The (Rump) Parliamentarian's Reply

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Douglas Mann finds much to object to in the current state of Canadian academic philosophy. He judges the philosophers currently populating Canadian philosophy departments to be largely disengaged,[1] clinging to specious and self-serving rationales for the inadequate sub-disciplinary coverage they offer,[2] concerned primarily with economic self-preservation,[3] blinded by a nationalist rejection of alternative modes of thought,[4] and yet nevertheless ". . . taking pride in [their] splendid isolation."[5] These are serious allegations and, if true, would warrant some serious soul searching on the part of Canadian philosophers. But they are not true or, more modestly, Mann has not shown them to be so. And although reflection on the state of the discipline is always worthwhile, no reason has been offered to believe Canadian philosophy is in a state of crisis that mandates the kind of wholesale rethinking in which Mann would have us engage.

1. Mann's Argument

Mann's argument consists of three central claims. First, philosophy as currently practiced in Canadian universities (and the English-speaking world more broadly) consists of a hierarchical structure of sub-disciplines from which certain traditional philosophical sub-disciplines have been excluded altogether. Second, the philosophical rationales offered in defense of this structure are inadequate. And third, the structure is best explained on the "Rump Parliament" model as the product of a ". . . series of paradigm-defining political decisions by analytic philosophers."[6] I will consider each of these in turn.

The hierarchy Mann attributes to the current discipline – which he borrows from Honderich[7] – gives pride of place to metaphysics, epistemology, and

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logic. At the second, lower, level we find philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, and moral philosophy. And at the periphery we find social and political philosophy, the philosophy of history, and aesthetics, among other things. Communications theory and cultural studies, post-structuralism, and postmodernism find no home in the hierarchy at all. Mann defends this picture of the current discipline by appeal to a survey of the listed specialties of tenured and tenure-track faculty at ". . .ten representative universities from across the country."[8]

Mann considers two rationales for the hierarchical and exclusionary structure of the discipline. First, he addresses Russell's observation that when a sub-discipline becomes a science, it ceases to be a branch of philosophy. And while apparently acknowledging that some sub-disciplines get excluded in this way, Mann argues that this process ". . . simply does not cover all meaningful cases of the shaving off of philosophy."[9] And second, Mann considers Honderich's claim that the core sub-disciplines are more general than the peripherals, and that the latter are dependent on the former (but not vice versa). Mann rejoins by arguing that the core sub-disciplines are "just as dependent" on the peripherals as the reverse, and that important historical philosophers have considered the questions raised by (some of) the peripheral sub-disciplines to be more important than those raised by the core.

Finally, Mann presents three causal factors which he claims explain how the discipline came to acquire its current exclusionary-hierarchical structure. First, the "domination of modern science in modern bureaucracies" led to a "legitimation crisis for academic philosophy."[10] Second, increasing pressure on universities to provide an economic justification for their teaching and research activities caused philosophy departments to become primarily concerned with economic self-preservation.[11] And third, an unwarranted belief – due in part to anti-continental nationalism – in the power of logico-linguistic analysis to solve philosophical problems led to an elevated status for such techniques within the discipline.[12]

2. Objections

In this section, I wish to take issue with Mann's first two claims. Although I also reject his Rump Parliament model of the genesis of the putative exclusionary-hierarchical state of the discipline, Mann simply asserts it without argument. Even if he is right about the current structure of the discipline and in his rejection of the philosophical rationales for it, that would by itself give no evidence for his favoured explanation of how the discipline came to acquire this structure.

