

MUSINGS

The Politics of Clarity

ALISON STONE

Philosophical writing can have many virtues. It can be imaginative, exciting, richly suggestive, innovative, careful, moving, or bold. It can also be clear. But is clarity a virtue? Typically, philosophers in the analytic or Anglo-American tradition—feminist or not—answer “yes,” and they may also suspect that “continental” philosophers do not always value clarity as they ought to. These suspicions go back a long way: famously, in 1931 the logical positivist Rudolf Carnap denounced Heidegger for saying that “the nothing noths” (*das Nichts nichtet*). Heidegger and others working in related traditions grouped together as “continental” were accused of deliberate obscurantism: using arcane terms and phrases of art that were really empty, but whose obscure, portentous sound prevented people from seeing that the emperor wore no clothes.

More recently, Martha Nussbaum reinvigorated these issues in a feminist context when she criticized Judith Butler (Nussbaum 1999). For Nussbaum, Butler’s writing is willfully obscure and difficult to understand; Butler’s underlying points are often fairly simple and familiar, but they masquerade as being complex, novel, and profound by being dressed up in abstruse language. Butler’s obscurity, Nussbaum charges, is mystifying, thus elitist and oppressive; it is contrary to the democratic, egalitarian spirit of feminism.

This stark opposition between analytic clarity and continental obscurity must be qualified. Certainly, analytic philosophers tend to see clarity as a virtue. Yet the very concern to be clear can lead to the creation of precise definitions and fine distinctions marked with technical terms. Especially but not only when logical formalization is used, the resulting writing can be just as difficult to access as some continental philosophy. Moreover, continental philosophers often use terms of art for the same reasons as analytic philosophers: to mark distinctions, capture unnoticed phenomena, and so on. Conversely, some continental philosophers embrace clarity, among them Butler in her more recent work (such as Butler 2004).

Even so, there tends to be greater wariness about clarity among continental than analytic philosophers, as well as more consideration of other reasons for exploring alternative philosophical styles, such as their expressive or aesthetic possibilities or

their capacity to prompt readers to think for themselves. Concentrating on clarity, though, I want to identify some reasons why continental philosophers are relatively wary of it, reasons that are understandable and important, as analytic philosophers do not always sufficiently appreciate. My account won't be exhaustive: these concerns about clarity are many, and they are seldom explicitly stated; more often they are tacitly embodied in writing style. I will pick out certain ethical and political concerns about clarity that speak particularly to feminists but that, I'll suggest, also generate a case for clarity as having value on distinctly feminist grounds.

So, to turn to concern (1): *complex, difficult subject matters*. A journal article in physics is not immediately accessible; why should a piece of philosophy be? Unlike physics, philosophy remains a "humane" subject. Since its inception, philosophy has addressed fundamental questions concerning life and death, time and change, the good life and how it might become shared more widely. Gendered, ethnic, and other biases mean that philosophers have often addressed these matters in limited, distorted ways. Nonetheless, philosophy's humane vocation means that philosophers should strive for their writing to remain connected with and speak to lived human existence. But, it may be objected, some philosophical theories and concepts are too complex to be put in everyday language; complex thought requires complex, difficult forms of expression. Yet it is precisely when philosophical theories are most complex that clarity of expression is most needed: to provide a pathway into the complexity.

What is clarity, anyway? I take it that clear language is transparent rather than opaque. When writing is opaque our attention is drawn to the medium—the words—and only dimly, if at all, to the subject matter to which the words refer. When writing is transparent, the medium remains present but draws little or no attention to itself, except that we might admire its very withdrawal from our attention. We see through transparent writing to what it refers to, as when, in a telephone conversation, ideally we hear what our interlocutor is saying, not the telephone equipment crackling.¹

How can philosophical writing achieve transparency? We need to use words with meanings as close as possible to the meanings they have ordinarily, to use words and phrases much as they are used in everyday, nonacademic language. This is because any ordinary language is a transparent medium in which its speakers move freely, using the expressions it furnishes to talk about their world without noticing the words as such, unless communication or understanding break down. Then the words that were our taken-for-granted background step into the foreground. To make complex theories clear, then, we need to translate them into ordinary language. However, continental traditions contain a rich family of objections to this conception of clarity.

One version of these objections—which embody concern (2), about *oppressive common sense*—comes from Adorno (Adorno 1990). For Adorno, to express theories clearly is to translate them into the familiar language of common sense. But everyday language is not neutral: it is a depository of the dominant patterns of thought that reflect capitalist society. For Marx, the ruling ideas of every epoch are the ideas of its ruling class. For Adorno, more broadly, our common sense reflects modernity's ruling social structures, that is, large-scale bureaucratic institutions and the instrumental

reason that governs them. If we make our theories clear, then we render them complicit with this oppressive society. Conversely, to be critical of this society we should eschew clarity. By couching our thoughts in difficult, contorted language, embracing paradox, avoiding neat solutions, we can think *against* oppressive society. This concern about clarity is political: the concern is that clear writing reinforces social structures that dominate individuals, overpower their critical faculties, and stifle resistance.

