosophical approaches, in three ways: (a) its explicit formulation in terms adapted from contemporary philosophy of mind, especially the statement of its functional role and its connection to the notion of a situation relative to which various propositions are true (this section); (b) its use of these ideas to solve various existing problems regarding embarrassment (Section 3); and of course (c) its application to philosophy (Sections 4–9).

[7]It is for this reason among others that embarrassment is sometimes classified as a "higher cognitive emotion" rather than a "basic" emotion, of which fear is often assumed to be a typical example. For some discussion of the higher cognitive/basic distinction, and scepticism about it, see Griffiths and Scarantino (2009); a classic discussion of the general question of classifying emotions is Griffiths (1997).

whether group agents if they exist feel anything at all (List, 2018; List & Pettit, 2011). Instead, we may take such remarks as reports with plural subjects. To say, for example, that the students (plural) in the back of the class are bored does not commit one to the view that the students constitute a single agent who is bored; it is rather that there is a plurality of individuals enough of whom are bored or at least are in some suitably related state. The same thing plausibly applies in the case of collectives and embarrassment. For a sports team to be embarrassed at their defeat, or for philosophers to be embarrassed by philosophy, is simply for enough of them to be embarrassed or be in some related state—so at any rate will be my assumption in what follows.

The *second question* concerns the attitude of embarrassment: what is it to *perceive* something as embarrassing?

In general, to perceive something is to be in a state that plays a distinctive constellation of representational, phenomenal, and functional roles; hence to be embarrassed is to be in a state that plays such roles.

The state is representational in that to be embarrassed by something is to represent it in a certain way and to represent it as having some properties and lacking others. One aspect of this is that the full gamut of representational possibilities is in play. You can perceive something as embarrassing even if the thing in question does not exist or obtain; likewise, you can perceive something as embarrassing even if, while it exists or obtains, it lacks the property or properties it is perceived to have.

Another aspect of the representational nature of embarrassment is that it includes what is sometimes called a *de se* or indexical element: if you are embarrassed you represent something, among other things, about you yourself, rather than merely about someone in general or someone who happens to be you. You may construe a state of affairs as one in which people are acting in violation of a set of norms, but this construal will amount to embarrassment only if you construe the people in question as including you yourself.[8]

The state is phenomenal in that there is typically associated with embarrassment a feeling or phenomenal element. The feeling has a negative valence: to feel embarrassment is to feel bad about something; we do not like to feel the way we do when we are embarrassed. This negative feeling is in turn associated with various bodily sensations; as noted, blushing is a characteristic response of embarrassment, much as hairs going up on the back of the neck is a characteristic response of fear.

The state is functional in that being in the state has effects on, and is in turn caused by, what other states one is in, at any rate within typical rational agents and within certain limits; moreover, often it is associated with these causes and effects precisely because of its representational and phenomenal features.

One element of the functional role of embarrassment concerns belief and knowledge: if you are embarrassed by something you will not only perceive it as embarrassing but also be inclined, if you are rational, to believe it is embarrassing; moreover, if you learn, and so come to know, that it is not embarrassing, you will be inclined, if you are rational, to cease finding it embarrassing.

Another element concerns desire: embarrassment is aversive—if you are embarrassed, you will want the embarrassment to go away; this point is closely connected to the negative valence of the feeling of embarrassment noted before.

A third element concerns intention and decision: an embarrassed individual is typically "flustered" as Goffman says (1959, 266): they are in a state of indecision about how to maintain their composure within the embarrassing situation. It is in this sense that embarrassment is an impediment or hindrance to normal social interaction just as in academic contexts it is an impediment or hindrance to the truth of some salient theory (see fn. 1).

[8]In a suitably adjusted version of Perry's famous example (see Perry, 1979), the shopper becomes embarrassed only when they perceive *themselves* to be making a mess. To the extent that they only perceive someone who is in fact them making a mess, the emotion is not embarrassment, though it might be something related, for example, imagined embarrassment.

A fourth element concerns imagination: embarrassment typically provokes (and is perhaps provoked by) what philosophers call "outside imagining," that is, imagining how you look or seem to someone external to you.[9]

To label the attitude involved in embarrassment "perception" is a way of indicating that the syndrome of representational, phenomenal, and functional roles associated with it is somewhat akin to sensory perception and also somewhat different from belief—the underlying idea is that emotion is more like sensory perception than it is like belief or other cognitive states. But we should be easy going here about the use of "perception." In philosophy of mind, there is a major dispute over whether there is a border between sensory perception and cognition in the first place, and if so how precisely it may be drawn (Block, 2023); likewise, there are many disputes about how to understand the functional, representational, and phenomenal aspects of perception, and the relations among them, even in paradigmatic cases (see, e.g., Siegel, 2015). To say that embarrassment and other emotions involve perception is not by itself to take a stand on such questions, and I will leave them in the background in this discussion.

Even if we treat the reference to perception lightly, we should nevertheless be alert to distinctions between the attitude of embarrassment strictly speaking and other attitudes that are similar from a phenomenal, representational, or functional point of view. In addition to embarrassment, for example, there is also imagined, remembered, feigned, and merely professed embarrassment. In principle, we may distinguish between being embarrassed and merely imagining or professing being so, even if in practice these states are in some cases difficult to disentangle not only for onlookers but perhaps also for the subject who is in them.[10]

The *third question* concerns the target of embarrassment: what is the something that is perceived to be embarrassing?

At least if we are guided by ordinary language, the target here can be of many different ontological categories. On visiting the hairdresser, there are many things you might find embarrassing: an object (your existing haircut), an event (getting a haircut), a situation (you getting a haircut), a condition (the state of your hair), a proposition (that your hair is cut that way), etc.

