A short interview with Nigel Warburton about the importance of clarity in philosophy

Nigel Warburton is senior lecturer in philosophy at *The Open University*. He is one of the world's foremost popularizers of philosophy, and has a particular gift for explaining things clearly. I asked him five questions about clarity (in bold).

At the top of your website *The Virtual Philosopher* you quote John Searle: 'If you can't say it clearly, you don't understand it yourself'. What is clarity, and why is it important in philosophy?

Clarity is expressing yourself in a way that allows readers to follow what you are saying. It minimizes the risk of misinterpretation. Clarity contrasts with obscurity. Obscurity leaves at least some readers in the dark about your meaning. I like the quotation from Searle. I like another quotation from the author Robert Heinlein too: 'Obscurity is the refuge of incompetence'. Obviously in some sorts of writing obscurity doesn't matter so much: some writers want to be interpreted in a variety of possibly contradictory ways. But Philosophy shouldn't be like this.

Clarity is important in Philosophy because life is short. Another reason why it is important is that many lightweight thinkers are attracted to Philosophy because it seems to promise them power through looking clever. Hiding behind a veil of obscurity is one way in which such people have traditionally duped their readership. Philosophy thrives on debate: if you can't understand what someone is saying the

doi:10.1017/S1477175613000274 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2014

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175613000274 Published online by Cambridge University Press

collaborative aspect of philosophy is likely to wither and much ink will be spent on the vexed question of what a particular philosopher could possibly mean by his or her oracular pronouncements. All that before we ever get on to the important question of whether what that philosopher said was true or worth saying. Philosophy thrives on debate and discussion, but if you don't really know what someone is trying to say, how can you discuss it?

Clarity in Philosophy involves clarity at the level of 1) words, 2) sentences, 3) paragraphs, 4) arguments, 5) illustrations, and 6) underlying thought. This list is not exhaustive, but these six features are all important.

1) At the level of words, there is no excuse for obfuscation through polysyllabic abstraction (i.e. hiding behind long words). Some writers write Philosophy as if they were paid by the syllable with bonus payments for including untranslated Latin. They also use jargon which may or may not clarify meaning. For a spectacular example of obscurity through excessive use of jargon, see Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (almost any page).
2) Then at the sentence level, passive constructions or convoluted syntax can obscure meaning.
3) Poor use of paragraphs often indicates poor argument structure.
4) Philosophy involves building a case for a conclusion. The reader needs to be able to see how evidence, argument support the conclusion which purportedly follows from them. For examples of this kind of clarity, take a look at René Descartes' first 'Meditation' or John Stuart Mill's chapter on Free Expression in On Liberty.
5) Illustrative examples help most readers, even the highly sophisticated ones, to understand

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175613000274 Published online by Cambridge University Press

generalizations. When philosophers omit examples or applications of their ideas they sometimes float off into realms of imprecision – not all their readers will be happy to float off with them.

6) Some philosophers have a nose for the subject and what matters. Others don't. Those who don't can be particularly difficult to understand because it is very hard to see why they are bothering to think or write about a particular topic at all.

If I find something is said very unclearly, can I really be confident the author doesn't understand it him or herself?

No. It is possible that the person saying it is just not a very good writer or speaker. But, on the other hand, obscurity cannot be good evidence that someone does understand something. My own experience has been that I've understood philosophical ideas far better once I tried to explain them to someone else. Teaching bright students, preferably students who aren't afraid to ask difficult (or obvious) questions is one of the best ways to get straight about an idea.

Might the lack of clarity in the writing of some philosophers be due to the fact that what they are dealing with is so deep? As we peer further into the depths, so the shadows inevitably grow deeper?

The history of philosophy includes many examples of beautiful clarity about deep subjects. Think of the writings of David Hume, for example. More recently, Thomas Nagel and Daniel Dennett have demonstrated that it is possible to write clearly about some of the most difficult philosophical problems about the mind; Jonathan Glover and Peter

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175613000274 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Singer have done the same in the area of ethics. Sometimes philosophers have to say very clearly 'we are in the dark about this'. They might choose to communicate this indirectly rather than stating it directly. But that need not involve obscurity of language, nor even of meaning.

Philosophers in the analytic tradition sometimes accuse those in the continental tradition of a lack of clarity. Why is that? Is there any justice to the accusation?

One reason is that some so-called continental philosophers have inherited a style of writing from Hegel that leaves readers floundering, confused or pretending that they understand when they don't. I think that some post-structuralist writers were charlatans who conned a generation (though this has been more of a problem in literature and fine art courses than in philosophy). If you don't believe me, read Sokal and Bricmont's brilliant exposé. But obviously not all continental philosophers fall into this category. Besides, it isn't always obvious who is to count as a philosopher in the continental tradition: Descartes, Kant, Schopenhauer, Frege, and Wittgenstein were all born on the European continent ... each in their own way was capable of a high degree of clarity.

Even among the more poetic philosophers, though, such as Soren Kierkegaard, there are ways of showing things rather than saying them which can be clear. The different voices within Either/Or explore contrasting positions from within and we are not meant to read what is said as literally Kierkegaard's view: I take it that Kierkegaard's meaning lies in what is shown rather than what is straightforwardly said in this book. But he is not perversely obscure in the way that some philosophers are, despite dealing with 'deep' topics. Or, to take another example, Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* adopted the obscurity of phenomenological jargon, but through his brilliant use of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175613000274 Published online by Cambridge University Press

extended examples and thought experiments manages great and memorable clarity in places in that book. We can forgive a philosophical writer who is sometimes obscure if he or she provides us with insight and occasional clarity; but obscurity can never be a virtue in Philosophy.

What would be your five key tips for thinking and writing clearly?

1) Care about being understood.
2) Read George Orwell's essay 'Politics and the English Language' (1946). It has excellent practical advice about writing to be understood.
3) Use examples. These can be highly imaginative and creative. This will force you to think through what you mean by generalisations and will also help your readers to understand what you mean. If you want your writing to be impressively obscure, don't descend from abstraction and use as much jargon as you can.
4) Know what your conclusion is, how your reasons and examples support it and your response to obvious counterarguments and counterexamples. If you don't know that, how can you expect your readers to work out what you are saying?
5) Don't bullshit. Most people know when they are doing it. If you don't, you are probably in the wrong subject.

Stephen Law
Editor, THINK

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175613000274 Published online by Cambridge University Press