## SHOULD PHILOSOPHERS BE CONSISTENT? (PART ONE)

**Berel Dov Lerner**

*Berel Dov Lerner argues for inconsistency.*

> 'Consistency is a virtue for trains: what we want from a philosopher is insights, whether he comes by them consistently or not.'
>
> Stephen Vizinczey.

Would it be wrong for a philosopher sometimes to argue for one position while at other times arguing for another, contradictory thesis? What should we think of a philosopher who devotes one book to proving God's existence, and another to defending atheism?

The notion that it is somehow valuable for a philosopher to strive for consistency is based on a false picture of how human knowledge progresses. If it were up to each individual philosopher to single-handedly create a comprehensive and coherent grand system, then it would be important for all of a philosopher's publications to agree with each other. Philosophy is, however, (like science) a communal rather than an individual pursuit. The individual philosopher makes his or her contribution to the discipline by presenting new ideas to the philosophical community as subjects for debate and criticism. At the end of the day, a philosopher must depend upon his or her peers to evaluate a new idea, and it is the community of philosophers which will draw out its full implications.

Many people do believe that great individual geniuses are responsible for important intellectual breakthroughs, but that impression is just an artifact of a certain way of retelling the history of ideas. Biography is a compelling literary genre, and as a result we have many books that concentrate upon a few outstanding thinkers, and very few that tease out the complicated processes by which new knowledge is produced by communities of researchers. It would be enormously difficult – and not very entertaining – to describe how new ideas de-



https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175600003134 Published online by Cambridge University Press

veloped through the interaction of many different people, but that must not blind us to the existence of such processes.

Once we appreciate the communal nature of philosophy, it becomes immediately clear why it is counterproductive for individual philosophers to censor their own work out of fears of inconsistency. If someone who has published theistically-oriented work in the past suddenly comes up with an interesting line of atheistic arguments, she has a duty to share those new ideas with her peers. It would be both unfair as well as foolishly arrogant for an individual philosopher to decide not to develop and publish lines of thought just because they do not agree with her previous work. Philosophers should let their minds take them were they may; in any case, it will be the community of scholars which ends up separating the wheat from the chaff. So: let a thousand flowers bloom, and let each gardener plant a thousand flowers!

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