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**Creativity and Imagination
in the Practice of Philosophy**

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Creativity and Imagination in the Practice of Philosophy

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Abstract

This paper argues that the exercise of the imagination requires us 1) to attempt to describe features of a certain practice that appear, at first blush, natural and obvious; 2) to understand that that which appears natural and obvious could be otherwise; and 3) to be open to the introduction of changes to that which appears natural and obvious. Imagination, in this sense, is quite different to creativity. The latter works on the basis of the introduction of variations to settled phenomena. This exercise of creativity is important, but ultimately, it contributes principally to the stability and identity of a community and reinforces its most firmly established features. Imagination, on the other hand, is more difficult, for it strikes at the very heart of that which is settled. Changes to that which is settled may not only be resisted, but may also be violently opposed. And yet, it is precisely the very ability and willingness to be open to such changes that may be of the most ethical and political significance. These differences between creativity and imagination are illustrated in the context of the practice of philosophy.

Introduction

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt occasionally refers to the thoughtlessness of Eichmann as “the lack of imagination.”¹ In subsequent work, Arendt returned again and again to the ethical and political significance of thoughtfulness – as she does, for example, in her paper, “Thinking and Moral Considerations”² and in the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*.³ In the former, Arendt explores the character of Socrates as a paradigmatic example of thoughtfulness. Putting to one side exegetical issues concerning Arendt’s understanding of thoughtfulness,⁴ her discussion raises the following question: how thoughtful, how imaginative, is the practice of philosophy? The aim of this paper is to offer an answer to that question, but in doing so, not to attempt to offer an accurate picture of the practice of

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¹ Arendt, Hannah, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, London: Penguin, 1964, at 287-288.

² Arendt, Hannah, “Thinking and Moral Considerations” (1971) 38(3) *Social Research* 417-446.

³ Arendt, Hannah, *The Life of the Mind*, New York: Harvest, 1981.

⁴ For a helpful overview, see Bernstein, Richard, “Arendt on Thinking” in Villa, Dana (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Arendt*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 277-292.

philosophy,⁵ but rather, to use the context of the practice of philosophy in order to explore what we may expect from the exercise of the imagination. As we shall see, such an exploration may also help us to understand the differences between the exercise of imagination and creativity.

The paper proceeds in five brief parts. The first four parts introduce what is called here the four layers of the practice of philosophy: first, the outer-outer layer; second, the neo-outer layer; third, the neo-inner layer; and fourth, the inner-inner layer. The outer-outer layer refers to the environments and tools thanks to which and in the context of which persons are emotionally involved in certain common or joint objects. The neo-outer layer is characterised by a repertoire of gestures developed at least partly in the environments and tools of the outer-outer layer. The focus of the third layer, the neo-inner, is on four elements of philosophical thinking: first, the reliance on intuition-contexts; second, the transcendental ambition; third, ideal-dialectical dynamics; and fourth, the exercise and camouflage of hindsight. The fourth layer, the inner-inner, is comprised of the substance and content of arguments and problems. Such is the program for the first four parts of the paper. Space constraints mean that the paper but sketches each of the layers and their respective components.

The fifth and final part argues that although there is both a need and an opportunity for creativity in the inner-inner layer of philosophical practice, the exercise of the imagination is characterised by the ability and willingness to 1) to attempt to describe that which, at first blush, appears natural and obvious; 2) to understand that that which appears natural and obvious could be otherwise; and 3) to be open to the introduction of changes to that which appears natural and obvious. In other words, exclusive reliance on the creativity needed and produced in the inner-inner layer will not, by itself, allow us to consider the practice of philosophy as imaginative. In order to be imaginative, the practice of philosophy must at the

⁵ This is also the reason why the paper does not offer any discussion as to the differences in the practice of philosophy in different cultures and at different times.

very least offer the possibility for changes to the first three layers. If we expect anything less from the exercise of the imagination, we run the risk of the practice of philosophy becoming ever more incapable of seeing the limitations of any one form in which it is practiced, and becoming ever more defensive and perhaps aggressive in response to changes that challenge the form in which it is practiced.

Put more generally, what was missing from Eichmann, and what seeks to be countered by the exercise of the imagination (as presented here), is precisely openness to an awareness of one's own limitations – to a great extent influenced by the environments, tools, embodiments and habits of thinking within which one acts and develops – and thus also an ability and willingness to confront the often unintended consequences of one's actions and change one's own ways of life. Creativity, at least as presented here, turns out to operate under a contrary dynamic, i.e., in offering variations on familiar themes, creativity reinforces the identity of persons, and increases the barriers that outsiders need to cross in order to become insiders. Although such reinforcement of identity, and such stabilisation of relations and expectations amongst persons is sometimes needed, there is an ever-present danger, particularly when such groups become powerful, that those outside it will be seen as, and treated as, unwelcome threats to the status quo.

