When Should Philosophers Be Silent?

JASON DECKER AND CHARLES TALIAFERRO

Abstract
Are there general precepts governing when philosophers should not conduct inquiry on a given topic? When, if ever, should a philosopher just be silent? In this paper we look at a number of practical, epistemic, and moral arguments for philosophical silence. Some are quite general, and suggest that it is best *never* to engage in philosophical inquiry, while others are more domain – or context – specific. We argue that these arguments fail to establish their conclusions. We do, however, try to identify and defend several substantive constraints on philosophical dialogue and inquiry. In practice, though, respecting these constraints needn't lead to much philosophical silence.

1. Introduction

In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein famously claimed that 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'.[1] If there are any analytic statements, such a claim comes quite close, though it falls a bit short. Just because you cannot speak about a topic, thing or event, it does not follow that you must be silent. You could beat a drum or cry or make all sorts of noise about the topic (perhaps even producing a noisy verbal latter that can later be kicked away). Leaving aside such options, are there general precepts about when philosophers should not conduct inquiry or dialogue on some given topic? When should philosophers be silent?

Some philosophers do claim (with conviction) that certain topics should be set aside. In a recent book on the problem of suffering for a theistic worldview, for example, Eleonore Stump rejects in principle any engagement with reflection on the Holocaust, which, she says, is not a fitting subject 'for the academic exploration of the problem of evil'. She writes:

> Although it is vitally important to remember the Holocaust and to reflect deeply on it, taking it simply as one more example or counter-example in academic disputation on the problem of evil strikes me as unspeakably awful. It is enough for me that

[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1922), 189.

doi:10.1017/S0031819112000034 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2012

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> I am a member of the species that propagated this evil. Stricken awe in the face of it seems to me the only response possible.[2]

Some philosophers have argued that there are times when one should not engage in philosophical reflection of, for example, impartiality and moral duty due to practical necessity (doing philosophy under certain circumstances would be having 'one thought too many'). Still others argue that some types of philosophy should not be practiced either due to our lack of competence to address some topics or due to the inevitable incoherence and obscurity of the philosophical concepts involved.

Stump's claim, Wittgenstein's famous lines about remaining silent, and various claims about when philosophy should not be practiced, invite the question (or, as our students would say – and we would resist in vain – *beg* the question) of whether there are any principles that may provide guidance concerning when philosophers should remain silent or forgo inquiry. In this paper our task is to identify and assess philosophically interesting potential constraints on inquiry.

You might be worried that our question (*when should philosophers be silent?*) is – as yet, anyway – too ambiguous to be sensibly addressed. One often hears of different 'oughts'. We are told that there are (at the very least) *practical*, *moral*, and *epistemic* oughts, and questions about what we ought to do (or should do) must always – at least implicitly – be indexed to a particular ought. If you want to kill us, you ought, practically speaking, to put cyanide in our coffee, whereas this is surely not the case morally speaking. On the other hand, some philosophers have thought that this talk of various 'ought's and 'should's is wrongheaded. Judith Thomson, for instance, argues that 'ought' and 'should' are not, in fact, multiply ambiguous.[3] There is no genuine sense of 'ought', she holds, for which it's true that if you want to kill us, you ought to put cyanide in our coffee. If you want to kill us, it's not the case that you ought to put cyanide in our coffee; you ought rather to seek out some moral guidance (and perhaps pay someone to restrain your evil hand).

We do not wish to take a side in this debate. Hoping to rise above it, we will focus on *all-things-considered* oughts and shoulds. (If you think that these are the only genuine oughts and shoulds, so much the better.) Still, we can see that true ought and should claims are

[2] Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in darkness: Narrative and the problem of suffering* (Oxford Clarendon Press, 2010), 16.

[3] Judith Thomson, *Normativity* (Chicago: Open Court, 2008).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sometimes grounded in primarily *practical* considerations, whereas other times they are grounded in primarily *epistemic, conceptual* or *moral* considerations. Thus, when we consider arguments for the claim that philosophers ought to be silent in certain situations – or about certain topics – we can sort them roughly into practical, broadly epistemic, and moral arguments. We will consider what we take to be some interesting arguments in each category without claiming to have hit on all of the interesting ones (and without claiming that the dividing lines between our categories are sharp).

2. Practical Worries

Most of the ordinary practical constraints on speech and inquiry apply in philosophical contexts. If you are a brain surgeon carrying out a dangerous operation, it would be just as inappropriate for you to discuss the merits of realism versus nominalism as it would be for you to discuss real estate (assuming this would not serve to somehow enhance the success of the operation). Your attention – and the attention of your colleagues – really ought to be focused elsewhere if you're going to do your job effectively. Indeed, if you're the sort of surgeon that ignores this particular kind of practical matter, your problem is not merely practical; it's moral.

Many of the practical conversational constraints identified by Paul Grice also apply to philosophy, as much as to ordinary speech.[4] Just as excessive details in a conversation when changing a tire would be at least odd, if not inappropriate and misleading ('please hand me that hammer, a metal object that is green and next to your animal body…'), it would be at least odd, if not inappropriate, to introduce zombie thought experiments and the problem of other minds during a public, political debate. The inappropriateness in these cases is not a moral inappropriateness; it's an inappropriateness from the practical standpoint of trying to make a meaningful, tractable contribution to the conversation. 'Please hand me that hammer, a metal object that is green and next to your animal body' is so strange in its overabundance of precision that it's likely to generate an *implicature*, or at least send the audience off looking for one. Assuming that one intends no implicature, one ought to stay away from this way of talking. Referencing philosophical zombies, the problem of other minds, or any other subtle philosophical issue during a public political debate is also

[4] H.P. Grice, 'Logic and Conversation', in *Studies in the Ways of Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 24–42.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

likely to obscure whatever point one is trying to make (in addition to being almost guaranteed to create a stumbling block for one's budding political career).

