

On Bullshitting and Brainstorming

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Remarks meant to be complimentary can sometimes be brutal eye-openers. The most jarring professional compliment ever paid me was from a student in one of my introductory sections. At the end of term she dropped by my office to thank me for the course. "This was the best class I've ever taken!" she said. "I just loved bullshitting about Socrates and the reflective life, and stuff like that!"

I can't remember my immediate response. Most likely I mumbled something about how much I'd enjoyed having her in class. But I do recall being taken aback. *She just loved bullshitting . . .?! Although she wasn't the best student I'd ever had, she certainly was among the liveliest. She expressed herself well in both group discussions and written assignments, and never missed a class. Moreover, she had always struck me as being that sort of person genuinely excited by philosophical speculation. Consequently, I was floored by her remark. It just did not fit my impression of her.*

At some point in the rather chatty conversation that followed—none of which, I guess, I really paid much attention to—I finally asked what she had meant. Looking back on it, I suppose I was hoping I would discover that she had used the word "bullshitting" in an innocently colloquial way, that it was studentese for "discussing," "reflecting upon" or "pondering about." I was wrong. This time she let me have it with both barrels—although, again, quite without malicious intent. In so many words, she told me she had used "bullshitting" because it fit. Philosophy itself was really bullshit—amusing, fun, sometimes temporarily brow-wrinkling, but bullshit nonetheless. By "bullshit" in this context she meant that philosophy was unimportant nonsense, without any utility in the "real" world. It was "just talk about ideas" which could never be verified or falsified, a tossing back and forth of equally unimportant opinions that in no way touched ground in any significant sense. Philosophical speculation and discourse, in short, was a kind of game in which players swapped stories. There were no clear winners or losers, but approximate victory could be achieved by coming up, from a purely rhetorical perspective, with the best sounding story. And since no one takes a game seriously, or does so only while the game is actually being played, philosophy should not be taken seriously.

As we talked more, it dawned upon me that I was responsible, to a certain extent, for my student's estimation of the nature and value of philosophy. My

classroom technique had reinforced her native suspicion that philosophy was, by and large, rhetorical bullshit.

In my introductory courses I regularly use six or seven primary texts (*never* textbooks), require intensive writing and regular attendance, and insist upon rigorously analytic treatments of the subject matter. In order to encourage logical analysis, I begin each course with a two week presentation of critical thinking techniques and require students to consistently apply them to each of the texts they read and the papers they write. Consequently my classes emphasize, in a traditional manner, both philosophical content, historical perspective, and critical analysis.

But I belong to that camp which takes the act of philosophizing to be pre-eminently a dialogal one. Consequently, I supplement my more traditional pedagogical approaches (especially in introductory courses) by trying to keep nonparticipatory, exclusively expository lectures to a minimum, focusing instead upon a technique that educators such as Kenneth Bruffee call “brainstorming.”¹ This involves a give-and-take on the part of students of imaginative speculations, (hopefully) rational criticisms of studied texts and each other’s opinions, and group reformulations of problems. Students are encouraged (and sometimes gently pressured) to join actively in the discussions and follow the Socratic *elenchus* wherever it may take them. Predictably enough, the technique is successful at times, stale and artificial at others. But an almost certain consequence, as in so many of the early Platonic dialogues, is that the problem under investigation remains unresolved. By “unresolved,” I mean of course that no fully satisfying, totally unambiguous answer, is arrived at. What *is* accomplished, if our brainstorming has gone well, is that a better understanding of the question’s complexity is achieved. Moreover, we often discover either that the pat solutions initially suggested are inadequate—even though, at first sight, they may appear strong—or that the question itself is confused and in need of reformulation.