In one sense, it does not matter which of these categories we operate with; we could formulate the main points whichever is in play. Still, in what follows it will be convenient to regiment language and talk as if it is situations which are the uniform targets of embarrassment—indeed, there are hints of this in Goffman himself who often talks of situations when he is talking about embarrassment and related issues (Goffman, 1959). From this point of view, to be embarrassed at all is in the first instance to be embarrassed by a situation and to be embarrassed by a situation is to perceive that situation as embarrassing. Correlatively, it is situations in the first instance that are embarrassing.[11]

What is a situation? What I have in mind (though I doubt Goffman intended anything like this) are the mini possible worlds or parts of possible worlds described by philosophers of language and semanticists in developing so-called situation semantics (see, e.g., Barwise & Perry, 1981; Kratzer, 2023). While several issues arise with respect to the nature and identity conditions of such objects, it will not be necessary for us to resolve them beyond making the following three points. First, I do not assume that situations are always actual—some might be merely possible; hence one might in

[9]A recent discussion of the distinction between outside and inside imagining is D'Ambrosio and Stoljar (2021).

[10]There is a connection between this point and the one noted earlier about collective embarrassment. I assumed before that a collective is embarrassed if enough of its members are embarrassed or are in some related state—the related state in question may be, for example, merely professed embarrassment.

[11]To say that embarrassment is in the first instance targeted on situations is not to deny that you can be embarrassed by things that are not situations, for example, events or objects. It is only to say that when you are embarrassed by events or objects, you are embarrassed by a situation. Of course, this raises the question of how embarrassment at a situation is related to embarrassment at an object or event. I will not try to deal with this question in this paper since it is an instance of a very general issue in philosophy of mind regarding how different targets of mental states are related. For discussion of questions of this sort, focusing on the cases of perception and imagination, see D'Ambrosio and Stoljar (2021, 2023).

principle perceive a situation as embarrassing and discover later that the situation in question is nonactual. Second, it may be more accurate in contexts like this to speak of a set of situations, or of a type of situation, rather than of particular situations—I will set this complication aside. Third, and this is perhaps the key point for present purposes, situations are things according to which various propositions are true. Hence, if you are embarrassed by a situation, you are embarrassed by a situation in which various propositions are true: that you need a haircut, or are getting a haircut, etc.

The *fourth question* concerns the corresponding property associated with embarrassment: what is the property you perceive the target of embarrassment to have when you are embarrassed?

We do, of course, have a handy name for the property in question. It is the property of being embarrassing. Being embarrass*ing* is a different property from being embarrass*ed.* Being embarrassed is a property a subject has when they are embarrassed. Being embarrassing is the property a situation is perceived to have by someone who is embarrassed. When you are embarrassed, you perceive something as being embarrassing.

But what is the property of being embarrassing that some situations are perceived to have? While we have a handy name for it, it is evidently a complex property, and the name does not reveal the complexity. I take Goffman's main idea here to be that for something to be embarrassing for you is for it to involve a violation of a social norm you accept. In the light of our assumption that the targets of embarrassment are situations, we may clarify this idea by focusing on what is true in any situation which is a target of embarrassment. In short, for a situation to be embarrassing is for it to be one in which a distinctive range of propositions are true.

What distinctive range? The proposal I will work with is that a situation is embarrassing if and only if it is one in which the following six things are true:

First, in the situation, there is a set of actors or participants. We do not find embarrassing situations in which there is nothing but empty space; it is situations that involve actors and typically groups of actors that are embarrassing.

Second, the participants in the situation occupy various social roles or have various social identities. The social roles can be formal or informal. In a court of law, there are formally assigned social roles to the participants—judges, bailiffs, jury members, the accused, and so on. These roles are largely fixed by some mix of convention and law. If you organize a dinner party, by contrast, or meet someone for coffee, there are various social roles here to occupy as well, but there are no laws or conventions that determine what those roles must be.

Third, the participants in the situation are subject to a set of social norms about how to behave in the situation, that is, a set of claims or propositions to the effect that you or some related individual in the situation ought (or ought not) to do something or be some way. Typically, these norms are generated by the social roles that the participants play in the situation. For example, given that you are the host of the dinner party, you should behave in this way rather than that way, etc.[12]

Fourth, at least one of the participants in the situation is the subject of embarrassment themselves—if a situation is embarrassing for you, the situation is one in which you yourself are a participant. This reflects the fact noted earlier, that embarrassment has a *de se* or indexical element.

Fifth, the norms just noted are not simply perceived to obtain in the situation by the subject of embarrassment; they are also accepted (at least in the moment) by that subject.[13] Hence, it is not simply true according to the situation that the occupants of the social roles should behave in conformity with these norms, and it is true according to the subject of the emotion.

Sixth, some (but not necessarily all) participants in the situation are in violation of the norms in the sense that they fail to act in ways proscribed by those norms. Maybe they act directly in

[12]For a general discussion of norms associated with social roles, see Hardimon (1994).

[13]In saying that the subject of embarrassment accepts the norms I mean to say something weaker than that the subject endorses the norms. I take it to be possible that you can accept a norm without endorsing it—much as a scientist might accept a theory without endorsing it—and in consequence be embarrassed at its violation.

contravention of the norms, or maybe something happens that prevents them acting in accordance with them.

Combining these points about the corresponding property with our earlier comments about the subject, attitude, and target of embarrassment, we may summarize our overall account by saying that you are embarrassed when you are embarrassed by a situation and you are embarrassed by a situation if and only if you perceive in a particular way that situation to be one in which there is a set of participants who satisfy various conditions, one of whom is you yourself, and some of which violate a set of social norms you accept.

One might object that this account overintellectualizes the topic badly. Consider the child embarrassed by being picked up at school by their father. Does the child perceive a situation as involving a violation of a social norm they accept? Not in so many words certainly and not consciously. It may be that the child can say nothing more than "that's so embarrassing" or something similar. However, the account we have offered is intended to capture the state the child is in fact in when they are embarrassed; it is not intended to express in the child's own language what state they are in.