Pushing this concern further, we might say that the notion of clarity is itself a myth. “Clear” thinking is merely thinking that fits in with, embodies, and fails to challenge the hegemonic power relations of the surrounding society. Such thinking seems “clear” merely because it is familiar, and this is because it is thinking in which dominant power relations are naturalized. To celebrate clarity is to mask the real issue: power.²

Power relations are indeed the central issue for feminists. This is because we want not to escape from or abolish power—those would be impossible goals—but to reconfigure existing power relations in ways that are enabling and *empowering* for oppressed groups. We therefore need to criticize power relations in their existing, oppressive configurations. This feminist concern—that individuals should be empowered to criticize and resist oppressive power relations—speaks *for* clarity. To provide tools of and resources for social critique, theories and concepts (including concepts of capitalism, hegemony, and oppression) need to be clarified enough that people can relate them to the social world with which they are pre-theoretically familiar. If theories and concepts are not made clear, then there is a risk that intellectual discussion will only reinforce society’s broader power relations by becoming exclusive to the initiated. Outsiders may then be overawed by the apparent cleverness of the initiated (or dismiss them as mere game-players divorced from reality). Unless theorists clarify concepts, then, intellectual discourse becomes closed, and becomes just another social practice that dominates rather than empowers individuals.

However, one might reply, the only way that those new to a discussion can genuinely join it is by putting in the work to master its concepts in all their difficulty. Thus Gayatri Spivak met complaints about her inaccessible language by saying: “Do your homework” (see Sellar 1997, 31).³ On the other hand, unless a body of discussion and discourse can be linked to experiences that people hold independent of that discourse, then people have little motivation to do the homework. People will be subjected to the discourse, not empowered by it to think for themselves—as, after all, Spivak wants: she wants the subaltern to be empowered to speak (Spivak 1987).

The concern about everyday common sense persists into concern (3): *false ontological categories*. When theoretical claims are put in everyday language, arguably they are recast in terms of false ontological assumptions that constitute our common sense. Central to these assumptions—for Nietzsche, among others (Nietzsche 1968, 293–94)—is the assumption that the world is made up of essentially separate items that act on one another from the outside, whether these are human agents or objects. Consider Nussbaum’s re-rendering of the following statement by Butler (excerpted below in part):

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects. (Butler, quoted in Nussbaum 1999, 39)

Now, as rendered by Nussbaum:

Marxist accounts, focusing on capital as the central force structuring social relations, depicted the operations of that force as everywhere uniform. By contrast, Althusserian accounts, focusing on power, see the operations of that force as variegated and as shifting over time. (Nussbaum 1999, 39)

One change that Nussbaum introduces is reference to a “force” that does things: it structures social relations, operates in uniform or variegated ways. This discrete agency now performs operations on other items. In “clarifying” Butler’s claims, then, Nussbaum may indeed have translated them into an atomistic ontology.

This concern about clarity is ontological. The thought is that describing the world as it really is—not as an aggregate of static items but as an ever-shifting web of relations—calls for unfamiliar, difficult language. This difficulty is inescapable given that everyday language embodies a falsely atomistic ontology. This ontological concern resonates with the feminist philosophical desire to understand persons and things as being thoroughly constituted by the webs of relationships in which they are located.

If common sense indeed embodies falsely atomistic assumptions, then we need to change our common sense. One model of how to effect such change comes from phenomenology. Phenomenologists seek to clarify structuring features of ordinary experience that usually pass unnoticed because they are all-pervasive. Phenomenologists bring these features to light, in part, by marking them with categories, for example, *natality*: the human condition of being born. Here, rather than clarifying *theory* by translating it into ordinary language and thus connecting it with everyday experience, we clarify everyday *experience* by conceptualizing its lineaments, translating its features into theory. In doing so we distinguish aspects of experience that had been muddled together, note what was concealed or clouded over by false assumptions, articulate what was inarticulate. In this process we change the character of our experience itself, insofar as that experience is always shaped and organized by our ways of making sense of it.

Phenomenological clarification thus offers a route by which the false ontology embedded in everyday common sense can be changed. For instance, by conceiving ourselves as *natals*, beings who are shaped through-and-through by the conditions of our birth, we experience the temporal flow of our lives differently: as flowing *from* our birth. Our changed experience embodies an implicit ontology on which relationships and dependency—on those who have borne us—are not external to but constitute who we are.

