Scientific, Poetic, and Philosophical Clarity

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Abstract

What is it to be clear? And will that question have the same answer in science, poetry, and philosophy? This paper offers a taxonomy of clarity, before focusing on two notions that are pertinent to the notions of clarity in science, poetry, and, in particular, philosophy. It argues that "scientific clarity," which is marked by its reliance on technical terms, is, though often appropriate, not the only way in which something can be clear. In particular, poetry entirely eschews technical terms—but can nonetheless be crystal clear. Poetry achieves this clarity by sensitivity to the richness of language: rhythm, ambiguity, and so on. The paper argues that some philosophy uses language in this same way to achieve its philosophical ends. Accordingly, we should allow that this is a legitimate philosophical method and should not judge the clarity of such philosophy by the standards of scientific clarity.

Keywords

> *[T]he dancer is not a woman dancing*, for these juxtaposed reasons: that *she is not a woman*, but a metaphor . . . and that *she is not dancing*, but suggesting . . . a kind of corporal writing: [she is] a poem.
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>   —Stéphane Mallarmé (1897 (2007), 130)

> In my opinion Mallarmé was trying to destroy language, says Monsieur Hennequin, he wanted to deny words the meaning they have . . . Mallarmé . . . was an obscurantist, and I believe in clarity. As an engineer it's almost a professional article of faith. Confused machines just aren't possible.
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>   —John Berger (1972, 158–59)

1 | Introduction

There is a dearth of recorded thought on that cardinal virtue in the pantheon of Analytic philosophy, clarity. This is a shame (as well as being ironic and telling, though I will not press these charges[1]). The understanding of clarity evinced by those few texts that deal with the concept, and the general understanding implicit in Analytic philosophy with which they are consonant, is one-sided. So, at least, I argue in this paper.

More specifically, I argue that the clarity championed in Analytic philosophy is indebted to the clarity indigenous to science; but that there is another sort of clarity: one found in poetry but occasionally also found in philosophy, to that philosophy's benefit.

The structure of the paper is this: after undertaking a taxonomy of varieties of clarity (section 2), I offer an account of clarity that I build within the account of philosophy developed by R. G. Collingwood

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1   The charges look a lot like the charge made by Richard Seymour (2019).

(section 3). Although this paper is not hermeneutic, Collingwood is its lodestar: he is singular in having a fruitful and systematic account of the natures of science, poetry, and philosophy—all three—and of what these natures mean for their respective literary forms. I do not commit either to his account of philosophy or to the account of clarity I build upon it: such argument is a far larger task than can be accomplished in a single paper. My more modest aim is the twofold one of arguing (a) that this account affords us a lens by which we can better understand some utterances (most obviously poetic ones [section 3.2]) and (b) that philosophers at least sometimes make this sort of utterance (section 4). The notion of clarity I adumbrate, which I call "poetic clarity," I contrast with "scientific clarity," which I delineate in section 3.1. This latter notion of clarity has had a profound impact on how Analytic philosophers write, and it needs no defence; but that (and how) Analytic philosophy can learn from poetic clarity is still in need of acknowledgement. Clearing the ground for such acknowledgement is the purpose of this paper.

2 | Preliminaries

The eventual question of this paper is "What is it to be clear in philosophy?" But this question is ambiguous in so far as there are several notions of clarity that can be applied to anything we say. In this preparatory section, I offer a fivefold taxonomy of notions of clarity, in order to isolate the notion at issue in the remainder of the paper.

At the highest level of abstraction, to be clear is to be transparent; it can be said not only of utterances but of everything from glass to government. As the *OED* has it, to be clear is to be free from opacity, obscurity, or obstruction; as applied to utterances and the like, terms such as "intelligible" are also used; and as applied to ideas and the like,

terms such as "free from confusion" and "manifest" are also used.[2] Such a vague notion of clarity, which we might call "clarity" *simpliciter*, is fine as far as it goes, but it is too abstract for our present purposes.

