

The problem of the uneven player: Derrida in analytic philosophy as a case study

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Abstract. The problem of the uneven player is this: we would like a certain level to be the lowest level of acceptable performance in a field and this contributor often goes below this level, while also sometimes reaching or surpassing it, or else giving rewards which are difficult to get from other contributors. I start with a book about reforming economics, and then focus on the case of Jacques Derrida interpreted as “applying” to be an exciting but uneven contributor to analytic philosophy. I point out the solutions of that tradition when faced with such a case.

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Why are you looking so old?

—Too much time with the hot and cold.

A book was recommended to me which I interpret as follows: it is an attempt to express the point of view of a large movement to reform a discipline. The discipline is economics and the book is *The econocracy*. I opened a chapter and I found an elementary oversight. It says: “All versions of liberal education reject instrumental approaches, narrowly defined as training for work.” (2016: 123) But there is nothing inconsistent about saying, “I am a liberal and the only reason for why I think the state should fund schools and universities is as a means of enabling people to work and thereby preventing poverty. Liberal citizens in familiar circumstances will all accept this as one reason – ‘How is your child going to manage, if they cannot do that?’ – while possibly having other reasons. But any other reason

is likely to be rejected by some liberal citizens and is therefore not a suitable foundation for the official educational policy of a liberal state, because that foundation should be acceptable to all liberal citizens. For example, teaching something because it is valuable in itself, such as literature or science, is likely to be rejected by some citizens who are liberal: they believe in democracy, freedom of speech, right to a fair trial, etc., but deny that this material is valuable in itself. In their eyes, it is valuable as a means.”

Maybe the approach just outlined is mistaken, but it is not inconsistent with liberalism and I don't think it will sound strange to philosophers specializing in liberalism (see Quong 2011: chapter one). One of the book's authors was studying politics, philosophy, and economics, and I would expect them to realize that. Nevertheless, perhaps there is some value elsewhere in the book. You open it up, you form a not-so-good impression, but maybe you have to search more thoroughly for the value.

That made me contemplate the problem of the uneven player. I take the term “player” from sport, but will apply it to fields that are probably quite different to sports in a number of respects. The problem is:

- Professionals in a field would like a certain level to be the minimum level for contributors in the field.
- An attempted contributor often performs below that desired minimum level.
- On a significant number of occasions, they also reach or surpass that desired minimum level; or else they provide some value to the field that is difficult to get from other contributors.

How does one deal with such a person? (By the way, uneven is not an ideal description, because there can be unevenness which is all above a minimum level. I shall ignore that kind below.)

Sometimes unevenness just reflects youth and will disappear with practice. Sometimes established members of a field are dealing with someone who is low-balling them, if this baseball metaphor makes sense. There is such a thing as a person who is looking for the lowest level at which they can get various rewards of a field. “Is this too low? Okay, let’s try a slightly higher level now.”

I am going to approach the case of Jacques Derrida attempting to contribute to analytic philosophy as a case of an uneven player, although I am not sure that this is the best approach. “Don’t expect me to meet various quality control standards, but I will give you exciting material,” seems to be a message of his writings responding to the analytic tradition. Here is the opening of Derrida’s famous paper “Signature Event Context”:

Is it certain that to the word *communication* corresponds a concept that is unique, univocal, rigorously controllable, and transmittable: in a word, communicable? Thus, in accordance with a strange figure of discourse, one must first of all ask oneself whether or not the word or signifier “communication” communicates a determinate content, an identifiable meaning, or a describable value. However, even to articulate and to propose this question I have had to anticipate the meaning of the word communication: I have been constrained to predetermine communication as a vehicle, a means of transport or transitional medium of a *meaning*, and moreover a unified *meaning*. (1977: 172, his italics)

It sounds as if he is raising some puzzle to do with the word “communication,” but what exactly is the puzzle and who, if anyone, does it affect? Perhaps you think, “I cannot work out what it is.” Perhaps you think, “I can see a puzzle from this information, but I am not doing all the work of spelling it out and responding to it. He should be doing that.”

Alternatively, “I can see a puzzle from this information, and I am going to do the work of spelling it out and responding to it.” Now you might point out that the paper is written in an exciting style – there is some value in that and maybe most philosophers in the analytic tradition cannot provide that value – and maybe the puzzle too has rare value. But should you be doing all this cleaning up after someone?

A lot of members of the analytic tradition are going to say, “I don’t understand that,” whether the sentences quoted prompt them to realize a puzzle or not. Within this particular field, I take that response as functioning to maintain standards, whether intentionally or not. There are also a set of people who do clean up after Derrida and evaluate the results (e.g. Richmond 1996; Morris 2000; Glendinning 2000; Kaposy 2005). Most of these papers do not appear to much extend Derrida’s influence, and there are questions of why that is. Is it because, once clarified, the material is just too remote from the core tradition? (In that case, he probably does not have sufficient incentive to struggle with meeting norms, in the first place.) Is it because the evaluator found the problems? Is it because “I don’t want to endorse that way of getting in”? Anyway, as far as I can see, those are the main solutions to Derrida as an uneven contributor: (i) to dismiss him as obscure, even to the point of protests over honorary degrees; or else (ii) to do some cleaning up, i.e. clarifying, and evaluating. (Probably some of the latter work is done because the former response did not have the desired effect. It is years now and Derrida looms still; some other response is needed. By the way, there is a version of this second response, which is to do the cleaning up decades later, when one can avoid certain power relations.)

(iii) A third solution is to just present the puzzle that occurred to one and not refer to Derrida: that will teach him to spell out his thinking next time. (iv) And a fourth solution is to offer something like Derrida, but without the unacceptable qualities. There is some material

like Derrida within the analytic tradition (e.g. Quine 1951), though perhaps not concerning the matter quoted.

The problem of the uneven player arises in various fields. As far I can see, these are the solutions adopted by the analytic tradition of philosophy, most of which aim to provide severe incentives against operating below a desired minimum. I fear in the 1980s I would have got stuck on the exception, (ii), which seems a recipe for being “enslaved.” I would be forever cleaning up after the ingenious Frenchman. “Oh dear, Jacqui has made a mess again and everyone is complaining!” What do the post-crash economic society suggest in this situation, for it is an economic problem if ever there was one? You have a nice well-run field and a Derrida comes along: what do you do?

References

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