Guest Column

Introduction to "Why Philosophy?"

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THE THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES FEATURE IN THIS ISSUE brings together some of the most influential theorists of our era with some of the most promising scholars to have benefited from their work. The title "Why Philosophy?" arose in my mind as an immediate and open-ended question, prompted by an ongoing classroom development as unexpected as it was unmistakable. From semester to semester, students at all levels of instruction were opting for philosophy—voting, so to speak, with their minds as well as their feet—by showing up not only in ever-growing numbers but also with ever-greater attentiveness and curiosity in courses in which the general modes of reflection and analysis we call philosophy were closely investigated. Further research indicated that my own (and others') repeated experience reflected an amply documented, if little scrutinized, intellectual tendency worldwide: even as declared interest in the humanities has undergone a historic decline, interest in the study of philosophy has been on an unprecedented and wholly unanticipated rise.

This development has persisted independent of external circumstances, beginning well before the world financial crisis of fall 2008 and extending through the present. As reported by the *New York Times* in April 2008, the depth and breadth of the shift in student interest in philosophy had already been going on nationwide for several years:

> At the City University of New York, where enrollment is up 18 percent over the past six years, *there are 322 philosophy majors, a 51 percent increase since 2002*. Nationwide, there are more colleges offering undergraduate philosophy programs today than a decade ago (817, up from 765), according to the College Board. Some schools with established programs like Texas A&M, Notre Dame, the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, *now have twice as many*

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.2.249 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> *philosophy majors as they did in the 1990s*. David E. Schrader, executive director of the American Philosophical Association, . . . said that the *demand for philosophy courses had outpaced the resources at some colleges, where students are often turned away*. Some are enrolling in online courses instead, he said, describing it as "really very strange." (Hu; my emphasis)

When the director of the American Philosophical Association states in early 2008 that he finds the increasing, often unmeetable demand for courses in the field he represents perplexing, we might ascribe his nonplussed reaction, as well as the turn of events it reflects, to the flush of inflated values that pervaded the nation a mere half year before those values came undone. Yet perhaps even more surprising than the growth of interest in philosophy in the first place is the marked increase with which it has proceeded unabated in the wake of crushing economic contraction and unemployment across the United States. As reported in late 2011, in the depths of, and in spite of, the nation's "jobless recovery" from a scarcely averted full-scale depression, philosophy continued its upward demographic trend: "Though philosophy is routinely dismissed and disparaged—as useless as English, as dead as Latin, as diminished as library science—more college students are getting degrees in that field than ever before. . . . [T]he number of four-year graduates has grown 46 percent in a decade, surpassing the growth rates of much bigger programs such as psychology and history" (Gammage).

Thus, while shrinking enrollments in the study of arts and letters in general may seem the natural result of a narrowing of intellectual horizons by global technological and economic pressures—a carpe diem–minded rejection of the long view of reflection in favor of immediately applicable, quantitative methods—discursive philosophy, ancient through modern, examined in itself and in its age-old relation to literature, has emerged to confirm the enduring contemporaneity of the classical counterclaim *ars longa, vita brevis* ("art is long, life is brief"). Even when categorical social and economic factors of racial, regional, sexual, and class affiliation, normatively considered as discounting (or discounted by) educational trends, are instead taken explicitly into account, this tendency of increasing student interest in philosophy remains intact, with evidence of its influence extending to an equal (or greater) degree throughout many of the largest, and most diverse, state university systems. While straitened economic conditions have led federal and state government agencies to reconceive the colleges and universities to which they contribute financially as institutions in which large-scale instruction in "practical" (i.e., marketable) skills is paramount and reflection is a negligible "luxury," the students at many public colleges and universities have come to see things another way:

> Once scoffed at as a luxury major, philosophy is being embraced at Rutgers and other universities by a new generation of college students who are drawing modern-day lessons from the age-old discipline as they try to make sense of their world, from the morality of the war in Iraq to the latest political scandal. The economic downturn has done little, if anything, to dampen this enthusiasm among students. . . . Rutgers, which has long had a top-ranked philosophy department, is one of a number of universities where the number of undergraduate philosophy majors is ballooning; there are 100 in this year's graduating class, up from 50 in 2002, even as overall enrollment on the main campus has declined by 4 percent. (Hu)

Indeed, their own "budget shortfalls" have not prevented local community colleges and other "gateway" institutions from further investing in, rather than divesting themselves of, philosophy:

> As state universities cut back on humanities programs in order to deal with budget shortfalls, LaGuardia Community College in Queens, N.Y., is going in the opposite direc-

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> tion. At LaGuardia, philosophy is king: Of the 17,000 matriculated students, 4,500 are taking philosophy. There are seven full-time professors, most of whom have been added in the past two years. The school, which has a well-regarded nursing school and programs in engineering and veterinary technology, is overturning the stereotype that four-year colleges are for intellectuals and community colleges are for career training. "People tell me the role of community colleges is narrow—to train students for tomorrow's jobs," says Peter Katopes, the interim president of LaGuardia. "But I ask them, 'What are these jobs?'" "The real task," he says, is training students for what he calls "the entrepreneurship of the imagination. . . . It is giving students the opportunity to really understand the context of their lives, and you do that through the humanities." (Adler)[1]

Given that the level of interest in philosophy starkly diverges from that in its fellow humanities disciplines, the apparently straightforward question "Why philosophy?," posed here in both its historical and theoretical senses—that is, why now (in historical fact and in particular) and why ever (rhetorically, dismissively, or seriously and in general)—implicitly carries with it the contrasting negative question "Why not literature?"

For, as their individual histories consistently demonstrate, while philosophy and literature are indeed different, the significance and intrinsic nature of their relation, the inherent ability of each to illuminate the other, is not canceled by but rather lies in that difference. At a time when the forces of interlocking contradictions—between all-purpose notions of globalization and universal rights, on the one hand, and the politics of regional and ethnic identity, on the other; between free access to digitized information and lucrative personal applications produced to profit from that freedom; between commerce and culture in general, as between monetization and education—appear to have eliminated all leeway, let alone appetite, for reflection, works of political, social, economic, legal, and moral philosophy; theories of state, and of national and international forms of governance; and the philosophical accounts of experience, history, aesthetics, religion, and knowledge fundamental to all these have attracted increasing numbers of students across the entire spectrum of educational institutions, largely replacing not so much literature per se but literature as it is widely represented in the classroom currently.

The question "Why philosophy?," then, asks not only what philosophical writing does that has made it the object of unparalleled interest at all levels of instruction in the humanities but also what literature is no longer regarded as doing—a two-pronged question, of interest *and* apathy, whose internal division precludes the usual superficial answers. The blanket ascription of plummeting humanities enrollments to the rise of the "practical sciences" favored by institutional and corporate investment passes off a truism (money pays) for truth and, more injuriously, undermines the intellectual interests it purports to advocate for by obscuring the paradox at work in the predominant practice of humanities scholarship today—a deeper schism, on the level of understanding, that may be seen to underlie the historic divergence of philosophy from its sister disciplines. For even while student interest in and engagement with works of philosophy offering no direct application or marketable product has "balloon[ed]" over the past decade, contemporaneous, contextually and empirically determined, approaches to literature and culture have striven to portray critical and theoretical perspectives as obsolete. Thus, the vitality of interest in philosophy, when examined critically—that is, with regard to the failures of understanding its own emergence exposes—also reveals a striking convergence between other, different accounts of knowledge that, while strictly opposed in practice, share a common anticonceptual method. The fashioning of information systems and autonomous models of interactive valuation designed to overleap

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all material obstacles to their unlimited, "real world" application (even as the single-minded pursuit of these same empirically untethered methods paves the way for world economic collapse) and the broadly contextualist-historicist methods of a humanities profession intent on demonstrating its own direct—theoretically unmediated—purchase on "the real" through a focus on exclusively empirical, and thus arbitrarily selected, extratextual conditions and details may have unwittingly worked together to intensify interest in a discipline in which precisely such unreflective positivisms are questioned.