A second notion of clarity operates at the very surface of utterances. Our utterances are clearer if our *presentation* of them is clear: if our speech is free from errors of pronunciation, or if our typeface is legible, then our speech is transparent: our listener can attend *directly* to our speech, rather than via mediate obstacles. High-resolution, well-recorded representations are also clear in this way. Let us call this "*presentational* clarity." It is not at issue in this paper.

The third notion of clarity is clarity of "thought" or "content": we can be clear or unclear in our mind about what we want to communicate, or what our thoughts or concepts are. We might, for instance, think that faster-than-light travel is impossible, where our conception of impossibility is ambiguous between conceptual and physical impossibility. In such a case, our notion is unclear, in the sense of confused or indistinct. This sort of clarity is not the focus of this paper either.[3]

The next two notions of clarity concern how we craft an utterance in order to best communicate what we are trying to communicate (that is, the utterance's content). Of these levels, one is audience directed, and the other is content directed. In order to communicate clearly, we must on the one hand respect the norms of communication extant

2   See "clarity," sense 4; "clear," senses 3, 7, 8, and 9; and "clearness," senses 2 and 5.

3   Plato's and Aristotle's similar uses of *saphêneia* are closest to this sort of clarity, though neither is identical to it, and Aristotle occasionally uses *saphêneia* in other ways. See Lesher 2010a and 2010b, and see Lesher 2010b, 143–44, for some examples of Aristotle's *saphêneia* being closest to my "presentational clarity." It is also the notion of clarity operative in Peirce 1878, Nagel 1938–39, and Milikan 1994. See Alshanetsky 2019 for an extended discussion of this sort of clarity.

within a community of discourse, and in so far as an utterance success-fully does this it is clear in an audience-directed way.[4] On the other hand, how we speak must be appropriate to the nature of what we are trying to communicate, and in so far as an utterance does this suc-cessfully it is clear in a content-directed way. I refer to these notions of clarity as audience-directed and content-directed clarity, respective-ly.[5] (It is worth pausing to note that Alison Stone appears not to con-sider content-directed clarity a species of clarity at all (2015, 616–17). She does not say why she thinks this. It seems obvious to me, though, that if the expression one chooses to express a thing is transparent to or obscures that thing by virtue of being appropriate or inappropri-ate to it, then it is (respectively) clear or unclear in that respect. This said, I suspect this disagreement is merely verbal: Stone, for purposes specific to her paper, wants to reserve "clarity" as an undifferentiated concept.)

Whether something is clear in the audience-directed sense is an empirical question, and accordingly there is a small literature in lin-guistics on the matter. For instance, John Hyland, who has worked ex-tensively on features typical of academic discourse (see Hyland 2001,

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4   This is the sort of clarity with which style guides such as Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* are concerned. It is also the sort of clarity with which Jarrell 1951 and Hartley, Sotto, and Fox 2004 are concerned.

5   Adorno (1994, 105) is close to making this distinction when he distinguish-es between intelligibility and clarity, but he does not completely distinguish audience-directed clarity and (what I call) scientific clarity. Stone 2015 elides presentational and audience-directed clarity. I read Kant's distinction in *Cri-tique of Pure Reason* between "discursive (logical) clarity, through concepts," and "intuitive (aesthetic) clarity, through intuitions" (1998, xvii–xix, empha-ses removed), as being between content- and audience-directed clarity, re-spectively, but I could also see it being a distinction within audience-directed clarity.

2002, and 2005), has shown that two norms of Analytic philosophy relative to other academic disciplines are the high frequency of the personal pronoun and of directives (that is, instructions to the reader, for example, "suppose that . . .").[6] The natural explanation here is that Analytic philosophers in particular find these norms clear. This is borne out by qualitative data (see Hobbs 2014, esp. 34, for a short compilation). Indeed, if we accept that the high-prestige journals that are these studies' corpora typically instantiate the norms of clarity of their disciplines—which is doubtless true, as they partly *determine* these norms through the familiarity they enjoy among philosophers consequent on their high prestige and impact—then the explanation simply follows. This is regardless of whether or not there is content-directed reason for the norms. Were one to speak eloquent English to a non-Anglophone monoglot, one could be speaking perfectly clearly in a content-directed sense, and indeed perfectly presentationally clearly if by "eloquence" we mean not just finding the *bon mot* but having excellent diction; but the audience-directed clarity would be nil. Audience-directed clarity is not the notion of clarity at issue in the present paper.