3. Puzzles of Embarrassment

The abstract account of embarrassment I have just sketched allows us to understand and accommodate various puzzles that have emerged in the literature.

3.1. Embarrassment at the actions of others

One kind of example that has proved difficult to handle are cases in which you are embarrassed not by what you have done—you yourself have done nothing wrong—but by what someone else has done; moreover, it may be that the person in question is themselves quite unembarrassed by the situation. An example of such a case is the episode of *Seinfeld* in which everyone is embarrassed at Elaine's dancing, though she herself is entirely oblivious. Similar cases are those in which we are embarrassed because we are in the audience of a terrible paper, or in which we host a dinner party at which one of the guests is quite drunk while another is something of a prude (Benziman, 2020; Montes Sánchez, 2020; Purshouse, 2001).

Such examples cause trouble for any theory on which a person is embarrassed only if they perceive themselves to have done something wrong, or, to put in our preferred idiom, they perceive themselves to be in a situation in which they have done wrong. But the account we have offered has no such consequence. For us, what needs to be true in the situation you find embarrassing is that you are in a group at least one of whom has done something wrong—that is, has not acted in accord with the norms associated with the social role they occupy—but it need not be you yourself who has done this. In embarrassment, as we might put it, you project not simply a particular role for you to play, but a suite of roles—an entire cast of characters. It is for this reason that Goffman's approach to embarrassment is sometimes presented in theatrical terms; his is a "dramaturgical" account (Goffman, 1959).

3.2. Embarrassment when no-one has done anything wrong

A different kind of problematic example concerns cases in which apparently no-one *at all* has done anything wrong, that is, not you and not anyone else. If you win a prize and your colleagues make a fuss of you at the Christmas party, you might in those circumstances feel embarrassed. But in such a case neither you nor your colleagues seem to have done anything wrong—on the contrary, you have quite properly won a prize, and your colleagues are quite properly making a fuss.

However, such examples cause a problem for our account only if properly understood they are cases in which we have a *single* situation that (a) you find embarrassing and (b) is one in which

no-one has done wrong. But we are not forced to characterize the examples this way. We noted before that situations are things according to which various propositions are true. A consequence of this is that it is easy to mistake one situation for another. We might, for example, have two situations, S1 and S2, that are exactly alike except that there are some propositions true in S1 that are not true in S2. If so, it is possible to be embarrassed by S2 and not be embarrassed by S1. That is what is going on, I think, in the case in which your colleagues make a fuss of you. There is one situation in which neither you nor your colleagues have done anything wrong. But there is also another situation, closely overlapping the first, in which someone has indeed done something wrong, for example, because they are in violation of a modesty norm which in effect permits people to know about your achievements, but not to speak of them out loud. Since it is the second situation you find embarrassing but the first in which no-one has done wrong, the problem disappears.[14]

3.3. Embarrassment and shame

One of the chestnuts of the embarrassment literature mentioned above (fn.5) is the distinction between embarrassment and shame. Not all languages mark a difference between embarrassment and shame, but most writers discern such a difference, and it is usually assumed that any account of embarrassment should allow us to say what it is.

One proposal is that shame is self-directed in a way that embarrassment is not. Perhaps when you are ashamed, you are always ashamed of some way you are or of something you have done; as we have seen, this need not be true in the case of embarrassment. However, in view of the possibility of being ashamed of what your country or religion has done, rather than what you have done, this is not very plausible. A different suggestion is that shame is always directed at an object—yourself, your country, your religion—while embarrassment is always directed at a situation. However, while this might be true, it is hard to see it as by itself revealing the felt difference between embarrassment and shame.

A better idea is that embarrassment is an essentially social emotion, while shame is not—it is perhaps an essentially moral emotion. If you feel embarrassed by something, the thing in question is, or is perceived by you, to involve a violation of a social rule you accept. If you feel ashamed by something, by contrast, the thing in question is, or is perceived by you, to involve a violation of a moral rule. While these are clearly related—moral rules sometimes are social rules and vice versa—they are not the same; hence the difference between shame and embarrassment.

The claim that embarrassment is an essentially social emotion needs to be interpreted with some care. The point is not that feeling embarrassed is a social property in the sense that you cannot have the property unless you are one of a group. If that were so, there would be no such thing as private embarrassment: you could refute solipsism given only the introspective premise that you feel embarrassed. The point rather is that embarrassment is a social emotion in that the participants in the embarrassing situation are understood by the subject of embarrassment as occupying various related social roles and as being subject to various norms of social action and thought.[15]

[14]It might be objected that the case described in the text is one of professed embarrassment rather than the real thing; don't you feel happy at winning the prize, after all, rather than having the negative feelings associated with embarrassment? However, while this is no doubt an accurate characterization of some cases of this sort, it is not an accurate characterization of all; it remains possible, in particular, that you are both happy at winning the prize *and* embarrassed at being made a fuss of.

[15]The distinction between embarrassment and shame raises a further issue, namely, how to distinguish embarrassment from other emotions which may also be occasioned by the violation of a norm, for example, anger or surprise. While I will not take up this issue directly here, my view is that the points in the text apply in these cases as well: neither anger nor surprise are essentially social emotions in the way embarrassment is, for example, nor do they match embarrassment in terms of its distinctive profile of functional, phenomenal, and rational characteristics.

3.4. Embarrassment as unserious

A final feature of embarrassment I want to consider is something raised by several writers: that embarrassment is in some fundamental way unserious or trivial. According to Benziman (2020), for example, "even when embarrassment is connected to a negative feature of ours, it is often not a grave one" (p. 79, fn.6).