I. The Outer-Outer Layer

Consider the following environments: a pub showing a football game and a philosophy seminar. In both scenarios, participants are emotionally involved in a joint or common object. In the case of the pub, the eyes and ears of most, if not all, persons are on the many screens scattered throughout the pub (a common object), or, perhaps, on one big screen (a joint object), listening to and watching the game. In the case of the philosophy seminar, the eyes and ears of most, if not all, persons are on the person giving the seminar.

There is emotional involvement in two different ways. First, there is the obvious emotional involvement in the result of the game or in the argument. That is not the kind of emotional involvement of interest here. The second kind, relevant for present purposes, is that of emotional involvement in the common or joint object such that, were there to be any interference in the capacity of persons to see and hear the game, or see and hear the argument, one could expect an expression, sometimes violent, of emotional disapprobation.

It is easy to forget that human beings are not born with the capacity for joint attention, i.e., the capacity to pay attention to a joint object.⁶ But it is not the physiological or developmental level that is of relevance presently. Rather, what is significant here is how the environment itself is structured to facilitate the exercise of our capacity for joint attention. In the case of the pub, reference has already been made to the scattering of television screens, or the prominent positioning of one big screen. In the case of the seminar, it is pertinent to notice the arrangement of the table and the seats, and the positioning of the speaker at a spot of maximum visibility and audibility for all. Joint attention is facilitated even more obviously in the case of a lecture theatre, sometimes to the extent that the mass of students sits in the dark, while the lecturer is bathed in the glory of a spotlight. And, of course, we could hardly conceive of a more dramatic ritualisation of joint attention than the football stadium.

Of course, we can speak of many other kinds of philosophical spaces. At one extreme, one can consider the effects of the differences between university campuses collected or scattered within the city, and those on the outskirts of a major city or those forming their own little university village. At the other, one can look at the design of office spaces, and ask oneself, for example, why it is that it is very rare, if it has ever occurred at all, for a philosophy department to have an open office environment. Somewhere in between these two extremes, one can look to see if those with offices closer together, and thus those more likely

⁶ For a recent overview of the relevant literature, see Eilan, Naomi et al (eds), *Joint Attention, Communication and Other Minds: Issues in Philosophy and Psychology*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

to interact more frequently, are already grouped in terms of research areas, or, if not, whether new research areas emerge from those more frequent interactions. One can look, further, at the design of any one individual office, lined with books (rather than, say, paintings), quiet, overlooking rooftops, and containing a computer screen and keyboard fighting for space with various half-open books and papers.

The important point to make here is that environments tend to be, on the whole, largely invisible to philosophers, and yet, simultaneously, and perhaps precisely because of this, highly influential. Their causal efficacy is notoriously difficult to convey, but their influence may be glimpsed when alternatives are considered. In other words, the successful functioning of these environments is dependent on their being taken for granted; on not yet even being recognised as obvious and natural; such that the possibility of them being different does not even arise as a question, let alone one in which the participants might take an active interest. Reference has already been made to the lack of open office space in philosophy departments, but one can consider other alternatives that would, potentially, facilitate different kinds of interaction and expression. Further examples shall feature in the fifth part of the paper.

The outer-outer layer is comprised not only of environments, but also tools. Again, one can be more or less telescopic in one's observations here. In the case of the seminar, for example, one can notice obvious material instruments, such as a blackboard, or a laptop and projector. But one can also pay attention to other forms, e.g., the form of a handout to be distributed prior to or during a presentation; or the form of a PowerPoint presentation – indeed, as for the latter, it may be pertinent to ask why, for example, some philosophers may feel their ideas are more easily presentable in the form of bullet points than others, or why those philosophers who do use PowerPoint nevertheless rarely use diagrams or images. One can also look at other forms, outside of the environment of the seminar, such as the forms of

articles (to be of a certain length, written in a certain tone, appropriately supported by references), the forms of books, the forms of reviews – all of which one can characterise as tools of expression – as well as tools of composition, such as the use of a computer and keyboard and their effects on philosophical expression.⁷ As with environments, philosophers may get so used to the tools they use that they do not ever come to consider how these tools might be affecting their philosophical output, or what would happen should they use alternative tools for either composition or expression. Once again, some alternatives will be considered in the fifth part of the paper.

One common thread that runs throughout the various different kinds of environments and tools used in philosophy departments is the facilitation and endorsement of solitude. Although some philosophy departments offer more opportunities for interaction than others, the typical and not wholly inaccurate image of philosophical practice is of the lonely philosopher, wrestling with, say, the never-ending perplexities of language. Indeed, it is not uncontroversial to suggest that it is likely that the greatest part of a contemporary philosopher's life will be spent alone before a computer. In previous times, papers stacked up on a simple table illuminated by candlelight replaced the contemporary computer. In short, whether looking back with grief and remorse,⁸ peering into oneself for the source of one's knowledge of wax burning,⁹ or waking up each day to face oneself in the mirror of nature,¹⁰ solitude is a staple diet for the philosopher. Indeed, so protected, so highly prized, is this time filled with one's own self that one may speculate whether or not it is linked with the long-standing interest, if not obsession, of philosophy with self-consciousness, self-knowledge, identity, deliberation, reason, and decision-making. What else could seem more insightful for

⁷ The bulk of the contemporary practice of philosophy is remarkably uniform in terms of tools of expression. One has to go back some centuries or decades to the works of, e.g., Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Benjamin and Wittgenstein for innovations in philosophical expression.