Finally, we turn to content-directed clarity, which *is* the focus of the rest of this paper.

It may be that different ways of communicating a thought are differentially successful at its communication not because they differentially resonate with some audience but intrinsically—that is, because of the nature of the thought. Whether an utterance is clear in this sense cannot be answered simply by asking its utterer and hearers, because people can be systematically mistaken about this, as will likely

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6   Hyland fails to specify that his results apply only to *Analytic* philosophy; see Valerie Hobbs 2014, who shows that Continental philosophy's norms look much less like science's.

be the case if their understanding of this content is deficient. To know whether or not something is content-directedly clear, we must also know something about the content.

Audience- and content-directed clarity are tightly connected. Norms of communication do not necessarily come with their justification appended, and both notions of clarity are normative concepts that concern how best to utter, rather than how to present that utterance (that is, how to be presentationally clear). Accordingly, discovering whether a norm is content directed or audience directed will require inquiring into whether that norm is justified on content- or audience-directed grounds. It may be—and ideally will be—that a norm can be equally well justified on both content- and audience-directed grounds. Nonetheless, the notions are distinct, as is evident from the fact that they can diverge: on the one hand (to give arguable, illustrative examples), there are writers, such as Hegel and the early Judith Butler, who ignore their audience for the sake of being adequate to their material; on the other, if the negative theologians are to be believed, there is the way we commonly speak of God, a way that ineluctably obfuscates its content.

Thus is the taxonomy of clarity I propose; let us take stock. First of all, we have the very abstract notion of clarity as transparency, clarity *simpliciter*. Next we have the multi-levelled utterance; when we utter something, we can (fail to) be clear:

(1) at the level of the content that we communicate (clarity of thought),

(2) at the level of whether the form is appropriate to the content (content-directed clarity),

(3) at the level of whether the norms of communication we adopt are appropriate to our audience (audience-directed clarity), and finally

(4) at the level of how that utterance is presented (presentational clarity).

There may be interesting taxonomic priorities to be sorted here, but this is orthogonal, and we will not go into it.[7] To repeat, it is the second of these four levels that is the focus of this paper.[8]

One last preliminary point needs mentioning. I have spoken of utterances and their content, but we will be concerned below with bigger, or at any rate more nebulous, fish: communities and their projects. The most important question is not whether some particular philosophical thesis is best expressed through these means or those, but whether Analytic philosophy's communicative norms are appropriate to all philosophical projects. This question is of course more than can be answered here; but if this paper spurs thought about the relevance of what I call "poetic clarity" to philosophy, then the question will not have been more than can be fruitfully asked.

3 | Scientific and Poetic Clarity

In this section, I consider two projects, which I call "the scientific" and "the poetic." I argue that the distinct natures of these projects demand

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7   I will note only that it seems that they can vary rather freely relative to each other, and that it is important to be clear in every respect. T. S. Eliot is saddened by Russell's "Why I Am Not a Christian," which embodies every sort of clarity but conceptual clarity, as a result of which "Mr. Russell's lucidity is often that of a mirror rather than that of clear water, and is not so easy to see through as it appears to be" (1927, 177).

8   This taxonomy cuts across Bryan Magee's (2014) distinction between "presentational" and "discursive" clarity. Magee's is the only other text of which I am aware that offers a taxonomy of clarity. See Hobbs (2015) for a response.

two corresponding sorts of content-directed clarity, which I call "scientific clarity" and "poetic clarity" respectively. In section 4, I show how this schema can furnish us with an account of philosophical clarity.

3.1 | Scientific Clarity

Let us consider scientific clarity first, as those few attempts to articulate what clarity is have been concerned only with this sort of clarity.[9] By "scientific clarity" I mean the clarity, (stereo)typically found in mathematics and the hard natural sciences, which has had such an influence on the appearance of Analytic philosophy since the inception of that philosophical tradition. Scientific clarity is a set of norms. I isolate one that is content directed (or isolate its content-directed aspect) shortly, but first some groundwork.