But these practical considerations are rather obvious and mundane, and aren't distinctive to philosophical discourse. We propose to set them to the side. We will lump with them *aesthetic* considerations (e.g. it would be good if a philosopher would at least consider being silent if he or she is boring the life out of everyone), *economic* considerations (e.g. perhaps philosophers at universities should not teach courses without pay, as this would worsen an already bad job market for philosophers), and *academic* considerations (e.g. silence might be warranted if a philosopher believes that if she were to challenge a university chancellor on some small administrative matters, this would likely lead to the closing down of the entire philosophy department). All of these will be set to the side.

Are there more philosophically interesting practical considerations to consider? We can think of two. The first concerns the usefulness of philosophy. Recall Romeo's rebuke to the Friar in *Romeo and Juliet* (Act 3, Scene 3, lines 57–60):

> Hang up philosophy!
> Unless philosophy can make a Juliet
> Displant a town, reverse a prince's doom,
> It helps not, it prevails not. Talk no more.[5]

If Romeo's point is just that there are times in life, especially in periods of great loss, when mourning is more appropriate than philosophical reflection (or almost any other activity), then he is surely correct. If his claim is rather that philosophy itself is useless, then he is surely incorrect. While philosophy may not resurrect a dead lover or destroy cities or rescue monarchs, part of what makes a person who she is involves her beliefs on distinctively philosophical questions (e.g. *how ought I live*?), towns are rarely made or intentionally destroyed without some kind of philosophy of power or conception of justice operating in the background, and it is hard to evaluate the rise or fall of a prince without a social philosophy that addresses monarchy.

In any event, much could be said to defend the usefulness of philosophy, but we suspect that we'd be preaching to an impatient choir. Instead, let's turn to the second of our two more philosophically interesting practical considerations. It is this: *Philosophy is*

[5] William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, edited by Horace Howard Furness (Philadelphia: Lippincott's Press, 1871), 1801.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sometimes dangerous. Socrates was put to death for corrupting the youth. Moritz Schlick was murdered for morally corrupting a particular youth (or at least this is one of several explanations that the assailant gave for his deed). Stalin piled Soviet intellectuals onto the Philosophers' Ships in 1922 and deported them to Germany. Their new home, you'll no doubt remember, didn't turn out to be a more congenial environment for intellectuals. Although inspired in part by various philosophers, the leaders of the Nazi party weren't exactly known for their warm embrace of free philosophical investigation (see the fleeing members of the Vienna Circle). And, as we all know, anti-intellectualism doesn't just arise from political ideology. Throughout history, many sects of the world's major religions have turned against philosophers and other intellectuals, condemning those on the outside and excommunicating their own from the inside.

Doing philosophy in the wrong place at the wrong time can get one into all sorts of trouble. This can give a philosopher a practical reason to be silent in a particular context. We assume that practical considerations like this can sometimes ground all-things-considered oughts (e.g. when there is nothing that is morally at stake in the particular situation). But when it's the case that a philosopher ought (all things considered) to be silent, and the relevant considerations grounding this *ought* are purely practical, the prescription of silence doesn't apply to the philosopher *qua philosopher*, it's a prescription that applies to the philosopher *qua self-interested individual*. We don't have much to say about when a philosopher should be silent *qua* self-interested individual. We wish to focus on the more philosophically interesting question of when a philosopher should be silent *qua philosopher*.

What does it mean to say that, in a certain situation, a philosopher ought (all things considered) to be silent *qua* philosopher? It means that the individual, as a philosopher, ought to be silent; the considerations that ground the prescription to silence involve the individual's interests insofar as these follow from the individual's role as a philosopher. But what does it mean to be a philosopher? At the risk of revealing the extraordinary flatness of our feet, we're inclined to say that a philosopher is a lover of wisdom.[6]

So, are there considerations in favor of being silent that apply to philosophers *qua* lovers of wisdom? Some philosophers have thought so. We will canvass some of their suggestions below, dividing them roughly into epistemic and moral considerations.

[6] Note that one can't truly love that with which one has no acquaintance.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. Epistemic Worries

3.1 It's (Epistemically) Dangerous

We noted above that many sects of the world's major religions have turned against philosophers and other intellectuals. Why is this? The concern has often been epistemic. The idea is that philosophy is (epistemically) dangerous: too much thinking about a certain topic might lead to a confused rejection of the truth (as it is Divinely revealed by the Scriptures or prophets).[7]

The problem is that it is often difficult to distinguish *philosophy* from *sophistry*. The philosopher is a lover of wisdom; the sophist is a lover of the appearance of wisdom. It takes a considerable amount of wisdom for one to be able to discern between the two. The concern, on the part of the religious sects mentioned above, is that most people, even those who study and teach philosophy for a living, lack the required amount of wisdom. Thus, in engaging in philosophical dialogue and thought, they are putting themselves and others at risk for contracting false beliefs. And the stakes are high. Since believing the truth (as understood by the sect) is seen as being of life-or-death importance – with souls hanging in the balance – any threat to such belief is to be resisted and, therefore, a philosophical frame of mind is a dangerous one.

We agree that if souls are hanging in the balance, it is indeed important that we hit the mark in our beliefs. But this doesn't give religious philosophers a reason to be silent – or be silenced. It gives them a reason to search for the truth with ever more urgency. It gives them a reason to explore every path, to question and test assumptions, and to subject their own views to the most withering criticism they can muster (and if they can't muster much, to outsource this project to genuine critics of their beliefs). J.S. Mill had the right idea in his *On Liberty*.[8] Either the cherished belief in question is false or it's true. If it's false, then subjecting it to tough scrutiny gives the believer a chance at uncovering its falsity and correcting her beliefs. If it's true, then subjecting it to tough scrutiny gives the believer a chance to strengthen her belief – a chance to gain a 'livelier apprehension of the truth' by seeing it pitted against falsehood.

[7] We will consider a secular version of this worry below when we consider Hilary Kornblith's argument against reason.