Now, this process of clarifying and thereby changing experience (and the everyday language bound up with it) requires theoretical formulations to retain some

continuity and connection with experience and language in their pre-clarified shape. Otherwise theory will not illuminate experience but break from it to comprise a separate discourse. To clarify rather than depart from experience, theoretical reflection must work with and on the elements that experience already has, including everyday phrases: creating new categories (“natality”) yet ones that latch onto existing usage (for example, “natal day,” meaning birthday). Theory can only clarify experience if we appreciate how it pertains to and takes up experience as it already is, so theory must be clarified enough that we can understand how it relates to experience. Thus clarification is a two-way, reciprocal movement.

So, regarding the concern that clear writing may reinforce a false and atomistic ontology, one way that we can transform that ontology is by subjecting our experience to phenomenological clarification. But for this to work, we need to keep our theoretical categories clear enough that their connection with experience can be appreciated in the first place. Thus the concern about false ontological assumptions tells *for* as much as against clarity.

Problematic assumptions also surround the ideal of clarity itself, motivating concern (4): *gendered historical meanings*. Clarity is linked with ideals of reason and argument that have long been understood in gender-divided ways. Reason has been opposed to the emotions and passions, argument opposed to persuasion and rhetoric, and both oppositions lined up with the symbolic hierarchy of male over female. For John Locke in his 1690 *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, eloquence deceives, “like the fair sex” (Locke 2009, 111). Allied with rhetoric, figuration, and allusion, eloquence—which is symbolically feminine—prevents us from reaching the truth; it is one of the many kinds of “abuse of words” that “render . . . signs less clear and distinct . . . than . . . they need to be.” In contrast, transparent language, like the male sex, does not flaunt its fair appearance. For Locke (despite his warnings against using allusion and figuration), the clarity/obscurity contrast aligns with a contrast between (male) truth and (female) appearance/deception/masquerade.⁴

To aim for clarity, it may seem, is naively to ignore this gendered history that casts clarity as a “masculine” virtue. The connection with Locke may also suggest that in espousing clarity, one accepts Enlightenment values (directly linked to clarity in German: *die Aufklärung*). Historically, those values have again been gendered—public reason (male) *versus* private passion (female). Plausibly, the value of clarity does indeed join up with the value of rational public debate, central to the Enlightenment. If I cannot understand the claim that a sentence is expressing, then I cannot assess that claim. I may project upon the sentence some understanding of my own, accurate or not. When numerous other readers do likewise, different people end up using the same expressions to convey quite various understandings, without anyone spelling out what those understandings are because it is assumed that they are shared. This impedes the formation of genuine communities of understanding or frank exchanges of reasons. Instead, people talk past one another, thinking they agree or disagree with one another when they don’t.

But if clarity is part of the Enlightenment project, then isn’t it bound up with the Enlightenment exclusion of women from the public sphere and with other forms of

oppression that developed in the Enlightenment, such as those based on race-thinking? This legacy is real, yet there remains some merit to the Enlightenment ideal of individuals using their own reason to assess claims that others put to them. Historically, this ideal has served feminists from Mary Wollstonecraft onward, as well as other groups pursuing emancipation, to criticize oppressive power relations. Given this historical tie between Enlightenment reason and social critique, there remains merit in the goal of communicating clearly and giving reasons for our claims that others can appraise based on their own reason. Indeed, this link between reason and critique has ultimately enabled feminist philosophers to criticize the association of clarity with masculinity made by Locke, among others.

I have suggested that feminist philosophers, continental and analytic, have reasons to regard clarity as a virtue, although one that has significant complications. Clarity is not the only virtue that philosophical writing can display, though, and clarity need not override other virtues. There are times to explore the rich ambiguities in webs of inherited meaning or to take exciting leaps of theoretical imagination. Yet clarity deserves to be given consideration, among other values, by those writing feminist philosophy.

NOTES

I thank the anonymous referees for their responses to an earlier draft.

1. The telephone example comes from Haslanger 2000, 121. My conception of clarity owes much to Jean-Paul Sartre, for whom prose writing is essentially transparent as poetry cannot be: poetry draws attention to words' sensory qualities and associations, whereas prose opens onto the outside world (Sartre 1988). This distinction is too stark—the same piece of writing can have prosaic and poetic aspects—but remains helpful. Etymologically, too, “clear” has long-standing links with transparency: a “clear sky,” “clear weather,” a “clear liquid” (Oxford English Dictionary 1989).

2. This position has roots in Foucault's rejection of the distinction between ideology and science (Foucault 1988, 132). Instead, for Foucault, there is only ever discourse: power and knowledge, together.

3. Anne Seller quotes Spivak from a 1987 Channel 4 television discussion between Spivak and John Searle.

4. I too defined clarity above using metaphors: of media, telephones, and skies. However, as I understand clarity, *contra* Locke, it is entirely possible for metaphors to clarify, for instance when comparing two subject matters illuminates a feature that they share. Rejecting the opposition clarity/metaphor, we can accept that metaphor and clarity can work together.

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