In this sense the increasing interest in philosophy can be seen to work *within* the humanities not as a statistical blip or historical anomaly but, on the contrary, dialectically—both negatively and responsively. For such unexpected, uncompensated interest already represents an at once timely *and* intellectual response to the two-sided question, "Why philosophy?" (why now / why ever), that its own actuality brings to the fore: the proposition not of an alternative, "eternal" rather than empirical, positivism generically identified as "philosophy" but, rather, of a similarly divided—critical and self-critical—understanding of what constitutes meaningful practice in the first place. For any act of reflection not only reveals the untruth, or practical insufficiency, of purely abstracted and purportedly purely empiricist methods alike, nor merely substitutes for these equally quantitative methods a single "qualitative" truth, of purportedly incontrovertible "affects" identified by, and ultimately devolving into, methods of measurement (of causation, location, and degree) as well. The acts of reflection represented across history by the discursive "method[s]" that, following Descartes, we call philosophy instead demonstrate the changing practical and thus historical truth of the heterogeneous bases of theoretical reflection itself.

Interest in, and practical intellectual curiosity about, philosophy, then, indirectly critiques the professional tendentiousness that myopically (or self-inflatingly) describes itself as "postcritical"—verbal gesturings at a time "beyond" understanding severing all arts and sciences and their products from the technical and analytic effort of their interpretation—but also provides direct insight into the distinctive approach to the arts and sciences that philosophy promises. Like theoretical work in any discipline, the discursive work of philosophy aims at conceiving complex objects and experiences in *general*, while the richness of literature, as of culture of any kind, inheres in its composition—that is, its representation, selection, and arrangement—of *particulars*. As the histories of both disciplines demonstrate, it is the willed separation of each from the other—of the general from the particular—that results in the mystifying distortions we call *ideological* fiction. The speculative composition of philosophy instead requires the particularization of the arguments it offers "on spec" (i.e., at once "specifically" and "in theory"), just as literary authors could not write a word without the general linguistic condition of abstraction—the condition of every language qua language—on which their verbal designation of particulars depends. For these same reasons, any work of philosophy that uses concepts must also make use of what we call literature—heuristic or empirically illustrative instances of referential language that represent logic as concepts cannot. "Thoughts without content are empty, sensory perceptions without concepts are blind": so states Kant in introducing his critical philosophy to the world, in a succinct, distinctly figural clarification of the "applied" logic of his formally limited representational method (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft* 98; A 52, B 76).[2] While the immediate aim of that powerfully literary definition in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is epistemological, its significance holds no less generally for the critiques of moral action and aesthetic judgment to follow—or, for that matter, for any comprehensive theoretical endeavor before Kant's or since.