[8] J.S. Mill, 'On Liberty (1859)' in *On Liberty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Of course, there *is* the possibility that the truth won't withstand criticism, not because of any intrinsic deficiency, but rather because the believer is taken in by seductive arguments against it or because she lacks the ability to properly assess the relevant arguments. This is a real risk. If we just assume at the outset that our beliefs are true, then this risk will obviously not seem to be worth taking. But insofar as we care about the truth, we won't merely assume that the beliefs we start out with are true. If we think that having the right beliefs in a domain is morally important, we have a moral obligation to test our beliefs in that domain. Sheltering them from scrutiny is not just an epistemic sin, it's a moral sin.

We do risk exchanging the truth for a lie, but this is a risk we must take, for otherwise we risk not exchanging a lie for the truth. Perhaps someone will argue here that, given the risks on both sides, everyone should be free to choose whichever risk better suits her tastes and constitution. But this is not so. If one shelters one's belief in a lie from all criticism, one is morally culpable for that belief. If, on the other hand, one is taken in by misleading evidence or seductive but fallacious arguments in the course of an honest and rigorous inquiry, one is not morally culpable (or as culpable) for believing falsely; one has done one's best to believe the truth.

Another objector might accuse us of being overly romantic. Perhaps we're putting far too much faith in the power of philosophical reasoning. Maybe we should be skeptical of the sort of reasoning that is characteristic of philosophy. Hilary Kornblith develops an argument along these lines in his 'Distrusting Reason'.[9] The argument goes roughly as follows: The practice of giving explicit reasons for belief – especially ones involving complicated and subtle arguments – is vulnerable to being (often unconsciously) commandeered for the purpose of constructing elaborate rationalizations for beliefs that are held for other reasons. Thus reason-giving often props up poorly justified beliefs, and should be regarded with suspicion. This is a serious charge and it will pay us to take a closer look at Kornblith's argument for it.[10]

The main character of his paper is a poor confused fellow by the name of 'Andrew'. Andrew, Kornblith tells us,

[9] Hilary Kornblith, 'Distrusting Reason', in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* **XXIII** (1999), 181–196.

[10] For a similar argument, see also Lara Buchak, 'Instrumental Rationality, Epistemic Rationality, and Evidence-Gathering', *Philosophical Perspectives* (2010) 85–120.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> has beliefs about the effectiveness of the death penalty in reducing the murder rate which are, at bottom, a product of wishful thinking… [I]t is his view about the morality of the death penalty that is driving his view about its effects… [His] reason for his belief about the deterrent effect of the death penalty is not a good reason. It would not withstand public, or even private, scrutiny. But Andrew is unaware that this is why he believes as he does.[11]

Kornblith goes on to explain that Andrew is aware of various empirical data and studies. Some seem to favor his view; others seem to challenge it.

> Andrew has latched on to the stories that fit with his antecedent view. He remembers them better than the others, and when asked about the death penalty, he is often able to cite relevant statistics from them. He has less vivid memories of the other studies, those that run counter to his belief about the death penalty's effectiveness, and when he reads about these studies he is typically able to mount some perfectly plausible methodological challenge to them: some important variable was not controlled for, the number of cases involved is not statistically significant, and so on. Andrew is intelligent and articulate. He is very good at constructing reasons for his belief from the mixed evidence with which he is confronted, and he is very good at presenting these reasons to others in discussion about the issue. He believes that the reasons that he presents are the reasons for which he holds his belief. But he is wrong about this…When Andrew offers rationalizations for his badly grounded opinions, his intelligence works against him.[12]

Andrew is not alone, Kornblith fears; many of us engage in this sort of rationalizing behavior. And to make matters worse, many of our carefully constructed arguments in favor of our views rely at various turns on plausibility judgments – judgments, Kornblith fears, which are extremely 'malleable' and can be affected by the same motivational distortions that give rise to rationalizations.

If cases like Andrew's are rare, then we still have a reason to be cautious when confronted with the carefully constructed arguments of others, or when we find ourselves constructing such arguments. If cases like Andrew's are the norm, then we have more than just a

[11] Op. cit. note 9, 182.
[12] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reason to be cautious; we have a reason to be skeptical of carefully constructed arguments. As Kornblith puts it:

> If one believes that rationalization is extremely widespread and that plausibility judgments are extremely malleable, then one may be well advised to be skeptical of rational argument. Under these conditions, attending to the logical niceties of argument would be no more useful in attaining ones epistemic goals than attending to the eye color of the person offering the argument…[13]

> There is nothing intrinsically wrong with logic or good reasoning itself on this view; any such view would be absurd. Rather, as a matter of empirical fact, it is argued, those who tend to present their arguments with the greatest logical perspicuity are also, on those occasions, most frequently offering rationalizations, or at least so frequently offering rationalizations as to make the best epistemic policy the one of adopting the skeptic's presumption [i.e., that the argument is just a *post hoc* rationalization and is most likely the result of sidelining important evidence and considerations]…[14]

If the reason-skeptic's empirical claim is right, then we have a reason to be skeptical when anyone tries to present a subtle, careful, and rigorous argument for a view. As the case of Andrew suggests, we ought to extend this skepticism even to ourselves and our own carefully constructed justifications for our beliefs. And – to reconnect to our main concern – since it is the very business of philosophy to construct such arguments, the skeptic has given us a general reason to distrust philosophers and their arguments. Any philosopher who sees the problem here seems to have a powerful reason to be (philosophically) silent.

Kornblith stops short of embracing this distrust of reasoning. He does, however, assert that the skeptic's argument has considerable force and deserves to be taken seriously. Indeed, he holds that '[i]t is only by taking the skeptic's hypothesis seriously and, if possible, laying it to rest, that our trust in public reason may be fully rational'.[15]

We are considerably less impressed with the skeptic's argument. First, we think that Kornblith pays insufficient attention to an important distinction between two kinds of reason. When we talk of someone's 'reasons for believing', we could have two very different things in mind:

[13] Ibid., 185.
[14] Ibid., 189–90.
[15] Ibid., 193.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Epistemic Reasons for Belief:

> An epistemic reason for belief in φ is a consideration that justifies – or is taken by the believer to justify – belief in φ.

Causal Reasons for Belief:

> A causal reason for a belief in φ is anything that is part of the total cause of the belief's existence.