⁸ See, Saint Augustine's *Confessions*.

⁹ See, Descartes' *Meditations*.

¹⁰ See, Thoreau's *Walden*.

a philosopher than more reflection on reflection? And what else could seem more valuable than the life examined, i.e., the life already led by philosophers?

As noted above, alleging causal relations between environments and tools and philosophical output is difficult and highly speculative. The point, in any event, of this part of the paper is not to point to any such causal relations, or even to raise the likelihood of a link between the environments and tools of the philosophical life and the tendency to focus on certain problems and look for certain insights. Rather, it is to point those environments and tools, and thereby also suggest that there are alternatives to them. If such an exercise is seen to be as uninteresting, or worse, offensive, by the philosopher, then that response may in itself tell us something about the tenacity of these environments and tools.

II. The Neo-Outer Layer

Attending a recent seminar given by a philosopher to other philosophers, an observer who focuses on the speaker's facial expressions and gestures may very well notice the following: when thinking, the speaker looks up into the air, sometimes also narrowing his eyes (squinting as if to signify that he is thinking something difficult). Should such an observer attend many seminars given by philosophers to other philosophers, she may very well notice a good many incidents of such a gesture. Indeed, such an observer may notice a whole repertoire of gestures and facial expressions, and she may not take long to consider the possibility that these gestures and facial expressions are recognisably philosophical, common to communities of philosophers. The suggestion of this part of the paper is that these gestures and expressions are equally part of philosophical practice, and are equally as important as, say, environments and tools, or, as we shall see in a moment, features of philosophical thinking or the content of arguments.

The neo-outer layer, however, should not be restricted to hand gestures and facial expressions. In a similar way to the case of environments and tools, it is precisely those things that we have not yet thought of as gestures that may be the most influential, and most difficult to shake off. An example from football may help bring out this notion of a heretofore invisible gesture. Return, for a moment, to the pub showing the football match. Imagine that a player in the match misses an excellent opportunity for scoring. He gets down on his knees. His hands clasp his head. He tilts his head back and rolls his eyes. He swears. These are all gestures we expect from players who miss such chances. Not only do we ourselves often fail to see these *as* gestures, i.e., as identifiable entities capable of being separated from the whole incident of a missed opportunity in football, but they also seem natural to us, and perhaps even more so the footballer. How is that there is so much uniformity in the comportment of a missed opportunity in football? Could there be, by analogy, a comportment of doubt, a comportment of thinking, a comportment of philosophising? Consider, too, the possibility that language is, at bottom, not something abstract – a tool of communication – but primarily a performance of one’s body. If there is a technical philosophical language, might one also say there is a technical philosophical body?

Much has, of course, been written about the body as a neglected locus of knowledge, and equally, about the questionable primacy given to certain senses in the expression and transmission of knowledge, such as the dominance of the sense of sight as a philosophical metaphor.¹¹ Rarely, it seems, has this been traced to the practice of philosophy.¹² Even Dewey, who spoke of his astonishment at not being able to sit down when instructed to do so

¹¹ For the latter, see Jay, Martin, *Downcast Eyes: the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

¹² A recent exception may be Shusterman, Richard, *Body Consciousness: a Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, though Shusterman appeals to, or at least tends to write in the register of, philosophical self-improvement. Of course, there is a long-standing tradition, more ancient and medieval than modern, of philosophy as a way of life (for a discussion, see, for example, the work of Pierre Hadot), but only rarely is this presented in corporeal terms, or when it is, as with the Stoics, the body tends to be thought of as a source of danger to be controlled by the mind.

in a particular way,¹³ did not consider how bodily habits might affect philosophical practice. The importance of the body figures not only in, though may be most dramatic in, the case of the exercise of philosophical practice, i.e., in how we communicate philosophical ideas, e.g., the fact that we do so by writing and speaking, rather than say, miming or passing pictures to each other or sculpting. Its importance also lies in the lack, in most philosophers, of any kind of bodily flexibility of the kind that Dewey did speak of.¹⁴ Indeed, this silencing of the many potentialities of the body may itself be as much as a source of the long-standing philosophical celebration of the cerebral, and the correlative primacy given to the deliberative in explanations of behaviour (e.g., by granting causal power to reasons), as the persuasiveness of any argument. In this respect, one could speculate that the silencing of the body and the alleged bias in favour of the cerebral, is analogous to the causal relation speculated on above between the facilitation and encouragement of solitude in the environments and tools of the philosophical life and the tendency to celebrate the importance of self-reliance, or self-control (e.g., rational control over one's emotions or desires), and the so-called rational liberation of the individual from the traditionality of a society.