I think we should be wary of such claims, for it is hard to pinpoint any notion of unseriousness that is interestingly related to embarrassment. In saying that embarrassment is unserious, one might mean that one does not feel it as keenly as other emotions. But that does not seem to be true from a phenomenological point of view. One might mean alternatively that it is not an essentially moral emotion like shame. That's true, but leaves open that it is serious in other ways. One might mean again that one can become embarrassed by more or less anything, including things that are trivial or meaningless in the larger context of one's life. That's true too, but does not mean that embarrassment is itself trivial or meaningless, especially given Goffman's point about what embarrassment reveals about social organization. Finally, one might mean that the social facts of a situation revealed by embarrassment are at least in some cases up to us; we can change the social roles we are committed to by reimagining or rethinking our situation. That is true as well, at least up to a point; it is also an important observation about embarrassment we will come back to below. But it is not clear that it provides a sense in which embarrassment is unserious. After all, while some social facts are open to change by us, others may be extremely recalcitrant; moreover, the mere fact that a social fact is open to change does not entail it is unserious.

Having made these observations, however, there is at least one sense in which unseriousness, or something close to it, is associated with embarrassment or at least with assertions of embarrassment. It is a familiar idea that assertions of belief typically convey uncertainty even though there is no internal connection between belief and uncertainty: if you are asked when the seminar starts, and you say, "I believe it is at 3 o"clock," you convey uncertainty even though the truth of what you say is consistent with you being certain about the answer to the question. In a somewhat similar way, assertions of embarrassment, and displays of embarrassment more generally, seem to have a distancing or exculpatory function with respect to the subject, and to that extent convey that the relevant violation, whatever it is, is unserious, or at any rate not as serious as it might be. When you say that something is embarrassing or display your embarrassment in other ways, you are, of course, conveying that the thing in question is or involves a violation of some norm, but you are also conveying that you endorse the norms in question. Hence, whatever badness may attach to something in virtue of which it is embarrassing, when you say it is embarrassing, there is often a conveyed sense in which that badness is somehow isolated to it and correlatively distant from you. Of course, none of this may be true. For one thing, you may not endorse the norms but merely accept them; moreover, that something else is embarrassing does not mean that you yourself are not open to criticism. The point rather is that this is what is conveyed in a typical assertion of embarrassment.[16]

4. Varieties of Philosophical Embarrassment

Now that we have a better sense of what embarrassment is in general, we may turn to our main interest: philosophical embarrassment. Clearly philosophical embarrassment is embarrassment of some particular variety, but what variety exactly? How in this case does the adjective qualify the noun?

I will assume in what follows that philosophical embarrassment is, to put it roughly at first, embarrassment felt by philosophers at philosophy. In this sense, the phrase "philosophical

[16]Since these assertions of embarrassment may or may not be expressions of a genuine underlying feeling, the point in the text generalizes to cases in which individuals merely profess or feign embarrassment—this is a further sense in which the functional role of embarrassment is shared by similar states.

embarrassment" may be understood on the model of "political anger." Political anger, I take it, is anger at some feature of a political system felt by participants in that system. Likewise, philosophical embarrassment is embarrassment felt at philosophy by some sort of participant in philosophy.[17]

Of course, the term "philosophy" can itself be understood in several ways. I will assume in the first instance it denotes a subject matter, or perhaps a collection of subject matters: something one can inquire into, learn about, ask questions about, and so on. But it may also be used to name various things related to this subject matter, for example, systematic inquiry into the subject matter or—this is perhaps the most natural usage—a social group of a distinctive sort, a discipline whose collective aim is to engage in systematic inquiry into this subject matter.

Correlatively, I will take a "philosopher" to be either someone who participates in some meaningful way in systematic inquiry into this subject matter or else a member of a discipline whose collective aim is systematic inquiry into this subject matter. These two ways of being a philosopher can come apart. You can be a philosopher who is not a member of the discipline of philosophy—Margaret Cavendish might be an example (Cunning, 2016; Peterman, 2025). You can also, at least in principle, be a member of the discipline of philosophy even if you are not engaged in any meaningful way in systematic inquiry into philosophical topics—that a group has a collective aim does not entail that every member of the group has that aim.

If philosophical embarrassment is embarrassment felt by philosophers at philosophy, there are evidently multiple varieties of the phenomenon; in fact, the possibilities here are endless. In principle, you could be embarrassed by philosophy's importance or lack of it in a university system, its demographic profile, the way philosophers dress or eat, or a host of other things.

Still, while we should acknowledge these potential varieties of philosophical embarrassment, it is reasonable to single out two varieties for special attention. The first is embarrassment at the moral features of the discipline, and especially at the moral failings of various famous philosophers, for example, Kant's racism, Frege's antisemitism, or Heidegger's membership of the Nazi party. The second is embarrassment felt at epistemic features of the discipline and especially its apparent long-term failure to solve its animating questions. The quotations with which we began are cases of the second, epistemic, variety of philosophical embarrassment, and indeed, it is this that mostly prompts my own interest in the topic. But it will be instructive to look first at the moral variety.

5. Philosophical Embarrassment: The Moral Variety

In his discussion of Kant's racism, Charles Mills (2017, xviii) summarizes the current state of play as follows:

> No Western Enlightenment philosopher can equal the standing of Immanuel Kant, the luminary par excellence of eighteenth-century thought, with stellar accomplishments not merely in ethics and political philosophy, but in metaphysics and aesthetics also. Yet Kant… has also a more dubious accomplishment to his (dis)-credit: being one of the founders—or (for some theorists) *the* founder—of modern "scientific" racism … Until recently, when the challenge from scholars of race made some response unavoidable, mainstream white political philosophers and ethicists had for the most part scrupulously avoided any mention of his racist writings in anthropology and physical geography. Now the dominant line of argument is that they are embarrassing and should be of course condemned, but they form no part of his philosophy.

