

How to Be Boring: Faking Philosophy

Matthew E. Johnson

June 11, 2013

When I tell someone I meet for the first time that I'm studying philosophy I usually get one of three responses. In some (rare) cases, they will light up and want to talk philosophy or bounce ideas off of me. More often, I will get a polite nod and some follow up questions. But surprisingly often, I get responses like "Wow. I would never want to do that!" or just blank stares that say more poignantly than words ever could, "What's wrong with you?"

What's strange to me about this is that everyone does philosophy, whether they decide to call it by that name or not. Every day, people think a lot about what it means to be who they are, what is the best way to deal with others, and what kinds of things are important to know about. These are exactly some of the big questions that philosophy attempts to tackle. But maybe even more importantly, every generation and every community carries a wealth of unquestioned assumptions about the world that fund our motivations and behavior in ways we are often unaware of. Philosophy allows us to take a step back and evaluate these assumptions and values we find in our cultural inheritance. So whether you are thinking about what's important in life or coasting on the intellectual momentum of your culture, you're doing philosophy.

So if everyone's doing it, why the stigma against philosophers?

Some might say that philosophy is boring and too hard to read. Or maybe philosophy is just a bunch of people throwing terms that have nothing to do with real life back and forth at each other. Unfortunately, sometimes these come close to the truth.

I think at the core of the problem is that philosophers are sometimes just not very good communicators.

It's so easy to get wrapped up in academic conversation and forget that the words mean nothing to someone outside of that world. But on the other hand, I wonder how far philosophy would be able to get if it constantly had to stop and translate into everyday non-philosophical terms. Sometimes terms can serve as shortcuts that allow us to talk about several complex systems all at once. But the problem comes when we use these "shortcuts" as the only supposedly untranslatable way of talking about things.

For example, Martin Heidegger creates a whole vocabulary of terms that he puts to use in his excavation of what it means to be human in a fundamental way. No other set of terms is sufficient for the task he wants to accomplish simply because it has never been done before. While Heidegger's project is admirable and incredibly important for the forward movement of philosophy, I can't help but wonder how necessary all the jargon is.

I find that in my own philosophical studies, I can throw around big words all day, but until I actually understand what I'm talking about and what's at stake, I can't explain it without propping up my explanation with philosophical shortcut terms. But once I get to the point where

I really understand an idea, it's much easier to explain it in a way that's tailored to the listener because I can approach it with greater creativity.

It's a little like learning to drive. I can take a class and learn what a turn signal is for and how to use the pedals, but until I get behind the wheel, I don't really know what driving is like. Once you get real experience on the road, you can describe what it's like to drive in creative ways because you really understand the experience. But you can't really teach someone to drive unless you've driven yourself; the best you can do is throw around second-hand things you know and terms like "u-turn" and "peel out." It's the same in philosophy. You can string together philosophical terms and throw around jargon, but that doesn't mean that you understand the ideas they are meant to communicate. On the other hand, you can make a u-turn without knowing the word for it, and maybe you can think about Heidegger's ideas without knowing what Dasein is.

It's no wonder that philosophy sounds boring to most people. All the philosophy a lot of people hear is a muddle of big words and a throwaway quote from Nietzsche rudely taken out of context: "God is dead."

So maybe it is the task of the philosophers to take academia into real life, translating philosophy into something understandable and interesting, without compromising its integrity. This task requires an enormous amount of work and creativity on the part of academic philosophy; for translation to be possible, academics can't hide behind shortcut terms nor can they just create new vocabularies.

It is a great tragedy when philosophy falls by the wayside because it's too boring, and if our ideas are untranslatable and incoherent, it might just be our fault. We cannot let too much jargon drain the vitality from our philosophy.

* * *

How translatable are philosophical ideas really? To what extent can we talk about Heidegger (for example) in plain English without having to use his terms? Are there nuances that are untranslatable or ideas that break down when we apply different terms to them? Does philosophy benefit from this type of creativity, or is translation a burden that constricts its movement?