I will begin with a discussion of Mann's critique of philosophical rationales for the putative exclusionary-hierarchical structure of the discipline. I will focus here on Honderich's rationale for the hierarchical aspect of said structure. Russell's account of the exclusionary aspect will be revisited in Section 3. below. Recall: Mann rejects Honderich's claim that the other philosophical

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sub-disciplines are dependent on logic, metaphysics, and epistemology by arguing (i) that these putatively core sub-disciplines are also dependent of the others and (ii) philosophers have historically considered questions raised by (some of) the peripheral sub-disciplines to be more important than those raised by the core. The central trouble with (i) is that, for the most part, the sense of dependence Mann invokes in which the core sub-disciplines are putatively dependent on the peripherals is distinct from and orthogonal to the sense of dependence with which Honderich is concerned. Whether one's decision or ability to pursue questions in the core sub-disciplines depends on political or aesthetic values is simply irrelevant to whether answers to such questions depend on answers to questions in political philosophy or aesthetics. Moreover, even when the argument is to the point – as when Mann argues that unless goodness or beauty were relevant to the correctness of solutions to problems in the core sub-disciplines, many of the problems in these areas would be settled – what we are given is simply a non sequitor.[13] Similarly, the difficulty with (ii) is that the putatively greater relative importance of the questions raised by the peripheral sub-disciplines is compatible with Honderich's claim that answers to these questions depend on answers to the more general questions raised by the core disciplines. Moreover, this whole discussion may ultimately prove to be moot. Few contemporary philosophers – Honderich aside – would accept the kind of sub-disciplinary foundationalism to which Mann objects. And as we shall see, Mann has provided no evidence – Honderich's testimony aside – to suppose the discipline currently has this kind of hierarchical structure in the first place.

Let us turn now to Mann's claim that, as currently practiced in Canadian universities, the philosophical discipline has an exclusionary-hierarchical structure. The evidence for this claim, as noted above, is a survey Mann has taken of the declared areas of specialization of tenured and tenure-track philosophy faculty at "ten representative universities."[14] According to Mann, his survey reveals a vast over-representation of specialties in the core sub-disciplines – logic, epistemology, and metaphysics – and cognate fields, especially the philosophy of science – and a vast under-representation of specialties in the peripheral sub-disciplines, including aesthetics, communications theory and cultural studies, post-structuralism, and postmodernism.[15]

The first thing to note is that Mann's survey is methodologically suspect in a number of important respects. First, he excludes the University of Toronto from the survey on the grounds that ". . . it is an 'omnibus' school catering to many interests, and because its sheer number of professors would skew the overall statistics."[16] But the right thing to say is that what would skew the overall statistics – insofar as the goal is a picture of Canadian philosophy *tout court* – is excluding the University of Toronto from the survey, both because of its sheer number of professors and because it is an "omnibus" school.[17] Second, Mann included only the first two specialties listed on departmental Web sites for each professor, rather than all of their listed specialties.[18] And while I acknowledge that some statistical compensation needs to be made to compare

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faculty who list multiple specialties with those who list single specialties, Mann's decision to include only the first two is entirely arbitrary.[19] And third, Mann states that the most common specialties, in descending order, are the philosophy of science, ethics, analytic metaphysics, epistemology, and logic; and on this basis draws the following conclusion: "Honderich's idealized 'solar system' as a political model for hiring and promotion in philosophy departments seems to be confirmed by these statistics."[20] The trouble is that not only does Mann neglect to note that, according to his own numbers, there are more specialties in social and political philosophy[21] – one of the peripheral sub-disciplines – than in logic or epistemology, the numbers for these latter two sub-disciplines, as well as analytic metaphysics, are artificially inflated. The number of specialties in epistemology includes not only faculty who list this specialization but also those who list a specialization in the philosophy of language. The numbers for analytic metaphysics include those who list specializations in cognitive science and the philosophy of mind. And most bizarrely, the number of logic specialties includes specialties in the philosophy of mathematics, decision theory, and critical thinking.[22] Mann's decisions regarding how to group specialties are arbitrary at best, and arguably self-serving. And they ultimately undermine the conclusions he wants to draw.

Moreover, even if these methodological worries could be rectified, Mann's survey still would not suffice to establish the putative current exclusionary-hierarchical structure of the discipline, let alone the rump parliament explanation of how it arose. First, even if Mann's survey could establish the exclusionary structure of the discipline, it would not establish its hierarchal structure. In the absence of some (rather improbable) principle to the effect that the relative popularity of a sub-discipline reliably tracks its perceived importance or, perhaps better, fundamentality, the putative fact that Hoderich's core sub-disciplines are over-represented does nothing to establish that they are considered to be more important or fundamental.