Elsewhere Mills explains that he rejects this dominant position, which he calls the "anomaly view," in favor of an alternative "symbiosis view" on which Kant's racism is inextricably intertwined with

[17]Goffman (1959, 265) distinguishes abrupt and sustained embarrassment; philosophical embarrassment is clearly an example of the second.

his moral philosophy (Mills, 2005)—though Mills adds that there is no reason even on the symbiosis view why one should not develop a Kant-inspired moral philosophy that is decoupled from racism, and he emphasizes that contemporary Kantians are best understood as developing theories of this sort.

The scholarly question of whether to opt for the anomaly or symbiosis view (or indeed some alternative) is not at issue here; our interest instead is the role of embarrassment in views of the kind Mills describes. As he emphasizes, embarrassment is central to the anomaly view. Proponents of that view, as Mills presents them, are embarrassed by Kant's racism, even if they think his racism is unrelated to his philosophy or at least unrelated to the main stem of his philosophy. In fact, it is natural to see in the anomaly view the distancing or exculpatory aspect of assertions of embarrassment noted earlier. Such philosophers want to emphasize their embarrassment at Kant's racism not only to acknowledge it but also to distance themselves from it.[18]

Suppose then we accept Mills's claim that the majority view is to be embarrassed by Kant's racism and suppose for convenience we express it as a generic: that (contemporary) philosophers are embarrassed in this way.[19] In that case, we have a certain fact about embarrassment, and we may go on to apply the Goffman-style analysis outlined above to this fact.

According to that analysis, to be embarrassed in general is to be embarrassed by a situation in which certain things are true; hence to be embarrassed by philosophy is to be embarrassed by a situation in which certain things are true as regards philosophy.[20]Applying this to the case at hand, for philosophers to be embarrassed by Kant's racist writings is for them to be embarrassed by a situation in which at least the following is the case: that they themselves are part of a group of which Kant also is a member, that the group instantiates various social roles which are associated with norms contemporary philosophers accept, and finally that Kant's writing what he did is in violation of these norms.

Notice it is no part of the analysis to suppose that contemporary philosophers have produced such writings themselves, still less that they themselves are racist. It is rather that they are embarrassed because they are in a group that includes Kant. Logically speaking, then, to be embarrassed by Kant's racist writings is akin to being embarrassed by Elaine's dancing. It is not something that contemporary philosophers have done, but what someone else has done, that makes them embarrassed.

Once we consider philosophical embarrassment of the moral variety from this point of view, however, we are confronted with an obvious line of questioning. What exactly are the social roles that the group in question instantiates? What are the norms associated with these roles, and how do Kant's actions violate those roles? More generally, how are philosophers thinking about the social facts concerning their discipline and themselves such that embarrassment is a rational response to Kant's racist writings?

While there might be different answers to these questions, a plausible hypothesis, and the one I will concentrate on, is that the embarrassed subjects here construe the group they are a part of as involved in a certain kind of collective project, namely, to promote and honor a certain tradition of thought according to which Kant is a great figure. As Mills says above, no-one "can equal the standing of Immanuel Kant, the luminary par excellence of eighteenth-century thought." Here Mills is talking, not about the way Kant is, but the way he appears in a tradition. If philosophy, in

[18]I will concentrate in the text on the anomaly view, since it is this view that Mills most closely associates with embarrassment. In fact, however, it is hard to see why the proponents of the symbiosis view should not also be embarrassed by Kant's racism.

[19]It may be thought that the philosophers Mills has in mind are merely professing embarrassment rather than really feeling it. I agree this is a possibility, but I will set it aside in the text. As noted above, professed embarrassment shares some the functional role with genuine embarrassment; in particular, it presupposes an available social assessment of the relevant situation —and it is the latter fact that is most important for our purposes.

[20]It is worth emphasis that nothing in the analysis implies that philosophy *itself* is a situation. The point rather is that, if we regiment in the way I have suggested, to be embarrassed by philosophy is to be embarrassed by a situation, for example, a situation that involves philosophy.

general, has at least in part the collective project of honoring and promoting this tradition, then contemporary philosophers will have the corresponding social role of doing that promoting and honoring; Kant himself, perhaps, has the role of simply being the luminary who is so promoted and honored. This hypothesis makes sense of, or rationalizes, the sort of philosophical embarrassment we are examining. Kant's actions violate the social role he has been assigned, and it is this that explains why philosophers are embarrassed by them.

One might object against this hypothesis that the contemporary philosophers Mills has in mind may not consciously think of themselves as promoting a tradition. If asked, they might not say anything like this; perhaps, they would say instead only that they are interested in Kant or interested in morality or something of the sort.

There are things lying behind this objection I agree with; I will come back to them as we proceed. But so formulated, it is unconvincing. The reason is that it neglects a central feature of Goffman's project, and since we are following him, a central feature of our own. As I noted at the outset, a person may know by introspection that they are embarrassed and yet be unconscious of the social properties they are attributing to the situation they find themselves in. The same thing can be true in the case of philosophers. If (as we are assuming) they are embarrassed by Kant's actions, it follows from the Goffmanian account that they must at some level have an analysis of the social situation they find themselves in. That they consciously disown this analysis is important, but it is certainly no decisive objection to the idea that they accept it; on the contrary, it is rather something to be expected.

One might object also that the majority cannot be conceiving of the situation in this way for a different though related reason: doing so is inconsistent with what I said above. I said above that philosophy (in one sense of the term) is a discipline whose aim is systematic investigation into philosophical topics. I have now said in effect that it is a discipline which is devoted to, or least is perceived to be devoted to, promoting and honoring a certain tradition of thought. But, one might insist, these two aims are quite different from one another, and not only that, they are in tension: how can a group aim both at systematic investigation of set of topics and at promoting a tradition?