There is a world of difference between the two kinds of reasons. It would be an enormous confusion to conflate epistemic reasons and causal reasons. The sizable lesion on poor Ned's brain is a causal reason for his belief that there is loud music playing in the room. It explains why (in the causal sense) Ned has the belief in question. It is obviously not, however, an *epistemic* reason for Ned's belief. Indeed, to assert otherwise would be to commit a category mistake. Brain lesions aren't considerations, so they are not considerations that justify – nor, unless the believer is very confused, are they taken by the believer to justify – particular beliefs. Epistemic reasons are propositions, not clumps of tissue (or even events involving clumps of tissue).

In his discussion of Andrew's belief in the effectiveness of the death penalty, Kornblith appears to conflate epistemic reasons and causal reasons. Andrew's belief, Kornblith says, is a product of wishful thinking. Okay; well, that's a point about the *causal origin* of the belief. So far we don't know what considerations (if any) are the *epistemic reasons* for his belief. Kornblith goes on to suggest that Andrew is confused about the 'reasons' for his belief. When he says what Andrew takes his reasons to be, it's clear that we're now talking about epistemic reasons (Andrew takes his arguments to justify his belief). Kornblith suggests that Andrew is wrong about what his reasons are, since his belief is really the result of wishful thinking. But, the latter claim concerns causal reasons, and the former seems to concern epistemic reasons. Andrew's confusion about the causal reasons for his belief doesn't suggest that Andrew is wrong about his epistemic reasons. Perhaps Kornblith thinks that since Andrew is confused about the causal origin of his belief, he is also confused about the considerations he takes to justify the belief. But this looks like a *non sequitur*. It's hard to see how one confusion would inevitably lead to the other.

To further defend poor Andrew: Rationalization, as Kornblith describes it, doesn't seem obviously bad or confused. Suppose Andrew

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

finds himself strongly believing something that he hopes is true, but he doesn't yet have sufficient epistemic reason to believe it. So he does a little investigation to see if there are compelling epistemic reasons to ground his belief. He finds that there are indeed compelling reasons and that potential underminers for the belief can be rebutted. This kind of 'rationalization' (if one wants to call it that) seems like it *is* contributing to Andrew's belief being more reasonable than it once was. (Even if you don't think that it's ideally reasonable, you should admit that it's at least more reasonable than it once was.) When Andrew later cites these considerations as his epistemic reasons, he's not confused about his epistemic reasons. These are indeed his epistemic reasons. Is he confused about his causal reasons? Maybe, but maybe not; we haven't been told enough about Andrew to say one way or the other. Kornblith's way of trying to make Andrew seem confused appears to conflate epistemic and causal reasons.

But perhaps the idea is supposed to be this: Andrew is confused about the causal reasons for his belief, for he thinks that it's his appreciation of the epistemic reasons for believing in the effectiveness of the death penalty that is the primary causal reason for his believing in its effectiveness. And perhaps Kornblith is supposing that Andrew would continue to hold the belief in question even if he didn't appreciate these epistemic reasons. However, all this would show is that Andrew's belief is causally *overdetermined*, not that Andrew's appreciation of the epistemic reasons isn't *a* cause of his current belief.

So it's not at all clear what Kornblith has in mind with his talk of 'rationalization', nor is it clear that rationalization is an epistemic vice. Consequently, Kornblith's skeptical argument seems to be under developed, at best.

An even more serious worry is that his argument seems to be *epistemically self-incriminating*. Insofar as we take the argument seriously, we must take ourselves to be unjustified in taking the argument seriously. It's a philosophical argument the conclusion of which entails that we should be highly skeptical of philosophical arguments. Indeed, as the thought goes, the better the philosophical argument (by usual philosophical standards), the more we should be suspicious of it. So, if we are convinced by the skeptic's philosophical argument, we should believe that we are unjustified in being convinced by it. And, of course, the more the argument convinces us to be suspicious of itself, the less reason we'll have to be suspicious of it, since our reason for being suspicious of the argument was grounded in the argument itself. We would be epistemically unjustified in accepted any argument with this embarrassing character – that is, any argument

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that yields the conclusion that we are justified in accepting it only (and precisely) insofar as we don't accept it.

Kornblith considers a nearby objection:

> The challenge I have in mind is that the skeptic's view is self-undermining, for the skeptic on the one hand proclaims that the activity of reason-giving is not connected to the truth and that we should therefore be unmoved by it, and yet, on the other hand, in order to convince us of this particular view, the skeptic offers us reasons. If the skeptic is right about the activity of reason-giving, then her argument would not, and should not, convince us. According to the challenger, skepticism about reason-giving is thus self-undermining.[16]

Kornblith suggests two responses to this objection. The first response is that the skeptic might simply be offering a *reductio* to friends of reason (just to have a label, let's call them *rationalists*). The skeptic, Kornblith says, 'may be seen as merely showing that the position of the person who puts his trust in reason-giving is internally inconsistent; that is, it fails to meet that person's own standards'. Unfortunately, Kornblith doesn't develop this line of response and it's unclear how it's supposed to work. If the argument really is a *reductio* of the rationalists' position, then it should start with premises that the rationalist accepts and derive some contradiction or absurdity from them. But the skeptic's argument doesn't appear to start with claims that the rationalist will accept. In explaining the skeptic's starting point, Kornblith says,

> What the skeptic believes is that there is a fairly strong correlation between the logical perspicuity with which arguments tend to be offered and the amount of rationalization that underlies them.[17]

Elsewhere he explains that the skeptic doesn't hold this on *a priori* grounds. '[H]er presumption about reasoning,' he says, 'is seen as an empirical hypothesis that, on her view, is well supported by available evidence. We may understand the skeptics position only if we see it in that light'.[18]

There are two problems here. The first is that the rationalist does not accept the skeptic's claim that there is a strong correlation between logical perspicuity and amount of rationalization. Presumably, she doesn't find the empirical evidence to support this

[16] Ibid., 186.
[17] Ibid., 189–90.
[18] Ibid., 189.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

assertion. Second, the skeptic is in no position to disagree with the rationalist on the first point. How is the skeptic's finding her conjecture to be well supported by the available evidence any different than Andrew's finding his conjecture to be well supported by the available evidence? Shouldn't the skeptic be skeptical of her own reasons for believing the conjecture? Shouldn't she presume that her own judgments about what's plausible based on the empirical evidence are as suspect as Andrew's? By the skeptics own lights, the answer is 'yes, she should!'