My definition of scientific clarity is deliberately vague. The norms of communication of any linguistic community will of course be hard to discern: as with any norms, they will often be implicit (are working-class accents appropriate?), they are liable to be contested (are jokes or footnotes always infelicitous?), and they will tend to alter over time (must one use impersonal verb forms?[10]). Further, they will be extensive, as with any norms in a complex society.

A full characterisation of scientific clarity in general, then, would clearly be an enormous undertaking, and so I do not attempt to undertake it here. I focus rather on one core feature: the use of technical

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9 See, e.g., Hobbs 2014, 29, 32, for a number of scientists' and philosophers' accounts of clarity, all ostensibly of clarity as such but all, in the terminology of this paper, accounts of scientific clarity.

10 The traditionally high proportion of impersonal verb forms in scientific writing is decreasing (Hobbs 2014, 34).

terms.[11] By "technical terms" I mean *terms whose meanings are exhaust-ed by their stipulated meanings*. Examples are scientific and mathematical symbols whose meanings do not need introduction outside textbooks (such as π) as well as terms concocted and defined by an author in a single text (such as Nelson Goodman's "grue").[12] They contrast with terms not exhausted by their definitions (for example, some of Heidegger's terms; see below), or without formal definition altogether (such as Joanna Newsom's "grue"; see section 3.2 below).

"Technical terminology" is a more specific concept than what we might call "jargon," namely, language that is not clear to someone not familiar with the tradition or text at hand. The meaning of jargon words may or may not be *exhausted* by their stipulated meanings. Consider Heidegger. To open one of his texts towards its end is to be dazzled by the density of his jargon. An example: "The coming to presence of technology threatens revealing, threatens it with the possibility that all revealing will be consumed in ordering and that everything will present itself only in the unconcealedness of standing-reserve" (1977, 34). All of Heidegger's jargon is introduced, to be sure—often even in the manner of an explicit definition (for example, "Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it the standing-reserve" [17]). Nevertheless, Heidegger's jargon is not technical terminology as I have defined that term, because his terms' meanings

11   Joll's (2009) notion of "default clarity," which clearly takes its cue from science despite Joll's admirable care not to build the superiority of scientific clarity into the concept of clarity, is more ambitious than mine (and seems to have both content- and audience-directed features), but his first condition—that terms be explicated—is more or less a demand for what I am calling "technical terms."

12   Technical terms' meanings may not always *actually* be exhausted by their stipulated meanings, as Collingwood (1938, 268) argued with regard to "atomic proposition," but I grant the point here for the sake of argument.

are not *exhausted* by their definitions. Rather, their meanings emerge from their histories, connotations, and so on. William Lovitt, the editor and translator of my quotation from the Heidegger essay, brings this out well, writing, "Heidegger has a poet's ear for language and often writes in a poetic way" (xix).

That technical terms are seen as desirable in science hardly needs demonstration, but, for the sceptical, there is some empirical research into the norms of academic writing, and it bears out the conventional wisdom.[13] The norm at play here is not going to be as abstract as "technical terms should be used," though: not even the most hard-nosed scientist would extol a paper composed *entirely* of technical terms, and there will be reasonable disagreement concerning when technical terms are clear. Indeed, we may expect "the" norm concerning technical terms to be rather a cluster of co-existing and even occasionally conflicting norms.