Once again, I have some sympathy with this objection and will come back to the themes it raises below. But, again, stated so baldly it is implausible. For one thing, the notion of a systematic investigation need not be interpreted as in tension with promoting a tradition; one might suppose that promoting a tradition is simply part of what systematic investigation amounts to in this specific case. In addition, even if they were in tension, this would present no serious difficulty for our proposal about why exactly philosophers are embarrassed by Kant's racist writings. For the discipline of philosophy is at least to this extent like an ordinary person: properly understood it may have, and may be perceived to have, multiple aims, even multiple aims that are inconsistent. So long as one of these aims involves promoting or honoring a tradition, our position can be sustained.

6. Traditionalism versus Cosmopolitanism

Mills's proposal, as I have understood it, is that philosophers are embarrassed by Kant's racism. What I have suggested so far is that we may make sense of, or rationalize, this embarrassment, in the light of our general account, if we assume that philosophers take their collective aim to be or include the promotion of a tradition of which Kant is a central figure.

The question to be considered now is how such embarrassment might be overcome or managed. Embarrassment, as I noted above, is aversive. Typically, when we are embarrassed, we will be motivated, at least if we are rational, to stop the feeling entirely (and so overcome it) or least seek to quarantine its effects (and so manage it). How might this be done in this case?[21]

[21]The issue of how to manage or overcome embarrassment bears comparison with a larger issue discussed in recent literature, namely, the extent to which contemporary members of some collective can or should apologise for the actions of past members. I will not try to elaborate this comparison here, but for some relevant discussion, see Bazargan-Forward and Tollefsen (2020) and Radzik (2009).

Given the account we are operating with, and concentrating for definiteness on the case of overcoming embarrassment rather than managing it, we may distinguish two main ways in which this might be accomplished; that is, two ways an individual may overcome embarrassment when it arises: they may reject the descriptive basis of the emotion, or they may reject its normative basis.[22]

As an illustration of the first, suppose you are embarrassed because, as it seems to you, you have just given a philosophy talk and all the while you had an unsightly stain on your shirt. Now suppose you realize that you do not, in fact, have an unsightly stain—you were just imagining things. If so, your embarrassment if you are rational should disappear. That is because you were wrong about the descriptive basis of the emotion. You perceived a situation in which certain things are true—in particular, that you had a stain on your shirt—and yet no such situation obtains in fact.

As an illustration of the second, suppose you are embarrassed because you feel underdressed at a wedding. Wedding guests, you think, should be in some sort of formal attire but you have managed to turn up in your usual rags. But suppose now you realize this wedding is atypical. Weddings in general have the feature you are concerned with, but not this one: formal wear here would come across as unfriendly and impolite. If so again your embarrassment if you are rational should disappear. That is because you have made an incorrect normative assessment of the situation. You"re right about your outfit—and so about the descriptive facts—but wrong about the norms.

In principle, the same possibilities exist as regards embarrassment at Kant's racist writings. It might in theory turn out that we are mistaken about the descriptive facts. Perhaps the case for Kant's racism crumbles on closer inspection, and his apparent racist statements can be explained away. While this is a coherent possibility, I am going to assume it is unavailable. For one thing, matters seem unfortunately clear-cut in the case of Kant (Allais, 2016; Kleingeld, 2007, 2019; Mills, 2017). But even if they were not, Kant's racism is in the end just an example. Philosophy being what it is, there are likely to be cases of this general sort even if this is not one of them; hence, it makes sense, if only from a methodological point of view, to continue with the example as described.

What then about rejecting the normative basis of the emotion? By "rejecting the normative basis," I, of course, do not mean arguing that Kant's racism is morally correct. What I mean instead is revising or reimagining our conception of philosophy so that Kant's racist writings, however false or morally problematic they are, no longer constitute a reason for philosophers to be embarrassed. The underlying idea is related to a point mentioned earlier. To some extent at least the social facts revealed by embarrassment are up to us; if we change those social facts, we change the norms concerning how we should behave both collectively and as individuals, and the embarrassment, at least in principle, should go away.

How to implement this proposal? We saw earlier that embarrassment at Kant's racist writings makes sense if we assume that philosophers are construing their collective aim to be promoting a relevant tradition of thought. But there is no clear reason for thinking that this is what our collective aim must be; on the contrary, Kant's racist writings themselves constitute a good reason for thinking the opposite. Suppose therefore we took our collective aim to be something else, for example, coming to know the truth about the questions on philosophical topics including the topics of moral philosophy. In that case, there would be no longer any reason to be embarrassed by Kant's racism. It is not that we lose sight of his racism or ignore it or seek in any way to excuse it; it is rather that, given the nature of our project, it ceases to be embarrassing.

One way to make the point at issue here is in terms of a distinction between a traditionalist and a cosmopolitan view of philosophy (see, e.g., Ganeri, 2017, 2018). On the traditionalist view, the collective aim of philosophy is or includes the promotion and honoring of some tradition. On the cosmopolitan view, by contrast, the goal is to come to know the truths that answer philosophical questions—it is, as Ganeri (2018) puts it, "the slow movement of thought toward truth." If we focus

[22]Putting this point in terms of a distinction between descriptive and normative is suboptimal since on many views, normative claims are descriptive as well. I will set this aside, however.

on the discipline of philosophy as it is in fact currently constituted, with all its real-world complexity, no doubt it includes at some level both traditionalist and cosmopolitan elements. Moreover, moving the discipline from having one collective aim to having another may be a huge task, and in principle even an impossible one, at any rate for one person. Still, we can certainly imagine versions of the discipline that are more purely traditionalist as well as versions that are more purely cosmopolitan; likewise, it is possible at least in principle to make those possible versions of philosophy a reality. What I have been suggesting is that the phenomenon of philosophical embarrassment, or at least the moral variety that we have so far considered, makes sense if we assume that philosophers are thinking of their discipline in traditionalist terms. Correlatively, the more we adopt an alternative cosmopolitan way of thinking of the subject, the less embarrassed we will be.