In addition to the oral brainstorming I aim for in class discussions, I also employ written brainstorming—or what some have referred to as the “writing-to-learn” technique.² Students are encouraged to intellectually free-associate with pen and paper about specific philosophical problems, to follow the implications of an insight wherever it takes them, by jotting down their reflections in a spontaneous, adventurous way. These written brainstorming exercises do not, of course, substitute for more formal written assignments, but they do complement them. The hope is that they will facilitate fluidity in speculative imagination, critical analysis and mode of expression. They demand creative participation on the part of a student which a more mechanical, properly discursive analysis of a specific text question might preclude. If the technique works, students are often pleasantly surprised at the direction their thoughts have taken. E. M. Forster may have been gently poking fun when he has one of his delightful fictional characters assure us that she never knows what she’s thinking until she sees it written down. But there is also a good measure of perhaps unintended insight in the *bon mot*.

Now, it never occurred to me that these pedagogical strategies could backfire

until my student paid me her disconcerting compliment. Clearly she had received a message quite different from the one I thought I was conveying. The informal, open-ended nature of brainstorming, in addition to the fact that it rarely results in uncontentious, discrete conclusions, led her to assume that philosophical speculation was necessarily only perspectival. She translated the fact that answers were rarely forthcoming into the proposition that there are no answers, and that no philosophical statement is ever true or false. This obviously designates philosophy as bullshit, a meaningless game which properly is played in one of two ways. Either the philosopher-bullshitter sophisticatedly defends or criticizes an argument just for the sake of winning a debate, or he strives to come up with an argument/story that, from an aesthetic point of view, is more compelling than others. Neither strategy takes seriously the suggestion that philosophical discourse serves as an important vehicle in the discovery and refinement of truth. What both *do* take seriously is playing the game well; and that entails coming up with a convincing story without ever falling into the trap of believing it to be anything more than bullshit.

Since my illuminating (and humbling!) discussion with my bullshit-loving student, I have kept an eye open for similar appraisals on the part of students in all my classes. I have become convinced that her interpretation of the nature of philosophy is not idiosyncratic. Other students share it, because they have failed to grasp the distinction between bullshitting and brainstorming (or, more honestly, because I've failed to convey the distinction). It is not, perhaps, the majority opinion, but it appears frequently enough to warrant serious consideration.

The devilish thing about bullshit is that it so often sounds like genuine brainstorming. Good bullshit uses the appropriate jargon, appears to follow accepted rules of inference, and strives for coherency in the relations between its propositions. That is why a skilled student-bullshitter can come across as a student-brainstormer, and actually be rewarded for his bullshit by an unwary instructor. But it seems to me there are certain discernable functional differences between the two, notwithstanding the fact that their modes of expression can be so similar. Bullshitting reflects an essentially nihilistic attitude. Although the bullshitter may go through the motions of intellectual speculation, he doesn't really give a damn about what he is doing because he assumes there is nothing there to give a damn about. Brainstorming, on the other hand, reflects an authentically committed desire to unravel problems in the hope that the process will shed some light upon the issue under investigation. True, the brainstormer ultimately may arrive at a nihilistic position, but she does not adopt one from the start.

Bullshitting is a serious problem, and deserves serious consideration. In what follows, I offer a more detailed analysis of the functional distinctions between it and genuine brainstorming, and share some thoughts on how to convert the classroom bullshitter into a philosophical brainstormer.

Bullshitting

If you and I are discussing an issue and you respond to one of my statements

with the exclamation “Bullshit!” chances are you’re expressing disagreement with what I’ve just said. In other words, you think I have made a false claim. That in turn presupposes that you accept some criterion of truth which separates propositional sheep from goats.

But I am not using “bullshit” (or any of its cognates) in that way here. Quite the contrary. Bullshitting in this context is that mode of expression appropriate to the assumption that truth value is never a function of philosophical statements. This position, as I indicated earlier, is essentially a nihilistic one. It presumes that philosophical discourse is meaningless—although at times it may be enjoyable. Since it is nonsense, it also has no instrumental value. It is incapable of providing solutions to “real” problems. If it has any utility at all, it is solely one of temporary amusement, analogous to the working through of a crossword puzzle.³