And second, in lieu of a principled account of what the proper representation of the various sub-disciplines is, any claim that they are over- or under-represented is vacuous. And it is far from clear what such an account ought to look like. One might argue that more specialized sub-disciplines – e.g., the philosophy of quantum mechanics – ought to have less representation than their more general cousins – such as the philosophy of science. But no such principle is available to Mann, as it presupposes the kind of hierarchical structure he eschews. Presumably he would endorse some kind of egalitarian principle according to which each sub-discipline ought to have roughly equal representation. But, as we have seen, in lieu of an account of the individuation of the sub-disciplines, this again is empty.

3. Alternative Explanations

Despite the rather serious methodological flaws in the collection and analysis of his data, and the errors of reasoning in his broader argument, Mann is right

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to note what might to the lay person seem to be a surprising distribution of specialties in Canadian philosophy departments. There are currently a whole lot of philosophers who specialize in the philosophy of science, the philosophy of mind, and the philosophy of language; and there are relatively few who specialize in the philosophy of art, existentialism, and phenomenology; communications theory and cultural studies: post-structuralism; and postmodernism. The paucity of specialties in existentialism and postmodernism might seem especially surprising given the popularity of the latter in academic units outside of philosophy and of the former in the population at large. And although, unlike Mann, I do not regard this as any kind of evidence of a crisis in the discipline, it does at least warrant some kind of explanation. And it my view, it can be explained as the product of a combination of philosophical rationale, intellectual fashion, and, yes, politics.

Although politics almost certainly played an important role in shaping the current discipline, it was not primarily the politics of expediency – of legitimation and economic survival – as Mann suggests. Rather it was the internecine politics of doctrine and methodology. It is part of the disciplinary lore that the current shape of academic philosophy is the product of bruising political battles between philosophers working in the analytic and continental traditions, which were ultimately largely won by the former. Philosophers in the two traditions were deeply divided over the nature of the philosophical enterprise, so much so that the departments in which they were housed splintered as a result. The upshot is an academic discipline consisting in large part of predominantly analytic departments, a few predominantly continental departments, and a lot of philosophy in the continental tradition being done outside philosophy departments – in English, history, anthropology, and communications departments, among others. Or so the lore has it.

Moreover, that the discipline-shaping politics were doctrinal and not expedient suggests that there may be a philosophical rationale which could at least partially illuminate the current shape of the discipline – that is, a coherent and defensible principle of sub-disciplinary inclusion and exclusion, in the sense that it tracks real distinctions between sub-disciplines. The principle that I have in mind –highly idealized as it stands – is that in order for a sub-discipline to count as philosophy, as it is currently practiced in Canadian philosophy departments, it needs to be committed to the ideal of truth or objectivity and to a methodology of discerning truth through the application of reason. Following Russell, this principle implies that a sub-discipline gets "shaved off" from philosophy when it becomes scientific; that is, when its methodology becomes predominantly empirical and less reliant on abstract reasoning. But in addition, it implies that a sub-discipline can be excluded when it abandons the ideal of truth and, correspondingly, reason in favour of rhetoric. Arguably, at least, this would go some way toward explaining the current paucity of specialties in communications theory and cultural studies, post-structuralism, and postmodernism in Canadian philosophy departments.

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But anomalies remain. As above, the number of specialties in the philosophy of science is surprisingly high and the number in existentialism and the philosophy of art is surprisingly low. In my view, such anomalies largely can be explained by the vicissitudes of philosophical fashion. From time to time certain philosophical questions and sub-disciplines simply come into and go out of vogue. It is a complicated issue why sub-disciplines become fashionable or unfashionable when they do. It may be driven in part by the desire for "fresh terrain" on the art new members of the profession – graduate students and newly minted Ph.D.s. And Mann may even be right that the pursuit of funding opportunities plays a role. But what is important is that arguably, nothing deeper than fashion needs to be invoked in order to explain the putative anomalies. Philosophy of science is currently quite fashionable but, presumably, in the future will go out of fashion.[23] Philosophy of art is currently relatively unfashionable but, again presumably, that too will change.