If you're wondering what possible unconscious motivation the skeptic could have for wanting to bury reason, you won't have to look far: try intellectual laziness. If she thinks she is justified in a general distrust of careful, logically perspicuous arguments, she won't be bothered with the task of trying to carefully assess her own views or the opposing views of others. It appears that she will have license to just go with her gut and leave it at that. Whenever she is challenged, she can presume that the challenger is just spinning some post hoc story that is propped up by bias and fueled by distorting motivations. Whenever she is asked to support her own views, she can politely decline, lest she be guilty of the same epistemic crimes. But this is just laziness, and it is indefensible laziness. Any attempt that the skeptic gives to defend it will be undermined by its own conclusion. The skeptic's own view entails that we should presume that any reason that she gives for accepting it is a piece of sophistry. And of course, to us rationalists, it already smacks of sophistry. So we can agree with the skeptic on that much.

So it won't do to say that the skeptic is just offering a *reductio* of the rationalist's position. The starting points of the argument are not the rationalist's, thus the argument is not one that the rationalist needs to accept as compelling. Furthermore, the skeptic herself shouldn't find the argument compelling, given the argument's conclusion. So the argument can be compelling neither for the speaker nor for the audience. Everyone should distrust *this* particular bit of reasoning.

Kornblith offers a second response to the self-undermining worry on behalf of the skeptic:

> [T]he skeptic does not accept the practice of reason-giving at face value, [but] this does not mean that the skeptic is forced to reject every case of reason-giving as bogus. Rather, her view about the frequency of reason-giving as reason-responsive, and reason-giving as mere rationalization, is just the reverse of the person who places his trust in the practice of giving reasons.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Consider the attitude of a rational and cautious person when buying a used car. Such a person will be faced with a good deal of reason-giving on the part of the used car salesman, and it may well be that, if taken at face value, the reasons offered for various purchases are wholly convincing. From the point of view of logic alone, the used car salesman's reasoning is impeccable. But the rational and cautious person does not take the used car salesman's arguments at face value. Rather, in this situation, although one does not simply ignore everything which is said, one does not simply evaluate the logical cogency of the arguments offered either. One may certainly approach argument in this way at the used car lot, while forming beliefs on the basis of argument on other occasions.
>
> Now the skeptic about reason-giving sees the practice of reason-giving generally in much the way that we all regard the arguments of the used car salesman… Reason-giving is not automatically irrelevant epistemically, on the skeptics view; it should simply be regarded as irrelevant until proven otherwise.[19]

This response won't do either. First, no one is suggesting (we hope!) that one should ever evaluate arguments solely on the basis of logical cogency (or lack thereof). We teach our freshman undergraduates the distinction between *validity* and *soundness* and take great pains to illustrate for them how a perfectly valid argument can nevertheless be a terrible argument. The rationalist certainly isn't lagging behind our undergraduates on this point.

Second, if the skeptic regards reason-giving as epistemically irrelevant until proven otherwise, she ought never to cease regarding it as epistemically irrelevant. For to *prove* it relevant, she will need to have some reasons for regarding it as relevant, and she is committed to taking those reasons to be epistemically irrelevant unless they have already been proven otherwise. She is caught in the old circle. She must have already proven that some reason-giving is epistemically relevant in order to prove that any reason-giving is epistemically relevant. Since this is impossible, she must always and forever take reason-giving to be epistemically irrelevant. Kornblith's conservative skeptic is in quite a predicament.

As far as we can see, the charge of self-incrimination stands. By the view's own lights, the skeptic must either (i) give no reasons whatsoever for her view – in which case it's hard to see why anyone else should take her view seriously, or (ii) give reasons for her view that

[19] Ibid., 187.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

even she herself shouldn't take seriously. Thus, Kornblith's secular argument for philosophical silence appears to fare no better than the religious one we dispensed with earlier.

3.2 Troubles with Concepts and Competence

Let us, then, look elsewhere for broadly epistemic reasons for philosophers to be silent. Wittgenstein's concluding remark from the *Tractatus* is a good place to start. Here it is suggested that, concerning matters 'whereof one cannot speak', one must be silent. The idea seems to be that if it's impossible for one to speak intelligibly about a certain topic, one shouldn't try to speak about it; one should be silent. One could see this as following from a stronger maxim: if one doesn't know how to speak intelligibly about a certain topic, one should be silent. It being impossible to speak intelligibly about a certain topic is one reason one might not know how to speak intelligibly about it, but there are other reasons that one might lack this know-how. It could be, for instance, that one lacks the necessary concepts to think and speak intelligibly about the subject, or it could be that one possesses the concepts but lacks the competence to effectively deploy them to think and speak about the subject.

Let's start with cases where it is (supposedly) impossible to speak intelligibly about a certain topic. There are two reasons that this might be so:

Ineffability:

The topic involves a realm of genuine facts, but they're ineffable.

Non-Existence:

The appearance of a topic is entirely illusory.[20]

[20] It's perhaps worth noting that even if a topic is nonexistent or ineffable, this might not be enough to force philosophers into silence. There is, for example, Plato's puzzling reference in the *Republic* to the good being beyond existence and Quine's puzzling claim in *Word and Object* that while linguistic meanings don't exist, if they had existed, the Verification Criterion of Meaning would have characterized them. There are even philosophers who hold that *impossibilities* can be conceived and discussed. This is not implausible, since, at the very least, one ought to be able to construct meaningful *reductio*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The later Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* (1958) made an ineffability claim about private sense perceptions.[21]

> "But you will surely admit that there is a difference between pain-behaviour accompanied by pain and pain-behaviour without any pain?" – Admit it? What greater difference could there be? – "And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a nothing." – Not at all. It is not a something, but not a nothing either! The conclusion was only that a nothing would serve just as well as a something about which nothing could be said.[22]

So the claim here is clearly an ineffability claim, not a non-existence claim. There is a realm of facts in the vicinity, it's just that we can't say anything about them.