The bullshitter, as Harry Frankfurt suggests,⁴ characteristically discusses topics he is ignorant of or has not really thought much about. But this is hardly a distinctive feature of bullshitting. As we will see, the brainstormer does much the same thing. What distinguishes the bullshitter from the brainstormer is that the former typically has no personal relation with the issue under investigation. Because he thinks the topic nonsensical to start with, he enters into the discussion in an anonymous, detached way. He feels no more commitment to the line he presents than does the member of a debate team required to defend, at the flip of a coin, the proposition that male members of Congress ought to wear three piece suits. The position he takes, in short, is a matter of complete personal indifference. He feels no existential urgency in defending one position as opposed to another. As far as he is concerned, the question under examination is not a live one; it has no relevance to his existence. Moreover, he is not even intellectually curious about it. His only goal as a bullshitter is to achieve a psychologically satisfying level of self-amusement.

That is why bullshit, although it has certain affinities with skepticism and relativism, goes far beyond either of these two attitudes. The skeptic may doubt that the truth value of any proposition is ever discernable, but he does take his skepticism seriously. He believes it to be the most acceptable position, and is concerned to provide arguments in its defense. Similarly with the relativist. Just because she claims all knowledge is context-dependent does not entail she likewise thinks all knowledge is worthless. Some propositions may be more valuable than others, depending upon the situation in which one finds oneself. Moreover, the relativist, like the skeptic, has a personal stake in defending her position. It is something she believes in, and the arguments she uses to defend it are meaningful to her.⁵

But the bullshitter is a horse of another color. His position is one of nihilism—at least when it comes to philosophy. Although he hasn’t thought much about it, he has the native suspicion that abstract, speculative discourse is necessarily meaningless. Philosophers go round and round, rehashing the same old issues, and never getting anywhere. He, on the other hand, has more important things to do than waste his time chasing abstract will-o’-the-wisps. His energy

is directed towards tackling solvable—that is, *real*—problems, ones which clearly have practical consequences in the *real* world. Those are the important things to focus on, the ones he has a personal stake in. Philosophy, on the other hand, is—well, bullshit.

If the bullshitter adopts a primarily nihilistic attitude towards philosophy, why does he bother to play the philosophy game—and at times play it so well that he comes across as a genuine brainstormer? There are, I suspect, several explanations. Most obviously, he wants a good grade in the course. His nihilism doesn't stretch to his Grade Point Average because he has a very personal relationship to it. Grades have a practical value. Good grades get him a degree and a job. Bad grades get him nothing but a lot of grief.

Moreover, an occasional bullshitter might be partially motivated by the urge to safely express his contempt for philosophy. Since bullshit is what is required in a philosophy class, bullshit is what he will shovel. He feels the need to show he is as good at the philosophy game as anyone else, including the instructor. In fact, as far as he is concerned, he is better. The instructor takes her bullshit seriously. He, the bullshitter, knows it for what it is worth. He derives a great deal of satisfaction in making the instructor think he also takes philosophy seriously—even though, while going through the external motions of enthusiasm, he internally (and without risk) trashes it.

But, as I mentioned earlier, the primary reason why most bullshitters indulge in the philosophy game is for the purpose of entertainment. The bullshitter is big on being entertained, mainly because he has a low boredom threshold. Bullshitting three times a week in class kills some time and also provides a certain level of amusement. For him, the philosophy class's only value is that it constitutes what Neil Postman calls a recreational "pseudo-context." As Postman defines it, "a pseudo-context is a structure invented to give fragmented and irrelevant information a seeming use. But the use the pseudo-context provides is not action, or problem-solving, or change. It is the only use left for information with no genuine connection to our lives. And that, of course, is to amuse."⁶ In the bullshitter's mind, the best chances for amusement-gratification in the philosophical pseudo-context is to exercise his wit by skillfully participating in rhetorical debates about what he takes to be meaningless topics. Consequently, he is willing to play by the rules of the game so long as it promises entertainment. But he never confuses games with real life.