4. Much Ado About Nothing

At the end of the day, it is not entirely clear what Mann is so exercised about. In the era of specialization, universities consist of clusters of academic units – departments – which themselves consist of clusters of sub-disciplines. Popular wisdom would have it that sub-disciplines are grouped together on the basis of disciplinary unity. As a matter of fact, however, things are not nearly so tidy and are, in fact, often quite arbitrary. Note, for example, that, until recently, philosophy and religious studies frequently were housed in the same department, and that cultural anthropology and sociology continue to be housed in different departments. Certainly similarity of subject matter and methodology do typically play roles in such groupings, but so do tradition and academic politics of various sorts.

In light of Mann's worries, there are two features worth noting of the membership of the clusters which currently constitute Canadian philosophy departments. First, two of the sub-disciplines to whose present prominence Mann most strongly objects – logic and the philosophy of science – are increasingly being delivered outside of philosophy departments: logic in mathematics departments, and the philosophy of science in self-standing history and philosophy of science departments. And second, as Mann himself acknowledges, the sub-disciplines which have been excluded from philosophy departments have found homes in other departments in Canadian universities: ". . . in all cases these fields of study migrated from a hostile philosophical environment to more friendly environments in Political Science, Sociology, English, Communications, and other departments."[24]

Especially given this latter fact, it is increasingly unclear exactly what Mann's complaint is. The sub-disciplines with which he is concerned continue to be pursued at Canadian universities in what he acknowledges to be friendlier environments than those of the philosophy departments from which they have

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been excluded. He might be worried that this involves a violation of some kind of disciplinary essentialism. But not only is such essentialism highly controversial, a violation of it hardly seems something to write home – or *Dialogue* – about. He might instead be worried that the prevalent institutional arrangement in some sense deprives his favoured sub-disciplines of the honorific "Philosophy." Even if this were correct it would be a relatively trifling matter. But again, it is not correct: counting as philosophy and counting as philosophy-as-currently-practiced-in-most-Canadian-universities are two very different things. He does explicitly state that the exclusion of his favorite sub-disciplines from philosophy departments has ". . . served only to impoverish philosophy."[25] To this I, in my "splendid isolation," am inclined to respond as follows: Thanks, Doug, for your concern, but we're doing just fine.

Notes

1 Mann, 669ff.
2 Ibid., 663, 665.
3 Ibid., 674.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 675.
6 Ibid., 674.
7 Honderich, 1995.
8 Ibid., 670.
9 Ibid., 663.
10 Ibid., 673.
11 Ibid., 674.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 665.
14 Ibid., 669ff.
15 At this point in his discussion, Mann abandons talk of core and peripheral sub-disciplines in favour of a taxonomy of hard rump, soft rump, neutral, and "engaged" sub-disciplines. Since no rationale is offered for this latter taxonomy, and nothing ultimately hangs on it, for simplicity of exposition I will continue to frame things in terms of the earlier one.
16 Mann, 670.
17 This would be akin to excluding all residents of Quebec from a survey of Canadian political opinion on the grounds that their idiosyncratic views and sheer numbers would skew the results.
18 Mann, 670.
19 In my own case, my fourth listed specialty is the one in which I am currently doing the most work. The reason it is listed fourth is that it is the specialty I most recently acquired and, as such, was simply added to the end of the list.
20 Mann, 673.
21 Ibid., 672.
22 Ibid., 671.

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23 Alternatively, the trend – if it is a trend – of the philosophy of science splitting off from philosophy departments and becoming part of history and philosophy of science departments may continue.
24 Mann, 669.
25 Ibid.

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