7. Philosophical Embarrassment: The Epistemic Variety

As significant as it is, embarrassment at Kant's racism, and at the moral failings of philosophers more generally, is not the most prominent version of the phenomenon we are interested in—at any rate it is not the version present in the quotations we began with. These quotations concern, not the moral failings of philosophy, but its epistemic failings. What Kelly and Horwich, for example, are embarrassed by, at least in the passages we quoted, is the fact or apparent fact that philosophy has somehow not answered the questions it has set for itself.[23]

Suppose then we accept these quotations at face value and suppose again we formulate the underlying thesis here as a generic: that philosophers are embarrassed by the epistemic failures of their discipline. In that case, we have a second fact about philosophical embarrassment, and we may go on as before to apply the analysis above to that fact.

Given the analysis, for philosophers to be embarrassed by epistemic failure is for them to be embarrassed by a situation in which various things are true: that they themselves are part of a group, that the group instantiates various social roles associated with norms philosophers accept, and finally that the failure of multiple members of the group to answer philosophical questions constitutes a violation of these norms.[24]

We now confront a version of our earlier line of questioning. What exactly are the social roles that the group in this situation instantiate? What are the norms associated with these roles and how do the actions of various philosophers violate those norms? More generally, how exactly are philosophers thinking about the social facts concerning their discipline and themselves such that embarrassment is a rational response to this perceived epistemic failure?

In my view, the best hypothesis here is that philosophers are implicitly adopting what Timothy Williamson (2021) has called "anti-exceptionalism" about philosophy. This idea might be formulated in several ways, but here I will understand it in terms of the notion of an epistemologically standard discipline, where in turn a discipline is epistemologically standard just in case: (a) it aims at coming to know the answers to first-order questions concerning its proprietary topics; (b) it uses standard rational methods to achieve those goals (perhaps tailored to suit the topics under

[23]It may be thought that, at least in Horwich's case, the use of the term "embarrassment" is no more than a flourish and could be replaced without loss with "frustrating." I agree such an interpretation is available; this possibility is akin to the one noted at the outset on which talk of "embarrassment" is a matter of style rather than substance. Still, I think it is also reasonable to take Horwich at his word. The reason is that he clearly means in the 2013 book from which this quotation is drawn to compare the state of play in philosophy with that in other fields, and so to make a social remark about it; in that sense, "embarrassing" is apt while "frustrating" is less so.

[24]If philosophers are embarrassed in general by the (apparent) epistemic failings of philosophy, they may well be embarrassed by the (apparent) epistemic failings of moral philosophy as a special case. This too may be described as "philosophical embarrassment of the moral variety," but it is clearly different from the phenomenon described that way in the text.

discussion); and (c) it has a reasonable expectation of success, usually because it has a history of progress on the topics in question. From this point of view, anti-exceptionalism about philosophy is the thesis that philosophy is an epistemologically standard discipline.

If philosophers are indeed thinking of their discipline in anti-exceptionalist terms, it becomes understandable why they would be embarrassed by it, at least given a certain view of its history. If you are a member of an epistemologically standard discipline, it is natural to assume that you are one of a group of inquirers whose past members solved the problems they were interested in, and whose current members, while they have not solved the problems they are working on, may nevertheless approach those problems with some confidence, precisely because of the actions of past members of the group. Since nothing like this appears to be true in philosophy—that is since past members of the discipline seem not to have solved the problems they worked on—it is no wonder you are embarrassed.[25]

We may present this point in a different way by bringing out a presupposition of the anti-exceptionalist approach to philosophy. The presupposition is that disciplines distinct from philosophy, for example, disciplines such as biology or history, are themselves epistemologically standard in the sense at issue—of course, it is a substantive matter whether this presupposition is true; the point is that it tends to be assumed in presentations of anti-exceptionalism about philosophy. If this is assumed, however, we have another way to say why philosophers are embarrassed, namely, that what makes them embarrassed is that their discipline is not behaving as others do or seem to. Philosophers are embarrassed, in short, because they are (in their own self-observation) not keeping up with the Joneses. They are continually peeping over the hedge and wondering why *their* house and garden is not up to the standards of the neighbors.

8. Exceptionalism versus Anti-Exceptionalism

The quotations we began with suggest that philosophers are embarrassed by the epistemic failures of their discipline. I have suggested that we may make sense of this is if we suppose that philosophers have implicitly adopted an anti-exceptionalist view about philosophy. At this point, however, the question arises again about how to undermine or manage the embarrassment.

As before, we may focus for definiteness on two possible ways to proceed: to reject the descriptive basis of the emotion or its normative basis. To reject the descriptive basis in this case would be to argue that the factual claim about the history of philosophy is mistaken—despite how things appear, it is not true that philosophy has a history of failure. To reject the normative basis, on the other hand, would be to argue that philosophy is not an epistemologically standard discipline in the first place.

In the case of the moral variety of philosophical embarrassment, it was a counterpart of the second strategy that was most plausible; a natural thought then is that the same thing might work in the epistemic case. And in fact, the history of philosophy provides several models of the discipline on which it is not epistemologically standard—several models of philosophy that are exceptionalist rather than anti-exceptionalist.