The bullshitter's willingness to be amused by the philosophical game both reflects and reinforces a method and attitude I call "rhetorical robotry." I have adapted the concept from A. B. Palma's recent discussion of "intellectual robotry." According to Palma, the latter is

a habitual indulgence in clever words for their own sake . . . , a fixation about the potency of arguments and a sort of involved commitment to certain fashionable ideologies. One of the main characteristics of intellectual robotry is that the practitioner of it invariably loses sight of the person he is talking to . . . He, the intellectual, is intent on pursuing his own momentum of metaphysical or ideological or political or whatever talk . . . but as he talks—you can almost

see it in his or her eyes—he is no longer talking *to* a person. He is rather turning his head towards some sort of Platonic universe of ideas . . .⁷

Although intellectual and rhetorical robotry are not identical, there is an obvious family resemblance between them. Both are primarily exercises in the skillful manipulation of words. Both can become habitual—and are certainly addictive. Both are modes of expression which are better characterized as reflexes than as responses. But the rhetorical robot, unlike the intellectual one, is not committed to any particular ideology, nor does he overestimate the power of logic. What he *is* committed to is coming up with a story line that will win the philosophy game. This demands a certain amount of flexibility and consistency on his part. The former is easy enough; since he has no commitment to any particular position, he is facile at jumping around until he finds one which best accommodates his rhetorical talents. Consistency might be a bit more difficult to maintain. But this isn't really a major problem, since genuine brainstorming often generates preliminary defenses of inconsistent propositions. Consequently, a certain amount of tension between the bullshitter's rhetorical propositions, and even one or two outright contradictions, only help to strengthen the impression that he is genuinely struggling with a philosophical problem. They will buy him some time until he can clean up his story.

In addition, the rhetorical robot never “loses sight” of the audience. He throws himself into an active relationship with it, and takes a certain amount of pride in reading it well enough to know what rhetorical flourishes will be most successful. What he has no meaningful relationship to is the issue he is ostensibly taking seriously. It represents for him only the category selected by a spin of the philosophy game's wheel. Or, to mix metaphors, it's simply the set of cards he's been dealt. The recreation and challenge comes in so bluffing the other players that they fold.

Bullshitting, then, is a type of robotry which consists in uncommitted word-artistry. It could almost be described as rhetoric for rhetoric's sake except for the fact that it does have an extrinsic goal: winning the philosophy game and amusing oneself in the process. Genuine bullshitters are never guilty of intellectual robotry. They lack the necessary condition—commitment to an ideology—for such an attitude. But it may be the case that habitual bullshitters who wind up buying their own rhetoric graduate from rhetorical to intellectual robotry. After all, young bullshitters must grow up sooner or later. When they do, we sometimes call them academics.

Brainstorming

The student-brainstormer shares one major characteristic with the student-bullshitter: she typically has not reflected deeply about the philosophical issue under discussion. But, unlike the bullshitter, she is eager to explore it by dialoging with others. This is because she is personally related to the topic. She takes it to be a live one; it means something to her as an individual. Consequently, she

has a personal stake in clarifying the problem and examining possible responses to it.

There are at least two reasons for the brainstormer's personal concern with philosophical issues. First, she appreciates—even if somewhat indistinctly—the intrinsic value of abstract speculation. She obviously wants a good grade in the course, and does not discount the importance of “practical” success, but she refuses to follow the bullshitter's *a priori* ascription of inutility and meaninglessness to philosophical discourse. She's willing to work under the assumption that philosophical propositions have truth-values, and that rational and creative discourse is a necessary vehicle in their discovery. She may be somewhat skeptical about the possibility of conclusively figuring out whether or not God exists, or what the good is, but she does not on that account reject sincere discussion of the issues. To be uncertain about the possibility of conclusively answering certain problems is not at all to dismiss them as nonsensical. The asking of questions is important in and of itself, and thus is to be taken seriously. A fully satisfying resolution may be unattainable. But, as Socrates demonstrated, dialogue just might be able to disabuse its practitioners of an array of hasty generalizations, false starts, subtle contradictions and weak methods. For the brainstormer, this is no small accomplishment.