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Plato's dramatic characters, disagreeing speakers, mundane scenes, openly mythologizing allegories of ideas, and entirely imaginary polis; Descartes's "engineer" tracing "regular" forms on a "vacant plane," the irregular "paths" through the "book of the world" his *Discourse* takes (*Discourse* 1–7), the local "customs" and other temporary "housings" in which his "I" necessarily "resides" "in time" (8–13), much like the "infinitely flexible" "piece of wax" whose simplest conception as "extension" remains unchanged (*Meditations* 60–69);[3] Locke's "empty cabinet" of a "mind" "furnished" with "ideas" (65) first "framed" by the "names" "lodged" within it (361–98); Hobbes's "Leviathan" or "Artificial Man" of a "State" whose "Soul" is the "Seat" of absolute "Sovereignty" (223–74), no less than Rousseau's opposing conception of a literally artificial "social contract" capable of replacing the "spectacul[ar]" bases of "inequality" with the "convention" of equal "citizenship" (*Discourses*; *Social Contract*),[4] all demonstrate not only their authors' arguments but also those arguments' reliance on language properly categorized as literary. Kant's story of a man who, ordered by his sovereign to bear false witness against an honest man on pain of immediate death, confirms the "fact" of "freedom" in himself by "admitting" the "possibility" that he "may" indeed decide not to (*Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* 140; A 54); his description of any subject's ability to "see" sensory objects "as the poets do," unfiltered by the formal lens of cognition, in acts of judgment instead requiring and resulting in the "common sense" of speech (*Kritik der Urteilskraft* 196, 224–28; B 118–19, 155–161); his characterization of "time" as both a practical product and a formal condition of all perceptual experience and, as such, an "art hidden deep in the human soul" (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft* 190); Hegel's representation of the origin of "spirit" as the incomprehending encounter with the "indecipherability" of the Egyptian pyramids, and resulting understanding of art as embodiment not of beauty but of semiosis—the entirely abstract *and* material opacity, or "essential ambiguousness," of a "symbol" (13: 394–97) that is "in the first place, a sign," and of "sign" as the necessarily "prosaic" basis and medium of philosophy (458–65); Marx's "language of commodities" spoken by objects appearing "mystical[ly]" to take on the agency of subjects (143, 164) on which his "general formula of capital," of "value" "valuating itself" as "surplus value," depends (252–57): all compose pathbreaking arguments made by way of particulars that cannot be derived from particulars, arguments that endure *because of*, not despite, the heterogeneity of their theoretical composition.

In a recent President's Column in the *MLA Newsletter*, Roland Greene extolled the benefits of "interpretation" in general, a view that this cluster of essays can only serve to underscore. Yet the proposed collective question, "Why philosophy?," suggests that to do this meaningfully, we must first distinguish "methods" that themselves underscore, from those that positively destroy, the bases of interpretation itself. Philosophy at its best is interpretation at its most rigorous—as increasing numbers of students seeking to meet rather than circumvent the challenge of understanding appear already to know. To interpret the formation—bases and contents—of experience and events, philosophy relies on neither empirically limited conjectures nor abstract theorems but on "fictions" or "forms" (from *fingere*, "to shape, fashion, or form") made for the purpose of posing questions. At its best, philosophy does this self-critically, conscious of the radical differences, in origin and effects, dividing made forms of every kind, including its own, from the universe of naturally determined things. Perhaps the examination of literary fiction—of things made and events represented to be experienced as such—would do well to take philosophy's inquisitive, interpretive lead,

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once again. I put its titular speculative question to the scholars I invited to contribute to this special *PMLA* essay cluster based on the commitment demonstrated in their work to doing both. The aim of the individual contributions is not to address these disciplinary issues and developments in particular, nor to espouse or advocate a philosophical argument or methodology, but rather to indicate, by example, why "philosophy"—the differing modes of critical reason proposed in and by acts of reflective, analytic inquiry—may help us identify the interrelated bases of such issues and developments and, thereby, recognize their own historical contingency, as well as the inherently critical, noncontigent bases of imaginative work, both literary and cultural in general.

Notes

1. Like similar educational-outreach programs instituted after it by colleges and universities across the United States, the Bard Prison Initiative, founded in 1999 to offer a degree-granting liberal arts education to men and women incarcerated in New York State, makes philosophy—and literature—central to its rigorous curriculum.

2. All unattributed translations are my own.

3. For a standard French edition of the works by Descartes quoted here in translation—*Discours de la méthode* and *Méditations métaphysiques*—see the collection *Œuvres philosophiques*, edited by Ferdinand Alquié (Paris: Garnier, 1963).

4. For standard French editions of the works by Rousseau quoted here in translation, see *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, edited by Jacques Roger (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1992), and *Du contrat social*, edited by Pierre Burgelin (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966).

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.2.249 Published online by Cambridge University Press