One such model is the *historicist* model, on which philosophy is recast as an interpretative discipline, focusing on what people think about philosophy rather than philosophy itself—the guiding idea is that philosophy should be conceived on analogy with religious studies rather than theology (Rorty, 1979). Another model is the *pragmatist* model (as we might call it) on which philosophy is recast as an enabler or helper of other disciplines (usually natural sciences) or else as a synthesizer of these other disciplines (Kitcher, 2012, 2023). A third is the *Wittgensteinian* model

[25]It is worth emphasis that the notion of a situation at issue here permits the possibility that situations may persist for an arbitrary length of time. Hence, for example, when Horwich speaks of philosophy's embarrassing failure "over two thousand years," he is from our point of view invoking a situation that has persisted for that period.

according to which philosophical problems are pseudo-questions rather than genuine ones (Horwich, 2012).[26]

These models of philosophy are different from each other in several ways. But all of them entail that philosophy is not an epistemologically standard discipline in the sense defined above. The historicist regards philosophy as a second- rather than a first-order discipline. The pragmatist denies it has any proprietary topics of its own. And the proponent of the Wittgensteinian model thinks that, while there is in some sense a set of questions that constitute its subject matter, these are generally pseudo-questions that cannot be approached using ordinary rational methods in the way the anti-exceptionalist demands.

Could we therefore appeal to these exceptionalist models to undermine the normative basis of philosophical embarrassment? My view is that this is implausible, and the reason is that the models themselves are implausible. This is not to say there is nothing right about them—there is. It is rather to insist they are not persuasive when interpreted as applying to philosophy in general.

As regards the historicist and the pragmatist, for example, no-one can deny that the problems they want philosophy as a discipline to focus on are genuine and important; the issue is rather that this fact in no way undermines the idea that ordinary first-order philosophical problems are *also* genuine and important. A similar point applies in the case of the Wittgensteinian model. No doubt some apparent problems, both inside and outside philosophy, are pseudo-problems, and it is certainly important to keep this possibility in mind. But the idea that this is true of philosophical problems as a class or in general is unconvincing. Indeed, we may take the history of philosophy after Wittgenstein to be a natural experiment which shows it is unconvincing.

I do not mean these brief remarks to constitute by themselves a rejection of these meta-philosophical proposals; there are many ways to defend and develop the proposals in question. But the points just mentioned are sufficient, I think, to motivate looking to a different strategy when it comes to undermining or managing the embarrassment that philosophers feel about the epistemic failings of their discipline. This alternative strategy is to deny the descriptive basis of the emotion; to argue, in other words, that there is no history of failure in the first place.

A simple way to implement this strategy is to adopt Bertrand Russell's (1912) suggestion that, if someone solves a philosophical question, or makes progress in some philosophical topic, then straightway these questions or topics cease to be properly called "philosophical," simply in view of the meaning of the term. Russell's suggestion, in effect, is that, while we tend to read the history of philosophy in a pessimistic way, this is only because we are misled by language; the underlying facts warrant a more optimistic view.

Russell's semantic proposal is not very plausible. It entails, for example, that the expression "philosophical progress" is a contradiction in terms—but even people who are pessimists about philosophical progress will reject this, since they allow that there is progress in certain cases, for example, in negative or conditional cases. Nevertheless, there is an alternative way to undermine the descriptive basis of philosophical embarrassment, a way that concentrates, not on how we use the word "philosophy," but on how we are thinking about the subject itself.

On this alternative way, we are driven to read the history of philosophy in pessimistic terms because we are thinking about the subject in what on reflection looks to be a highly immodest and even epistemically arrogant way—to use terms that have been prevalent in recent epistemological literature (see, e.g., Ballantyne, 2019; Lynch & Johnson, 2018). One constituent assumption of this way of thinking is that philosophical problems remain literally the same over time—our problems are literally the same as the counterpart problems discussed by our forebears and our descendants. Another related assumption is that we may assume in discussing these problems that in some important sense all the relevant facts are in. A third assumption is that the solution to a

[26]Of course, whether Wittgenstein himself adopted the Wittgensteinian model described in the text is a difficult scholarly question; I make no judgment on that issue here.

philosophical problem, if it comes, will not come as a simple increase of information about a topic of interest but will be some pithy idea that all of a sudden solves the problem. If you hold these views either severally or together, it is extremely easy to read the history of philosophy in a pessimistic way. If you reject them, by contrast, as you should if they are genuinely immodest or arrogant, a more optimistic picture comes into view.

In other works, I have argued in detail that we should indeed reject these views and defend the optimistic picture (see, e.g., Stoljar, 2017, 2021). I will not relitigate these issues here. The point instead is to connect them to philosophical embarrassment. For if it is right that we think of philosophy as having a history of failure only because we hold a set of mistaken views about the subject, we then have a different way of overcoming philosophical embarrassment of the epistemic variety. Philosophers are embarrassed by their subject because, as they see it, it has a history of failure. On the other hand, if they are mistaken about that history, their embarrassment if they are rational should go away.

9. Conclusion

Goffman's central insight is that embarrassment is a clue to underlying social phenomena. A person who is embarrassed must have a social assessment of the situation they find themselves in, even if this assessment is not introspectively available. I have been suggesting that this insight applies in the case of philosophical embarrassment just as much as embarrassment of a more everyday sort. In the case of embarrassment at the moral failings of famous members of the discipline, I"ve argued, first, that philosophers who feel this must be thinking of their discipline in traditionalist terms and, second, that the feeling will be overcome if we think of the discipline in alternative cosmopolitan way. In the case of embarrassment at the epistemic failings of the discipline—the older and more prevalent form of philosophical embarrassment—I"ve argued that this makes best sense if we assume that philosophers are thinking of their discipline in an anti-exceptionalist way. The remedy in this case is not to think of philosophy in an exceptionalist way—that option is I think unavailable—but rather to revise our view of the underlying facts. It is true that philosophers often think of their discipline in pessimistic terms, but there are several reasons also for thinking this is a mistake. If it is, there is nothing in philosophy to be embarrassed about.

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