Second, the brainstormer takes philosophical speculation seriously because she accepts a much richer definition of “instrumentality” or “practical value” than the bullshitter. She acknowledges that knowledge is capable of being its own end, but also realizes that even the most abstract speculation results in effects which, directly or indirectly, have a practical bearing upon her daily existence. Brainstorming about whether or not values are objective, for example, is important for her because she realizes the position she eventually adopts will influence her concrete relations with others in the “real” world. Similarly, discussions about metaphysical questions are instrumental in her construction of a worldview which in turn serves as a point of personal orientation for her social behavior, religious beliefs, personal and professional aspirations, and so on. In short, the brainstormer recognizes, as did Cardinal Newman,⁸ that philosophical speculation's intrinsic value is accompanied by other, very utility-laden, consequences: the habituation of critical analysis, intellectual curiosity, imaginative adventurousness, and character formation. The examined life, for her, has both intrinsic and practical value.

This is not to deny that part of the reason why a brainstormer throws herself into philosophy is a desire for recreation. The interplay of ideas can be genuine fun. No one has ever accused Socrates of being a dour killjoy. But the brainstormer's personal relationship to the ideas she's exploring precludes the possibility that her sole goal is amusement. For her, philosophical discourse is a genuine, not a pseudo, context. Consequently, although having fun may be a characteristic of legitimate brainstorming, it is not a definitive one, as in the case of bullshitting. Very often, in fact, brainstorming can be sheer hard work. It can also be emotionally unsettling.

The emotional discomfort occasionally spawned by brainstorming points

back to the fact that it entails the committed engagement of the participant. The brainstormer feels a deeply personal involvement in the topic under discussion. The more the issue at hand speaks to her as a concrete individual, the more likely she is to react to it emotionally as well as intellectually. My own classroom experience, for example, has shown me that the typical brainstormer often undergoes what might be described as an existential crisis during the course of a semester, particularly if the class has focused upon issues such as the existence of God, death, or the meaning of life. Discussion of issues such as these hit the brainstormer hard. She sees that they relate to her in a profoundly intimate way, and that she has to come to grips with them. They awaken a hunger, a *Sehnsucht*, that demands her total involvement. Very often, the need to come to terms with such issues far outstrips the brainstormer's concern for a good grade in the class. Her focus of attention shifts, and she recognizes that her existential awakening is far more important than an A.

That is why the genuine brainstormer grows increasingly comfortable in taking risks, in sharing with others her arguments, intuitions and thoughts, even when she realizes they are somewhat crude, awkward or sketchy. She is not interested in dazzling others with a rhetorically perfect story. Instead, she wants to understand. Consequently, she is willing to make herself vulnerable by thinking aloud, even if it means having her ideas pulled apart and scattered by other brainstormers. Unlike the bullshitter, she is not competing in the philosophy game, trying to beat out the next guy in a brilliant but sterile display of rhetorical one-upmanship. Instead, she is putting herself on the line by publicly struggling with doubts, perplexities and tentative shots in the dark. Her hope is that talking and listening to others will help her deal with a philosophical matter she takes to be of great personal urgency. The realization that making herself available in this way may lead to a certain amount of embarrassment is obviously not a pleasant one. But the distasteful prospect of verbally floundering and sometimes sinking in front of her peers is offset by the recognition that attainment of self-knowledge and insight doesn't come easily. The maturation of self always involves growing pains.

It is true, of course, that the very existential engagement which encourages the brainstormer's intellectual risk-taking can also, at least initially, breed a certain amount of hard-headed tenacity on her part. Many of us tend to become quite proprietorial about the intuitions and intellectual models that structure our worldviews. Students are no exception to this rule. An apprentice brainstormer often dogmatically champions one position to the exclusion of others because it is an essential link in her web of beliefs. But such tenacity is not necessarily a liability. A fledgling brainstormer who digs in her heels and defends a set of beliefs in the face of alternative opinions or caveats is compelled to reflect upon her perspective. She feels the need to clarify her position, to herself as well as others, and to do so with a rigorousness she probably never thought necessary before. Struggling with a defense of her worldview may eventually strengthen its supporting arguments. But in working through the putative justifications of a position, the brainstormer may also come to creatively modify it in light of

critical challenges or, if her back is to the wall, even junk it. Her original tenacity, then, often forces her into a sink-or-swim situation in which she necessarily calls up intellectual and intuitive reserves hitherto untapped.