The earlier Wittenstein of the *Tractatus*, on the other hand, wasn't just making an ineffability claim at the end of his philosophical manifesto, he was making a non-existence claim. What was the target? Traditional philosophy. In proposition 6.53, he says:

> The right method of philosophy would be this: To say nothing except what can be said, i.e. the propositions of natural science, i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other – he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy – but it would be the only strictly correct method.[23]

You might be tempted here to point out to Wittgenstein that proposition 6.53 itself falls squarely within the realm of philosophy (it's certainly not a claim of natural science!). But before you congratulate yourself on a clean and decisive refutation of the Great Sage, read on to proposition 6.54:

---

arguments against impossibilia and evaluate substantive indicative and counterfactual conditionals with impossible antecedents.

[21] Now is as good a time as any for us to caution that any claims we make about Wittgenstein (both early and late) are subject to contradiction by Wittgenstein scholars – such being the penalty for attributions to Wittgenstein (to adapt a phrase from Quine).

[22] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd edition, Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1958), 102e.

[23] Op. cit. note 1, 187–189.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.[24]

And this is where he abruptly concludes his essay with 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'. Interestingly, this also doesn't look like a claim of natural science, so one assumes that it must be thrown away with the rest of the ladder. (We're unsure how, exactly, one is supposed to throw it away, but let's not let this worry detain us.)

The Other Great Sage, David Hume, had earlier complained about metaphysics, and any other area of discourse where the roots of meaning could not be traced directly back to sense perceptions. If you've read Hume's *Enquiry*, you no doubt recall these memorable lines:

> When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance, let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.[25]

Some advice! The logical positivists, inspired by the Great Sages, also made forceful arguments along these lines concerning moral discourse and metaphysics. Their claim was not that the moral and metaphysical truths are ineffable; their claim was that there are no such truths. Metaphysical and moral 'claims' are just pseudo-claims. If this is so, philosophers have a compelling reason, *qua* lovers of wisdom, to stop trying to make genuine claims in these areas. What should they do instead? Among their options are: (i) to take Wittgenstein's advice and practice philosophy-as-linguistic-therapy, (ii) to leave philosophy and become natural scientists, and (iii) to organize a good old-fashioned Humean book burning.[26]

[24] Ibid., 189.

[25] David Hume, 'An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding' in *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 165.

[26] Hilary Putnam suggests a more respectful approach in a chapter entitled '"Ontology": An Obituary' of his *Ethics Without Ontology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004). After comparing ontology

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Well, what should we say about the arguments that led to this sad conclusion? We're inclined to think that all of the ineffability and non-existence arguments we've mentioned so far are bad arguments. We lack the space and inclination (and maybe the talent) to rebut them all. Suffice it to say that all of the arguments we've mentioned so far seem to us to rely on faulty philosophical theories of meaning. This is particularly striking in the case of the writings of the logical positivists, wherein a relatively clear and explicit criterion of meaningfulness is invoked (the Verification Criterion) – one which (as it has been pointed out many times by many philosophers) unfortunately seems to straightforwardly dismiss itself as meaningless.

Instead of confronting the arguments one by one, we'd like to suggest what we feel is a sound general approach to such arguments: Whenever we're faced with a non-existence or impossibility claim, a compelling response is to produce an item of the sort that is said not to exist or to be impossible. If your student bristles as the claim that there are no unicorns,[27] he could easily satisfy you by producing a specimen. Obviously, this strategy works all the better when the claim is an impossibility claim. It doesn't take an expert in modal logic to discern that actuality entails possibility. If Wittgenstein tells you that it is not possible to say anything about private sensations, it is a compelling response to say something intelligible about private sensations. If A.J. Ayer tells you that it is not possible to say anything meaningful that can't be verified in principle, it is a compelling response to say something that is meaningful that can't be verified in principle. If the Humean tells you that metaphysics is all sophistry and illusion, it's a compelling response to produce some metaphysics that's not just sophistry and illusion.

---

to a stinking horse corpse (that's not the respectful part), Putnam offers this on its behalf:

> [I]n Plato and Aristotle it [ontology] represented the vehicle for conveying many genuine philosophical insights. The insights still preoccupy all of us in philosophy who have any historical sense at all. But the vehicle has long since outlived its usefulness. (85)

Ontology is a vehicle that one shouldn't want to take – you're not going to get very far riding a stinking horse corpse! – but it's at least a vehicle with a storied history. It used to be useful for getting interesting places, even if it was getting there in a confused way. It can at least be admired for that (and presumably discussed in the context of a historical investigation of its uses).

[27] One of us had such a student. How serious he was being was shockingly unclear.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Even if Wittgenstein, Ayer, and Hume are right (and we think that they're not), philosophers ought to try to show that they're not. For non-existence and impossibility claims are a notoriously tricky lot. As we've said, it's a straightforward matter to conclusively *refute* a non-existence claim (one needs only to produce that which is said not to exist). On the other hand, it's a very tricky matter to conclusively *establish* a non-existence claim. Looking here and there and not finding the object in question is not enough to force one to accept non-existence. Even if one searches everywhere for the object without finding it, that is not enough, for the object might also be in motion or might be undetectable through the particular means one is employing. One would have to search everywhere, everywhen, and everyhow in order to conclusively establish a non-existence claim, and this is no small task.

Of course, one could instead try to establish non-existence through impossibility. But in many cases, this path is even more fraught. Modal space is expansive and embracing. It's difficult to show that something doesn't exist anywhere in it. For instance, if one wants to establish that it is impossible to say anything about private phenomenal experiences, one would need to not just establish that our current concepts and languages leave us unable to say anything about them, but also that any possible conceptual scheme or language would be inadequate to the task. If one establishes the former without the latter, one will not have supported the prescription of philosophical silence on the matter, one will have positively encouraged philosophers to create new, more powerful conceptual schemes to allow us to express what is currently ineffable.