It might be thought that if the justification for technical terms is multifarious in this way, then it is more than a single paper can do to inquire into it. We need not worry, however: first, it is not essential to our present purposes to answer this question, as we are considering science as a model by which to compare philosophy rather than for its own sake. Our question is whether technical terms are ever clear in *philosophy*, and our answer here is independent of our answer to their clarity in science. This said, asking the question in the context of science will set up the question in the context of philosophy nicely. After all, it is (without denying the scholastic influence) primarily from

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13   See, e.g., Hartley, Sotto, and Fox 2004 and Hobbs 2014. It should be noted that my definition of "technical terms" may not accord exactly with what is found by these studies, as they do not define the term: rather, they determine preponderance of technical terms indirectly, through frequency of repetition of words in a text.

science that Analytic philosophy learnt to use technical terminology (see n. 25 below), and so understanding it in this context will provide a paradigm instance of where it is appropriate. It is fortunate, then, that R. G. Collingwood, in *An Essay on Philosophical Method* (2005 [1933]; henceforth *EPM*), his major work on philosophical method, furnishes us with another way around the objection: he offers a convincing defence of the use of technical terms in science, and in particular argues that they are clear in a content-directed way. His argument, briefly, is that since the objects of science are perfectly discrete, the terms used to refer to them should similarly be discrete. He writes: "Technical terms are needed in science because in the course of scientific thought we encounter concepts which are wholly new to us, and for which therefore we must have wholly new names. Such words as chiliagon and pterodactyl are additions to our vocabulary because the things for which they stand are additions to our experience" (*EPM*, 205).

The key word in this defence is "wholly." This needs some careful handling. In one obvious sense, chiliagons are not *wholly* new to us, because even if we have never seen or conceived of one, we will have seen things such as circles and octagons that are not wholly dissimilar: they, too, are geometric shapes; an octagon, too, is a polygon; and they all *look* similar. Collingwood is not denying this. What he means is that in scientific classification, species of a genus fit under that genus more or less as books fit into a library: they are discrete both from each other and from the library itself. Books in a library are wholly different from each other in the sense that they do not overlap: in checking out one book, you do not, to any extent, check out another, nor do you at all check out the library itself. Similarly, a chiliagon is not, to any extent, an octagon, however similar it is to one; and although it is of course a polygon, the copula here indicates that "chiliagon" falls under the genus "polygon"; the overlap that never happens is between concepts at the same level of abstraction that fall under the same genus.

Accordingly, referring to a chiliagon by a term that also refers to an octagon, or to the genus "polygon," will never be required by clarity—we already have terms for these concepts—and so is at best an extravagance, at worst unclear. There should be a *pro tanto* norm, then, of using technical terms—terms that function in just this way—to refer to scientific concepts. And that is just what we find in science.

Focusing on one norm in this way of course limits my thesis: I will not be able to argue that philosophers should study with the poets all things considered, only that *ceteris paribus* they should do so with regard to this norm. This circumscription does not, however, render the present project picayune: technical terms are extremely common in both scientific and philosophical contexts, and so if it transpires that they can systemically inhibit philosophical expression, as I argue they do in section 4, then this is already significant.

3.2 | Poetic clarity

This defence of technical terms in science seems to me unobjectionable, but remember that the question of this paper is how appropriate they are to philosophy. Before we turn to this question, though, let us consider, to put into relief what we have seen so far, a very different enterprise: poetry. This relief is important: the prima facie plausibility of Nicholas Joll's (2009) claim that his notion of "default clarity"—which approximates what I am calling "scientific clarity"—is justifiably default is due to his contrasting work that embodies it with the notoriously difficult writers of Continental philosophy, whose demands on the reader may well seem in need of justification. But not everything that does not follow the norms of scientific clarity is as abstruse as He-

gel. In particular, poetry can be very clear, clearer than we can bear.[14] With this made salient, Joll's demand that philosophy that does not exhibit default clarity needs justification looks unmotivated.

Now, even more than of science, the varieties of poetry are endless, and so, as with science above, let us focus on one communicative norm—or rather focus on the absence of a norm, and consider a justification for its absence. That absent norm, of course, is that the use of technical terms is virtuous.

It is not that there has never been a poem that defines any of its terms, although it should be said that these poems are exceedingly rare. I have found three instances. The first is Kenneth Koch's "The Art of Poetry":

> By "exigent" I mean extremely careful, wanting each poem to be a
>   conclusion
> Of everything he senses, feels and knows.