This richer, more complex appreciation of philosophical inquiry in turn promotes the flexibility and critical tolerance necessary for meaningful discourse by showing the brainstormer that even the most attractive of philosophical models may need further clarification or amendment. This flexibility is not the free-wheeling opportunism of the bullshitter. He leapfrogs from one position to the next until he lands on one that can be translated into the best story. The brainstormer, on the other hand, is willing to change his position if it proves to be inchoate or weak. But she will not opt for just any good-sounding line. Her flexibility, in short, involves discrimination and reflection. She has too much at stake to settle for anything else.

The brainstormer's willingness to subject her ideas to peer scrutiny and to reformulate them on the basis of constructive feedback is, as I have indicated, an adventurous risk-taking. The strengthening of intellectual intrepidity which this exploratory speculation fosters likewise enriches imaginative creativity. The brainstormer does not merely modify her position. She also reformulates the questions she asks. This reformulation often involves a switch in emphasis, but can also give birth to an entirely new line of investigation based on innovative reconstructions of traditional problems.

Breaking through conventional models of explanation, methodological procedures and theoretical paradigms, even if the move proves ultimately fruitless, both entails and enriches the ability to see freshly. This is a talent, admittedly, which few of us cultivate. The genuine brainstormer, however, works at it. The bullshitter, on the other hand, could not care less. The problems which orient him are, to a large extent, set in stone. It rarely occurs to him to question their validity. That is why Frankfurt's suggestion⁹ that the bullshitter's eloquent manipulation of words requires a certain amount of creative imagination seems too generous. The bullshitter relies more upon ingenuity than imagination. He possesses the skill to weave words into aesthetically pleasing garments, but lacks the ability or desire to design new patterns. He is a word mechanic, not an inventor. The brainstormer can likewise take pleasure in verbal adroitness. But she is much more interested in *knowing* than in *composing*. And that sometimes involves cutting new patterns from fresh cloth, even at the risk of ruining the bolt.

From Bullshitters to Brainstormers

Contrary to a widespread conviction expressed in locutions such as "He's a born bullshitter!" or "She was born with a gift of gab!"—both of which frequently crop up in reaction to political speeches and academic lectures—bullshitters are *not* born. They are made. Society fashions them by rewarding vapid mimicry instead of original speculation, rhetorical eloquence rather than awkward but conscientious groping, outward success rather than reflective integrity. Moreover, as Horkheimer argues,¹⁰ we live in an age in which "practical" knowledge

resulting in “concrete problem-solving” is the received model. Abstract speculation that does not result in the immediate augmentation of instrumentality tends to be dismissed as either frivolous or meaningless.¹¹ Finally, as Postman suggests,¹² the late twentieth century’s proliferation of electronic media has so accustomed us to swift and entertaining information-access that we increasingly avoid laborious and not-so-pleasant reflective analysis. Each of these factors help to promote the contemptuous attitude towards “inutile” philosophical speculation which breeds bullshitters.

But if bullshitting is an acquired rather than a natural attitude and mode of expression, it can be unlearned. One of the best contexts to initiate the deprogramming process is a philosophy class which sensitizes budding rhetorical robots to the complexity and depth of their personal experiences. This involves helping them discover for themselves the importance of self-growth and the re-examination of ideas they have always taken for granted. The role of the philosophy instructor, then, is to play the Socratic midwife to the potentially fecund student.

But what else is new? Teaching as midwifery is one of those metaphorical platitudes that, although intuitively reasonable, is also rather mysterious. How does one serve as a midwife for the birth and blossoming of another person’s self-discovery? How does an instructor aid a bullshitter to wean himself of his nihilistic scorn of wonderment and existential curiosity?