Once again, the causal relations between forms of the philosophical body and philosophical pictures, arguments or biases are not easily drawn; nor is that the focus here. What is more important here is the very process of identifying features or characteristics of the philosophical body and thereby opening up the possibility for changing them. We can gain the most powerful insights into the philosophical body when we consider alternatives; when we widen, in short, the realm of possible philosophical bodies. Consider, for example, the possibility of philosophical ideas being communicated by way of miming or passing pictures or sculpting. What does the consideration of such a possibility tell us about the philosophical

¹³ See, Dewey, John, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology*, New York: Henry and Holt, 1922.

¹⁴ For a striking example of a sociologist to the contrary, see Wacquant, Loic, "Pugs at Work: Bodily Capital and Bodily Labour Among Professional Boxers" (1995) 1 *Body & Society* 65-94.

body? How do philosophers respond to such a suggestion? What does that reveal about the tenacity, the pull of gravity, of bodily habits?

III. The Neo-Inner Layer

The focus of the neo-inner layer is on philosophical thinking. The four features of philosophical thinking, to be discussed below in this order, are: first, the reliance on intuition-contexts; second, the transcendental ambition; third, ideal-dialectical dynamics; and fourth, the exercise and camouflage of hindsight. All of these features are closely related and only artificially divided. Again, given space restrictions, each of them can only be sketched very briefly. Further, no evidence will be offered for asserting them as features of philosophical thinking. Rather, they are offered as observations not for their own sakes, but for the sake of understanding what we may expect of the imagination in the practice of philosophy.

IIIA. Intuition-Contexts

Intuition-contexts are stocks of common examples often used to illustrate, buttress, or motivate intuitions. These can be thought of as mini-stories, or typical narrative images, in which the intuitions at play in certain communities of arguments or problems feel at home.

To illustrate this feature of philosophical thinking, a good deal of exegetical work would need to be done. One way in which this could be done would be to take some of the most often cited or most often taught texts of, say, the contemporary analytical philosophy of action and to point to the alleged common features of typical examples. These, it might be thought, would involve ex-ante, first-person, short-term action, rather than ex-post, third-person, long-term activities.¹⁵ Another way to approach the task would be to take the concept

¹⁵ Recall, for example, the light-switcher in Davidson, or the lever-puller in Anscombe. The typical examples are not, by contrast, the actions of rugby teams, or the activity of gardening. Of course, one can see, in light of this, how changes to the examples also result in the emergence of new fields and problems, e.g., the problem of collective intentionality, and thus the-sub field of the analytical philosophy of group actions.

or problem of intentionality and to show how this concept or problem has emerged from the repetition of certain examples, e.g., examples in which there are already articulated rules about how someone ought to proceed, with the only question left over being whether they are following them, or why they should follow them. Yet another strategy would be to take a debate, e.g., the debate over the extent to which, and in what circumstances, intentional action is accompanied by awareness or consciousness, and to situate this debate within, once again, the recurring examples, e.g., games (e.g., chess) where some set of rules is said to be constitutive, and where the debate oscillates between the example of the beginner and the expert (the former's intentionality said to be accompanied by awareness or consciousness, and the other's not).¹⁶ A final strategy would be to consider the effect of new examples on some philosophical debate, the most dramatic of which, in recent times, was the tremor felt among epistemologists confronted by the Gettier cases.

The important point in all of this is to suggest the primacy of recurring images, from which various kinds of arguments, problems, concepts, positions or debates emerge and around which they oscillate. Recognising this feature, in other words, is recognising that images are not mere illustrations of abstract principles (i.e., that they are not 'mere' examples, even if we call them that), but that abstract principles emerge from recurring images, as supplemented, perhaps, by one's own experiences. In short, and counter-intuitively, it may be more accurate to say that it is the abstract principles that are the examples for the recurring images.

IIIB. The Transcendental Ambition

The transcendental ambition consists in the construction of philosophical pictures out of conditions thanks to which the author of those conditions hopes to be able to evaluate the

¹⁶ The work of Hubert Dreyfus is exemplary here.

rightness or wrongness (whether from a political, ethical, epistemic, social, legal, or any other perspective) of an action or proposition. It has sometimes been thought that some philosophical thinking is characterised by the search for a definition.¹⁷ But, at least in light of the present feature, this does not get at the core of the issue, which is that the search for a definition is but one way of attempting to find a ground from which an evaluation of some action or proposition can proceed.

Take any philosophical picture. Take, for instance, the debate over legal validity or moral objectivity, and consider whether any of the proposed answers to this problem do not proceed in such a fashion as to enable the author of the alleged criteria of validity or objectivity to evaluate whether this or that norm is valid or objective. Take the problem of political obligation: is this problem not seen to be resolved when the author is able to show that we can use his or her picture to evaluate whether, in these or those circumstances, a person is obliged to obey a directive of the government or not? Of course, in the context of the problem of political obligation, the answers will differ; some may place more or less reliance on, say, the circumstances in which authority is exercised, others on the content of the directive, or any number of other factors – indeed, in light of the first feature noted above, we could say that the relative reliance on any one of those is likely to be influenced by the typical images assumed or focused on by the author.

