SHOULD PHILOSOPHERS BE CONSISTENT? (PART TWO)

Berel Dov Lerner

Berel Dov Lerner now argues, inconsistently, for consistency.

Consistency is the hallmark of serious thought. Philosophers are human beings and it is a general truth of human psychology that when people are not expected to hold consistent opinions they find little incentive to think deeply about what they say before they say it. It is simply impractical to assume that the quality of philosophical work does not suffer when there is no price to be paid when philosophers change their minds. Why invest effort in working out the implications of an idea before publishing it when you can painlessly change your mind in a later article?

Consistency is vital for the task of interpreting a philosopher's writings. If consistency may be assumed, then an ambiguous passage found in one paper written by a particular philosopher can be interpreted in the light of passages from other books and articles written by that same philosopher. However, if inconsistency were to become the norm, every paper and monograph would become an isolated exegetical island. If a particular passage proved unyielding to our best efforts at interpretation within the confines of the work in which it appeared, we would have nowhere left to turn to for help.

Finally, the view that philosophers should have no qualms about being inconsistent is based on a false picture of how human knowledge progresses. Philosophy is (like science) a communal rather than an individual pursuit. The individual philosopher makes his or her contribution to the discipline by faithfully representing certain ideas within the philosophical community. The process by which a philosophical idea is tested is similar to the workings of a court of law. Some philosophers tenaciously defend the idea, while others attack it. Imagine the miscarriages of justice that would take place if attorneys for the defense and prosecutors felt free to switch roles as often as they liked during the course of a trial! Similarly, if ideas

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could not claim the allegiance of particular philosophers, how could we be sure that they ever enjoyed a fair 'day in court'? It is especially unfortunate when the inventors of new ideas abandon them, because the person who invents an idea is very likely to be particularly well-suited to defend it.

Of course, sometimes a philosopher will find herself compelled by persuasive criticism to change her mind. In such cases, however, the philosopher involved owes her readers a special debt. She must take pains to explicitly announce her change of heart and to lay out her new stand regarding her earlier writings. She must directly engage with the arguments she had previously forwarded in support of her now abandoned thesis and explain why she no longer finds them convincing. Failing to do so would make the interpretation of her work unnecessarily difficult and serve to undermine the quality of philosophical debate.

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