It seems to me that midwifery can only be effective if it encourages the student-bullshitter to drop his impersonal detachedness from philosophical issues and realize that the examined life is something that is of the greatest importance to him as an individual. This realization can never be achieved by an exclusively intellectualistic approach. It necessarily also involves an act of will, a conative longing for points of orientation by which to ground oneself in one’s relations to the world. It must, in short, open the bullshitter’s eyes to a felt lack within himself which he yearns to fill. This longing for completeness, this *Sehnsucht*, this Platonic eros, is a necessary condition for the transformation of bullshitters into brainstormers.

A first step in encouraging a personal engagement to philosophical inquiry is helping the bullshitter understand that he has always had a personal stake in abstract speculation, regardless of whether or not he was aware of the fact. If, for example, his philosophical nihilism stems from a chthonic fidelity to “commonsensism”—which in many students reduces to either a crude positivism or naive realism—he might be encouraged to explore his justifications for accepting this perspective at the exclusion of others. This examination of his position, if successful, will reveal to him that his rejection of abstract speculation itself is grounded upon a *very* speculative basis, which includes methodological, metaphysical, epistemic and normative assumptions. He will come to see that he is not as hard-headed an advocate of atheoretical fact-collation as he supposed, but that instead his position is shot through with the theoretical and normative axioms of a particular worldview. The point, of course, is not to get him to drop his orientation so much as to awaken him to the fact that it rests upon tacit generalizations he has inferred from his experiences in the world. Once he

recognizes that these assumptions serve as the ground of his orientation, the importance of justifying them—not so much to others as to himself—may dawn. He comes to see that philosophical curiosity belongs to him, touches his very existence, and is not simply a word game. He recollects, in short, what was always an existential, lived awareness, but one he somehow “forgot” along the way: that the theoretical and normative interpretations which have brought him to where he is are not passive reflections so much as constructions which he himself has woven from the manifold of his experience. Once he *explicitly* sees what he always *implicitly* knew, he can claim as his own the philosophical enterprise. And once he does that, the impersonal distancing that characterizes the mode of bullshitting cannot be sustained. To own something is to assume a personal relationship to it, to become engaged with it, to exult in its perfection or feel deeply its lack of perfection. It is to be erotically, in the Platonic sense, committed to it.

This claiming as one’s own philosophical curiosity as well as the erotic drive for answers that accompanies it, has clear affinities with the model of learning as re-collecting or recognizing. It is an intimately personal move because it involves an explicit giving to oneself of what one has always possessed. The awakening which this self-giving entails is effective precisely because it involves the realization that philosophical questioning is a live endeavor which speaks personally to the inquirer. It is not simply a detached, mechanical calling to mind of faint memory images or impressions. It is, as Cassirer suggests, “a rebirth of the past; it implies a creative and constructive process. It is not enough to pick up isolated data of our past experience; we must really *re-collect* them, we must organize and synthesize them, and assemble them into a focus of thought.”¹³

The re-collective process, then, demands an active listening to the voice of one’s intuitions and the creative synthesis of them into a coherent whole. There is no imposition here of external, dead structures upon the subject. Instead, he accepts as his own both the process and its results. Heidegger nicely captures this insight when he says that

. . . genuine learning is . . . an extremely peculiar taking, a taking where he who takes only takes what he actually already has. Teaching corresponds to *this* learning. Teaching is a giving, an offering; but what is offered in teaching is not the learnable, for the student is merely instructed to take for himself what he already has. True learning only occurs where the taking of what one already has is a self-giving and is experienced as such. . . . The most difficult learning is to come to know all the way what we already know.¹⁴

And coming “to know all the way what we already know” necessarily includes not merely an intellectual re-cognition but also an erotic re-awakening.