It is, however, true that if a philosopher currently lacks the conceptual resources to speak intelligibly about a certain matter, and is unwilling or unable to improve those conceptual resources until they're up to the task, she should (*qua* philosopher) be silent on the matter. If one loves wisdom, one will not willingly speak nonsense on any matter. Thus, when considering whether one should, as a philosopher, speak on a certain matter, there is a competency constraint:

The Competency Constraint:

> If a philosopher lacks the competency to say anything clear and coherent about a subject, the philosopher ought, *qua* philosopher, to be silent (at least until she develops the required competency).

There are certainly many notable philosophers who have run afoul of this principle. In *Talking Philosophy: A Wordbook*, A.W. Sparkes has

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

an entry 'Obscure, abstruse, obtuse', and he offers this passage from Hegel as a case of 'non-vague, non-ambiguous obscurity':

> This finitude of the End consists in the circumstance, that, in the process of realising it, the material, which is employed as a means, is only externally subsumed under it and made conformable to it. But, as a matter of fact, the object is the notion implicitly: and thus when the notion, in the shape of the End, is realised in the object, we have but the manifestation of the inner nature of the object itself. Objectivity is thus, as it were, only a covering under which the notion lies concealed.[28]

This is certainly obscure, and Sparkes was perhaps overly generous to call it non-vague and non-ambiguous. Suppose this is all Hegel could say on whatever topic he was trying to address in the passage. If he is completely unable to address his topic with clarity and coherence, he should pass over the given topic in silence, at least until he has developed some competency with respect to it. Alover of wisdom does not revel in the obscure and murky. She revels in clarity.

We do not, by the way, take this to be a constraint that shows undue favoritism toward so-called 'analytic' philosophy over so-called 'continental' philosophy. The best philosophers, on either side, strive to say something clear and coherent, and there are philosophers from both traditions who are commendable in this respect. There are also philosophers on both sides who wallow in the obscure. Some of these philosophers have a rather remarkable gift for stringing together words in a way that is aesthetically pleasing and has the ring of profundity. But what they practice is not philosophy, and it's hardly even sophistry. Philosophers, *qua* philosophers, ought not be so entranced by the sound of their own words that they forget to say something with some content.

There might well be certain apparent topics for discussion that turn out to be mere pseudo-topics. This leads us to a second constraint:

> The Intelligibility Constraint:
>
> > If there is no genuine subject matter for discussion, philosophers (*qua* philosophers) ought to be silent with respect to the pseudo-subject.

[28] A. W. Sparkes, *Talking Philosophy: A Wordbook* (London: Routledge, 1991), 54.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

If, for instance, the logical positivists are right that metaphysics consists of meaningless pseudo-claims, it would be best for a lover of wisdom (as a lover of wisdom) to avoid forming metaphysical pseudo-beliefs and making metaphysical pseudo-assertions.

In practice, however, these constraints will not lead to much philosophical silence. First, a philosopher trying to discharge her duties *qua* philosopher will have to make a judgment on whether there is a genuine subject matter and whether she is competent to speak to it. Part of how she can decide whether or not she's dealing with a genuine subject matter is by seeing if she can make meaningful, coherent assertions in the (purported) domain of inquiry. If she can, it's a genuine domain of inquiry. It's possible, however, that there are illusions of meaningfulness; this is what the logical positivists, for example, thought about metaphysics, and early Wittgenstein apparently thought about all of philosophy. If they're right, however, the illusion is an extraordinarily convincing one. The best way for a philosopher to test whether or not the appearance of meaningfulness is illusory is to put as much pressure on the area of discourse as possible. Hopefully, the artificial edges of the illusion will become apparent as the philosopher tries to give careful and exacting scrutiny to the (supposed) subject matter. The best way she can see if a subject matter is intelligible is by trying her best to make sense of it.

Of course, she must also consider carefully any general arguments against the subject matter's intelligibility. The metaphysician, for example, must confront the anti-metaphysical arguments of the positivists. Defending the relevant domain against these arguments will bring the philosopher even further from silence. Now she is not only diligently working out her views in the first-order domain, but also confronting second-order questions about the domain itself. So, although a dutiful philosopher will try her best not to violate the intelligibility and competence constraints, she must balance this against and even greater duty to seek the truth. In practice, this will lead to less philosophical silence rather than more.

4. Moral Worries

A third constraint on philosophical inquiry is suggested by Stump's remarks about philosophical discussion of the Holocaust:

The Moral Constraint:

> If taking up a certain topic in a particular philosophical discussion would somehow obscure its moral status, a philosopher

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> has a reason (*qua* philosopher) to avoid discussing the topic in question (in this context).

We agree wholeheartedly with this principle; but we think that it's hard to imagine cases of serious philosophical discussions where it would apply. If Stump is correct that considering whether the occurrence of the Holocaust renders theism implausible will (by its very nature) make us think of the Holocaust as simply one example in an academic disputation, that would be a compelling reason not to engage in such philosophical reflection. However, we think that Stump is unconvincing on this front. Discussing something serious in a philosophical spirit is not a way of disrespecting it. Of course, if what we're really engaged in is mere rhetoric or sophistry, then Stump is right that we ought to avoid discussion of the Holocaust. Rhetoric (for its own sake) and sophistry are just games. But true philosophy is not. When engaged in the latter enterprise, we show no insensitivity to a moral horror by discussing it.

Ruling out academic discussion of the Holocaust – particularly in relation to assessing the reasonableness of theistic faith – strikes us as a severe limitation. Indeed, it seems dialectically unfair in the context of a discussion of the problem of evil. It is the existence of such evil – evil so awe-inspiring and horrifying that mere mention of it could be seen as unspeakably awful – that grounds the atheist's assertion that there is not, in fact, an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God.