More pertinently for present purposes, it is significant that, sooner or later, the ‘success’ of some proposed stack of conditions is revealed to have been mistaken, i.e., there are always counter-examples that are, eventually, offered, such as to reveal some circumstances in which the conditions do not pick out some relevant difference.

Finally, it is noteworthy to acknowledge that the transcendental ambition might appear too obvious to be worthy of being stated. For what other ambition can one discern from, say, a

¹⁷ See, for example, Hart, HLA, *Definition and Theory in Jurisprudence: An Inaugural Lecture*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953.

theory of truth, except that it is designed to help us distinguish between true and false statements? In answer, it is worth repeating that, as with many of the features of the first three layers of philosophical practice, they all appear too obvious to be worth stating until and unless one proposes an alternative; until and unless, that is, one sees such features as contingent rather than necessary components of philosophical thinking.

IIIC. Ideal-Dialectical Dynamics

The ideal-dialectical dynamics of philosophical thinking – and also the third feature of the neo-inner layer – consists in the observation that philosophical work typically proceeds in the shadow of the horizon of a concept that is always receding and always being approached in the form of examples that fall short of reaching their destination. Put differently, one could assert that every philosophical thought is the pursuit of an ideal, and that this pursuit is never-ending, for these are ideals, like all ideals, that are difficult, if not impossible, to think in themselves, and can be, perhaps only, or at least are typically, approached from the perspective of examples of that which they are not.

The idea that philosophical thinking needs ideals it can never satisfy ought not to be thought of as determined for all time. There is, in other words, no set list of ideals. The idea, rather, is that in any one case of philosophical thinking there is always some ideal (often grammatically positive, such as truth, beauty, goodness, validity, and so on) that is functioning in a way that cannot be exhausted, with the effect that philosophical thinking can, at best, amass examples of situations in which it is absent.

It would be unclear, then, to say that philosophical thinking proceeds by dividing, distinguishing, classifying, and so on – in the same way that, as mentioned with respect to the previous feature, it is unclear to say that (some) philosophical thinking proceeds by way of definition. Rather, at any one time, an ideal is pursued; its explanation is sought; its pursuance

emerges from an attempt to make sense of some typical recurring example or some experience assumed or taken to be paradigmatic; but its actual capture is impossible. To take but one example from this paper, the figure of the imagination could be understood to be treated as an ideal – the concept is being pursued and examples are being amassed of what imagination is not.

One can think, if pressed, of this feature of philosophical thinking as the reverse of the previous one, i.e., that the impossibility to capture the ideal pursued by philosophical thinking is revealed in the always-available possibility of constructing counter-examples that show the transcendental ambition to have failed.

Further, if one imagines the possibility of a philosophy of falsity, ugliness, invalidity and the bad, then one sees the importance of certain recurring examples in not only making intuitions feel at home, but also, with reference to this feature, driving the pursuit of that which is impossible to capture.

IIID. The Exercise and Camouflage of Hindsight

One way of illustrating the exercise and camouflage of hindsight – the fourth and final feature of philosophical thinking to be discussed here – is to consider the idea of there being an implicit order composed of implicit rules being observed in some activity, with the possibly self-serving consequence that a philosopher (and, typically, according to the philosopher, only a philosopher) is required to make the implicit rule(s) explicit.¹⁸

What tends to be forgotten in such cases is that what can now be understood, in hindsight, as having led to the articulation of a rule, could not have been so understood prior

¹⁸ This is a very common feature in normative and social philosophy. An obvious and proud example is Robert Brandom's *Making It Explicit*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994, but the same idea also appears in less likely places, such as Pierre Bourdieu's assertion in *Pascalian Meditations*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000, that he can (and only others who adopt his various methodological tools can) make explicit the implicit rules governing scholasticism. For an example from legal theory, see Neil MacCormick's discussion of informal normative orders in *Institutions of Law*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

to the circumstances that led to that articulation. When that is forgotten, it becomes possible to offer an explanation – typically a causal story, whether comprised of reasons or emotions that moved the agent or some mechanisms that determined the agent’s behaviour – that takes advantage of the assumption that the rule was there all along. Such an explanation conveniently ignores our lack of attention to the alleged prior order, i.e., our not yet having even conceived it as an order. Indeed, one can state this feature more strongly: all stories, whether they tend to prioritise the involvement of the will of the agent or not (whether they do tends to depend, once again, on the typical examples from which such stories emerge), are constructed with the benefit of hindsight. Further, the appeal to an implicit order, or a set of rules said to have been implicitly followed, may also be understood as a move aimed at legitimating the practice of evaluating the action or proposition the rule addresses – otherwise the imposition of a new rule places stress on a justification for the exercise of the power to evaluate.