But the re-cognition of a perspective cannot be performed *in vacuo*. Its possibility requires a background consisting of different frames of reference, alternative points of view and critical challenges by which to measure and evaluate itself. That’s where the technique of brainstorming comes in. Listening

to other persons' philosophical explorations is a necessary condition for listening to oneself. The give and take inquiry that characterizes good brainstorming aids the recovering bullshitter's search for a coherent orientation because it provides him with feedback as well as speculative points of departure by which to further investigate his worldview. He must see, however, that brainstorming is a method rather than an end, that it is the pointing finger rather than the object pointed at. Excelling at brainstorming is desirable only to the extent that it facilitates re-cognition. It is not a goal in and of itself. This is the lesson I failed to convey to the bullshit-loving student whose "compliment" triggered this analysis. It is a lesson none of us can afford to neglect if we take seriously the notion of philosophy as an invitation to the examined life.

Tragically, some student-bullshitters are past the point of recovery. They have become set in their ways, rewarded for them by society, and will go through life without ever recovering the sense of wonderment that probably characterized their earlier years. But some bullshitters can be saved. They can be awakened to the erotic challenge of the reflective life before they leave the university and submerge themselves in the no-nonsense "real world." The greatest satisfaction a philosophy instructor can experience is to see a student-bullshitter work his way out of his nihilism, even when the process is a profoundly unsettling one. And that, I assure you, is no bullshit.

Notes

Thanks to Chan Coulter and Lisa Portmess for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. I am especially grateful to Lou Hamman for our interesting conversations about bullshitting in general.

1. Kenneth Bruffee, *A Short Course in Writing*, 3rd Edition (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1985) and "Collaborative Learning and 'The Conversation of Mankind,'" *College English* 46 (November 1984), 635-52. See also Edwin Mason, *Collaborative Learning* (London: Ward Lock Educational, 1970).

2. Janet Emig, "Writing as a Mode of Learning," *College Composition and Comments* (May 1977), 122-27; Stephen Fishman, "Writing-to-Learn in Philosophy," *Teaching Philosophy* 8 (October 1985), 331-34; Susan R. Horton, *Thinking Through Writing* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1983).

3. It might be argued that one of the goals of working through crossword puzzles is to strengthen one's vocabulary, but I suspect it is an insignificant and secondary one. Most of us do crosswords to kill time and amuse ourselves. Vocabulary-building, if it occurs, is an accidental bonus that rarely takes place, since the primary purpose of crossword puzzling is amusement, and we tend not to take such enterprises seriously. Addicted crossword puzzler that I am, I still am stumped every time I need a three letter word for "table scraps," even though I run across the same clue in about every third crossword I do. Since I do not take the game seriously, the word does not sink in. Similarly with the bullshitter. The philosophy game may improve her rhetorical skills or add to her lexicon of philosophical words, but only minimally. She plays to have fun, not to be edified.

4. Harry Frankfurt, "Reflections on Bullshit," *Harper's Magazine* (February 1987). Frankfurt's analysis differs from mine in that he focuses upon the distinction between bullshitting and deception. Moreover, his characterization of bullshitting allows for a greater degree of creativity and imagination than mine does.

5. This is not to suggest that either the relativist or skeptical position is ultimately coherent, but only that the advocates of each are committed to their positions.

6. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 76.

7. A. B. Palma, "Intellectual Robotry," *Philosophy* 61 (1986), 491.

8. John Henry Newman, *The Scope and Nature of University Education* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1958), especially Discourses IV and V.

9. Frankfurt, *op. cit.*

10. Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), especially Essays I and V.

11. I have discussed the contemporary apotheosis of instrumental reason in academia in "Critical Thinking and the Danger of Intellectual Conformity," *Innovative Higher Education* 11 (1987), 94-102 and "Critical Thinking in Liberal Education: A Case of Overkill?," *Liberal Education* 72 (Fall 1986), 233-44.

12. Postman, *op. cit.*, especially chapters 5, 6 and 10.

13. Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 51.

14. Martin Heidegger, *What Is A Thing?*, trans. W. B. Barton and Vera Deutsch (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1967), 73.

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