Of course the fact that it's dialectically unfair isn't itself decisive. Again, if the conversation in which we're engaged is just part of a silly game or competition, then Stump is surely right that we should steer clear of mentions of the Holocaust, lest we make light of an event of great gravity. But is academic philosophy just another silly game or competition? We like to think not! Academic philosophy, at its best, concerns itself with the quest for truth and clarity, and not as part of some trivial game or competition, but rather as a constitutive part of the search for – and love of – wisdom.[29]

To rule out of court the most compelling examples of evil in a philosophical discussion of the problem of evil is to fail to take entirely seriously the very serious and troubling charge that the atheist brings before the theist. And to rule them out for the reason that Stump gives seems to also fail to take philosophy itself entirely seriously. A successful theodicy must confront head-on the most horrifying and the most awful evils that exist – those evils that we don't

[29] This is academic philosophy at its best. How often it's at its best is a fine question.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

want to so much as mention, let alone dwell upon. And constructing such a theodicy (if it's possible – and we hope and believe that it is) is more that just an academic exercise. The problem of evil is not just a philosophers' problem. It is a problem that grips ordinary folks and academics alike, and it gets to the heart of some of humankind's deepest questions about itself and the universe it inhabits. Philosophy in general, and this question in particular, is no silly game.

If Stump were right about philosophical discussion of the Holocaust, one would have to wonder when, if ever, a discussion of the Holocaust would be in order. Could moral realists point out the uncomfortable and implausible claims the moral antirealist needs to accept concerning the Holocaust? Could historians argue about the ultimate causes and effects of the Holocaust? Could psychologists relate their work on how humans react to perceived authority figures to the grotesque acts that were committed in Nazi Germany? Would these amount to taking the Holocaust as simply one more topic for academic disputations? If so, the demand for silence on the subject is quite far-reaching and one worries that the subject might begin to disappear altogether from the public consciousness, which would itself be unspeakably awful.

And – if we may slide a bit further down the slippery slope – can Hollywood producers or documentarians treat the subject? It would be strange to suggest that the topic is off limits for serious Hollywood producers and documentarians. But it would be far stranger to suggest that these artists could approach the subject but that it's off limits for serious philosophers – philosophers struggling with the deepest and most important questions and concerns that trouble the human mind. Our view is that such philosophers must be morally permitted to discuss the Holocaust in the context of discussions of evil, free-will, etc., if any of the other academics or artists we've mentioned are permitted to study the events of the Holocaust from their particular perspectives. And it seems obvious to us that they are permitted to do so.

We will not, however, argue for the right of non-serious philosophers, academics, and artists to use the Holocaust in their parlor games, competitions, or works of art. If this is all Stump had in mind, then she's surely right that so-using the Holocaust is unspeakably awful. But serious philosophers discussing the problem of evil belong outside the scope of her censure.

Let us, then, consider a different moral argument. In his 'Persons, character and morality',[30] Bernard Williams discusses an example

[30] In *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1–19.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

from Charles Fried[31] concerning a man who is in a position to save either of two people, but not both of them. One happens to be the man's wife. Fried's question concerns whether the man must treat the two victims with impartiality if he is going to approach the situation in the way that morality demands. Williams considers that there might be a way of providing a moral justification for the man to show partiality in such a situation, but he feels that there would be something objectionable about the man's rehearsing that justification for himself before making the decision to save his wife. To adopt Williams' memorable phrase, such a man would have 'one thought too many'. His reason for saving his wife shouldn't be his subtle moral argument granting him an exception to an otherwise predominant impartiality constraint; his reason should be that the victim he will save is his wife.

Suppose the man in question is a philosopher. We seem to have a case, then, where it would be strange for a philosopher to engage in philosophical inquiry. Indeed, we're inclined to say that it would be morally problematic, especially if time is of the essence. The moral considerations in favor of his saving his wife should be particularly salient to him, should he need to search for them. But if he needs to search for them, it is a sign of moral dysfunction. Our view is that it is not just morally permissible for the man to save his wife in this context, it is *obviously* morally permissible. Indeed, we'd go so far as to say that it's morally required. These things won't be obvious to everyone, particularly those who have bought into certain normative theories, but they should be. Why is it morally required for the man to favor his wife in this situation? The simple answer is the natural one that Williams gives (though he seems not to see it as a moral reason): *she's his wife*. Spouses have special moral obligations to each other, and one of the obligations is to to protect the other and promote his or her interests even above one's own. One has these obligations in virtue of entering into a voluntary union with the other. One doesn't have this particularly weighty obligation to complete strangers.

Williams is quite right that, if the man has to rehearse this justification to himself before deciding to save his wife, he is having one thought too many. It's not that these aren't the reasons he is permitted to save her, though; it's just that if one needs to rehearse this justification to oneself in this sort of situation, it is a sign of serious moral dysfunction. Being a non-defective moral agent

[31] Charles Fried, *Anatomy of Values* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

involves having a certain kind of moral know-how, a sensibility that allows one to see immediately that certain things are to be done and certain other things aren't to be done. If one reverts to explicit inference in cases where one should see the answer immediately, this is a sign of dysfunction. This isn't just the case in the moral realm; it holds quite generally. Suppose one is in a life-or-death situation where, for some reason or other, one must sum the numbers 3 and 5. If one works through a complicated deductive argument starting with Peano's Axioms to get to the answer, this is a sign of dysfunction (*qua* mathematical reasoner). One should be able to see the answer to this particular problem without running a deductive argument from Peano's Axioms. Importantly, it's not that there's anything wrong with such an argument – the problem is just with someone who needs to rehearse it in a life-or-death situation. Likewise with the moral argument for saving one's wife over the stranger. There's nothing wrong with the argument, but one shouldn't need it in certain situations. In other situations, however, these matters are worthy of serious thought and consideration.

So where does all of this leave us?

5. Whereof some think one cannot or should not speak, thereof one should still try to speak at least a little

We strongly suspect that the title of our subject heading will not become a catch phrase. But that is our conclusion.

Jason Decker, Carleton College
Charles Taliaferro, St. Olaf College
j.decker@carleton.edu

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000034 Published online by Cambridge University Press