It is notoriously difficult to offer examples of this fourth feature of philosophical thinking, for any example of a rule being alleged to be implicit is already one that has benefited from the first instance of a ‘break’ from the ‘usual’ run of things to which persons have reacted with disapprobation.¹⁹ One can approach this feature by contrasting the commentary that one hears live in a football game with the commentary one hears in the break at half-time when the game is subject to an analysis consisting not only of events already understood in light of the entire half, but also thanks to various kinds of arrows and other technical gimmicks that ‘reveal’ patterns in the play of the two sides – those being ‘patterns’ visible only in hindsight. A similar illustration is provided by the contrast between live and ex-post commentary to chess games.

¹⁹ Some examples, though in the context of a different argument, are provided in ‘Making Room for the Silence of Social Normativity’, currently under review.

An illustration at a different level might help here. There is a peculiar kind of chess puzzle known as the retrograde puzzle.²⁰ One solves it not by attempting to find the best move from the current position, but rather, by reconstructing the last few moves that led to the current position. Typically, there is only one such reconstruction possible. The exercise and camouflage of hindsight may be analogous in the sense that it is as if all philosophical thinking expressed itself in the form of solutions to retrograde puzzles, and, in doing so, avoided the difficulties associated with explaining what goes on when a solution is sought to be found from the current position. Indeed, the point can be put even more strongly, for in a real chess game, a player not only must find the best move to continue, but he or she also does not know, and cannot know, whether the position is like that of a problem that can be solved, or more like a situation where there are numerous equally good moves.

The above, then, are but quick sketches of four features of philosophical thinking. There are others one could mention, e.g., the tendency to rely on the excess of meaning (the excess of ambiguity) in terms such as necessity, possibility, is, ought, can, and others;²¹ or the tendency to create philosophical pictures by finding a middle point between what one understands or characterises as excesses in the relevant literature; or the tendency to see as an insight only that which confirms that which one already finds insightful;²² and others. Indeed, there are no doubt an infinite number of features that could be ‘identified.’ In any event, the point of the above four features, to reiterate, is not to accurately describe or, worse, attempt to exhaust, the characteristics of philosophical thinking. The point, instead, is to offer some no doubt inadequate and speculative observations – from a distance somewhat removed from the detail of philosophical work – such as to open up the very possibility of change.

²⁰ A recent discussion of these puzzles appears in Graeffrath, Bernd, “To Know the Past One Must First Know the Future: Raymond Smullyan and the Mysteries of Retrograde Analysis” in Hale, Benjamin (ed), *Philosophy Looks at Chess*, Chicago: Open Court, 2008, 1-12.

²¹ This point is made by Wittgenstein in *Culture and Value*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1980, at 15e.

²² See, De Man, Paul, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

IV. The Inner-Inner Layer

The fourth and final layer of philosophical practice is that of the content or substance of philosophical problems and arguments. It is introduced last because it tends to be projected, typically by philosophers, as not only the most important, but indeed as philosophy itself. In other words, philosophy itself, it is typically thought, is the realm of philosophical beliefs or systems of beliefs, such as cognitivism in meta-ethics, or reliabilism in epistemology, or positivism in legal theory, or idealism in metaphysics. This very mode of self-identification by philosophers is of interest, though it shall not be dwelt on here. The point is that the inner-inner layer tends to be overemphasised by philosophers themselves – hence the motivation in this paper to begin with and emphasise the first three layers.

Another observation in relation to the ordering of the layers needs to be made. Although at various times throughout the paper, speculations have been offered as to the possible causal relations between the first three layers and the fourth layer – e.g., the possible link between individual offices and, say, the focus on self-conscious knowledge by epistemologists – it is no part of the argument that the first three layers determine the content of the last layer. Nor is it part of the argument to suggest that the causal relation, if there is one, is always one way, i.e., that it cannot proceed from the fourth layer and go on to affect the other three layers. Nevertheless, it is the case that the inner-inner layer is offered last in order to suggest that it may be worthwhile for philosophers to consider what influence the features of the first three layers have on the tendency to focus on certain kinds of problems and offer certain kinds of insights in response to those problems. Even more provocatively, it is hoped that positioning the inner-inner layer last may spark consideration of the possibility that when philosophers speak of, say, rationality as the distinguishing feature of human beings, they are not speaking of all human beings, but that, instead, they are speaking

primarily of philosophers. In other words, philosophers ought to consider the possibility that what they find problematic, interesting, insightful, worthy of consideration, debate and exploration is something that is limited by the characteristics of the first three layers, i.e., that it is, in effect, a form of reflection on the philosophical life, i.e., on a life composed of the kinds of environments and tools and corporeal and cerebral habits sketched in the first three parts.

Of course, even if the last observation was accurate – and it is not presented here in that tone – then it would not mean that the inner-inner layer is not important, or without its own kinds of effects on philosophers and the wider pool of citizens. Certainly, one can find instances of the inner-inner layer influencing the decisions of individuals, communities and governments. However, even here one must have the courage to be sceptical, for it is likely that philosophers themselves – and perhaps also many historians (depending on their methodologies) – will emphasise, possibly without realising it, the causal importance of ideas, thereby also confirming and reconfirming not only their self-conceptions, but also the importance of those self-conceptions.

Two further observations can be made with respect to this inner-inner layer. First, recall that when introducing the first layer, two kinds of emotional involvement were identified. The indirect was of interest in the case of the first layer – it invoked that sense of the frame that, when broken or disrupted, becomes visible and results in emotional disapprobation. In this layer, it is the more direct emotional involvement that is of interest. This latter kind of emotional involvement appears in reactions of approval or disapproval to certain ways of presenting recognisable, substantive, arguments or positions in philosophy. Some may feel, on any one occasion, that some positions are represented inadequately; important details skirted over; important distinctions not made; inaccurate citations selected; or that any other kinds of mistakes are made. The mutual disciplining that goes on in this

layer is visible and audible – indeed, the layer is permeated with overt and highly dramatic mutual evaluation.

Secondly and finally, it needs to be pointed out that change is not only possible, but also, in some respects, necessary in this inner-inner layer. Most usually, change will come in the form of slight shifts in variation in an argument, which, if one accepts the first feature of philosophical thinking presented above, will themselves emerge from modest tweaking of the examples or counter-examples. Without such changes, or where such changes become difficult to introduce, because, say, of the highly developed stage of the argument – comprised of a thicket of variations on recurring images or examples, and brimming with conditions of increasing complexity and abstractness (e.g., the cognitivism versus non-cognitivism debate in metaethics, or the positivism versus natural law debate in legal theory) – then the debate or area might begin to lose its standing as a so-called ‘hot issue’ or ‘cutting edge debate’ in philosophy, and simply die a kind of philosophical death. One can perhaps best see glimpses of these kinds of variations, as well as, these kinds of deaths, when perusing the debates of philosophical journals in the recent past (say, twenty to thirty years ago). In this way, then, creativity, or the introduction of variations into settled themes, will raise the costs of entry into the relevant debate or field, thereby also contributing to the reinforcement of the community of persons that already participate in it.

V. Exercising the Imagination

In the parts above, there have been moments when certain alternatives were offered to those features that were identified as characteristic of the relevant layer of philosophical practice. Thus, in the case of the outer-outer layer, the possibility of an open-office philosophy department was suggested. In the case of the neo-outer layer, the possibility of philosophy being communicated by way of mimes, or images, or even sculptures was mooted. The

purpose of this part of the paper is to offer more such alternatives. Before going on to do so, however, a few preliminary observations can be made.

The first of these, and also one that has been reiterated throughout the paper, is that it is pertinent to notice that the moment something is described as being in a certain way, or the moment that something is identified or revealed or said to exist, is also the moment in which it becomes possible to recognise that it need not always be so. In other words, and somewhat paradoxically, the moment we put our finger on an 'is' is also the moment in which we open the possibility that we will recognise it as an 'ought to be' or an 'ought not to be' – we describe or reveal or identify it in a certain way, and, thereafter, create the possibility that we will consider whether it ought to be so, or whether it could be changed. For example, if we agree that such and such kinds of environments and tools characterise philosophical practice, or that this or that kind of body is a philosophical one, or that such and such are features of philosophical thinking, then it becomes possible for us to consider the possibility of them not being so, i.e., for them not being characteristics of the practice of philosophy in the future. Of course, there is always the possibility that we shall not agree on any one description; on any one 'identification.' But if we do, suddenly, the possibility of change opens itself up.

The second and related observation is that even if we do agree on a description or identification of a feature, all we do is open up the possibility of change – we still need to consider, for example, by whom such a change is likely to be considered seriously and respectfully. In the context of the practice of philosophy, then, we could ask: are changes – and, in particular, changes to the first three layers – likely to be considered, let alone introduced, by those who have had successful careers as philosophers, climbing their way up the ladders of academia, attracting grants, prizes and admiration from their fellow philosophers and those aspiring to become like them? And if not by them, then by whom are such changes likely to be considered or entertained, and perhaps introduced? To what extent

can these most difficult changes to entertain and make (changes in the environments and tools, and in the corporeal and cerebral habits) come from those who are most familiar with them and successful in their use – and, if not to a great extent, then might the entertaining and making of those changes be exactly that which we expect from the exercise of the imagination?

The third and final observation is to become aware of how reluctant a philosophical community might be to changes to the first three layers, and how energetically it may attempt to keep out those who suggest or even accidentally introduce such changes, or, even worse, stigmatise or persecute them. To recognise this is to realise how invisible such denunciations may be to members within those communities, and how natural and obvious it may be for them to regard those who do not conform as dangerously foreign. Once again, this is likely to be the case for those who have lived, and lived successfully, in a certain community. To think, suddenly, that what one has considered to be the expressions of one's most honest and hard-working efforts of philosophical work have been contingent on certain features one has, up to now, never seen before, never even recognised as usual or normal, and to say, 'here is an opportunity for change that I ought to consider seriously and be open to the possibility of taking up' is very difficult indeed. The difficulty of so doing may be the impulse behind violent responses to and persecutions of those who threaten that which one has not yet even considered be natural and obvious, and thus that which one has not even raised as potentially subject to change.

Having said this, consider now the following changes to the forms of the components of the first three layers. In the case of the first, outer-outer, layer, imagine that or consider the possibility that

- philosophers were not members of any one university department, but scattered throughout other departments, only meeting together occasionally to present papers;
- philosophers worked in glass cubes in the middle of a busy square, where they and the results of their inquiries could be observed at will by any passerby;
- philosophical work was always required to be produced by at least two, and preferably more, persons;
- philosophical work was published only in the form of works exhibited in a gallery for a brief period of time; or
- reviews of philosophical work were required to be done by persons outside the literature to which that work was responding.

In the case of the neo-outer layer, imagine that or consider the possibility that

- philosophers were allowed to philosophise only while moving;
- philosophers were required to produce works that had to be presented, and could only be presented, by persons from other disciplines;
- philosophical work was not allowed to focus on any one or more elements that the philosopher asserted distinguished human beings from animals, but, rather, on all the elements that the philosopher asserted human beings have in common with animals; or
- philosophers were required to write their works as if they were plays, and to perform them in different characters (different voices, different gestures).

In the case of the neo-inner layer, imagine that or consider the possibility that

- philosophical work was required to be composed only in one image after another;

- philosophical work was praised for its ability to provoke change in corporeal habits;
- philosophical work could only be so called when it showed what could not exist and what could not be known;
- philosophical work had to be composed in the form of questions only; or
- philosophical work was celebrated for its ability to show the infinite richness of expression.

It should be stressed here that these alternatives are not being suggested as beneficial or appropriate changes. To treat them in this manner would be to miss the point of offering them. The point in offering them is to illustrate the kinds of changes that arise as possible changes, having gone through the process of ‘identifying’ features of philosophical practice. It is part of the exercise of the imagination to proceed through such a process, but it is even more, and much more importantly, an exercise of the imagination to be open to such possibilities – to be able and willing to consider them seriously; to be able and willing, in other words, to change, and especially to change in those features that one might not yet even had the chance to consider as natural and obvious.

Conclusion

The exercise of the imagination, then, requires us 1) to attempt to describe that which, at first blush, appears natural and obvious; 2) to understand that that which appears natural and obvious could be otherwise; and 3) to be open to the introduction of changes to that which appears natural and obvious. Imagination, in this sense, is quite different to creativity. The latter works on the basis of variations of settled phenomena, e.g., existing ideas or components or arguments or positions are grouped together differently; what is a problem in

one area is introduced as a problem in another; examples or arguments are tweaked at the edges. This exercise of creativity is important: for one, it helps sustain life in a certain philosophical community. Ultimately, however, it contributes mainly to the stability and identity of a philosophical community and reinforces its most firmly established features. Imagination, on the other hand, is more difficult, for it strikes at the very heart of that which is settled. Changes to that which is settled may not only be resisted, but may also be violently opposed. And yet, it is precisely the very ability and willingness to be open to such changes that may be of the most ethical and political significance.

Already, in the comments above, it is easy to see how the account here, applied to the practice of philosophy, might be generalisable, and how this defence of the exercise of the imagination as releasing that which is not even yet recognised as natural and obvious, widening the realm of possibility, and being open to such changes as are made possible, might have broader ethical and political significance. Without the exercise of the imagination as argued for here, communities of all kinds may be much more likely to adopt attitudes with little time or tolerance for those who do not conform to their ways of life, or to come to condemning judgements of practices they cannot understand much more quickly and to execute those judgements more persistently and violently.

Arendt was right to speak of the ethical and political significance of thoughtfulness, and, correlatively, of the dangers of thoughtless. We ought never to underestimate the power of all the things we learn, often with great effort, in order to become successful members of the many communities that we are simultaneously members of. Nor should we underestimate the power of all those things that we have not yet even thought of as natural and obvious, and thus all those things that we have not yet granted the chance to become contingent. If we remain alert, then we will also not confine the exercise of the imagination to the realm of creativity, for that realm, at least as presented here, is one better characterised by variation-

making in ways that reinforce, rather than question, the stability of relations and expectations. Having said that, it is important to acknowledge that there is nothing inherently good about the exercise of the imagination, and certainly nothing inherently bad about creativity. Ultimately, a balance will have to be struck between the stabilising tendencies of creativity and the de-stabilising tendencies of the imagination. However, if we are to err on the side of caution, we ought also to recognise that there are already a great many strategies, techniques and opportunities for reinforcing the familiar, for repeating that which we have always found problematic and insightful, for surrounding ourselves with mirrors that make us feel good and for avoiding or persecuting that which we see as threats to our conception of ourselves and our ways of life. In that respect, exercising the imagination may well be more important.