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14   We will all have our own favourite examples of this obvious truth, but coming to my mind this season are Maya Angelou's

> love costs all we are
> and will ever be.
> Yet it is only love
> which sets us free.

and Zack de la Rocha's

> A mass of tears are transformed to stones now,
> Sharpened on suffering and woven into slings.
> Hope lies in the rubble of this rich fortress:
> Taking today what tomorrow never brings.

come to my mind this season.

The second apparent exception is TLC's "No Scrubs," in which a scrub is defined, in the opening line, as "a guy that thinks he's fly" and, later, as "a guy that can't get no love from me." And finally, there is Hop Along's "Prior Things," in which "vacation" is defined as "leave," which is defined in turn as "obliterate all prior things."[15]

In each of these instances, a close reading shows that the ostensible definition is not what it seems. The Koch and Hop Along definitions are grammatically awkward; Koch, I think, is parodying the ungainliness of academic prose, and the Hop Along "definition" reads to me more like a stream of free association than an attempt at a definition. And it is ambiguous where the "definition" of "No Scrubs" ends, which suggests that the lyricists are not serious about defining. Even if my reading of these texts is mistaken, however, the rarity of definitions in poetry is strong evidence that technical terms are not a part of poetry's communicative norms.

Words most familiar to us from contexts in which they are technical terms are also sometimes imported from those contexts into poetry (for example, Richard Dawson's mention of beta-blockers in his "Jogging"), but their meaning is always greater than their formal definitions: they have rhythmic, cultural, and so on, salience.

Of course, as with scientific norms, there will doubtless be many reasons, audience directed and content directed, good and bad, compatible and conflicting, why technical terms are anathema to poetry. But this does not give us reason to doubt that one reason poets eschew technical terms is that they are seen as not conducive to clarity. In-

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15   "No Scrubs" and "Prior Things" are songs rather than poems, but I do not see any important relevant difference between these forms of art, and in any case by expanding my definition of poetry I am only making my conclusions more robust.

deed, though poets often speak of the importance of clarity, they never mention technical terms in connection with it.[16]

Of course, it could be that, *pace* the poets, technical terms *would* aid their attempts to be clear. So I will now present an abstract account of the poetic project, and argue that in so far as this characterisation is accurate, technical terms impede clarity; as with science above, the nature of the poetic project partly determines its norms of communication. Fully characterising poetry is an impossible task, of course, but it is not so large that it cannot be begun. And we can do a bit better than just begin, too: Collingwood comes to our aid again. In *EPM* and especially in *The Principles of Art* (1938, henceforth *PA*), his major mature work on the philosophy of art, he offers just such an account of what poets do qua poets. With this account, which I will now briefly introduce, we will be able to see how the refusal of technical terms can actually aid clarity.

According to Collingwood, art is the total imaginative activity of the expression of emotion; poetry is just art restricted to language.[17] It would take us too far afield to fully expound this definition; briefly: in

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16   In Birkerts 2008, for instance, Tate doubts that any poet ever strives for obscurity. D. H. Tracy (2011), in offering a taxonomy of poetic clarities (more concrete than and compatible with my taxonomy), remarks that the value of clarity is "taken for granted." Nowhere does he mention technical terms.

17   *PA* is concerned with art in general, not just poetry, but Collingwood understands poetry as a subset of art. (Also, he often talks of poetry directly, and certainly it is an art to which he is particularly sensitive.) I focus on poetry in this paper for the sake of setting up the ideal taxonomy of the paper most clearly: poetry is close to science and Analytic philosophy in that it is a linguistic enterprise (unlike, say, painting), while also clearly using language in a way deeply different to the way science and philosophy do (unlike prose literature). It may well be that much of what goes for poetry goes for art in general.

creating art, we express, or clarify to ourselves, what can variously be called our emotions, our inner life, or our worldview. This clarification does not leave what is clarified unchanged: it is also a refinement of our worldview. Further, although it has to be done in some medium or other (in poetry, the medium is language), the artist must be sensitive to things not strictly in their medium: in the poet's case, this most obviously includes things such as the layout of the poem on its page but can extend, in principle, to anything a poem can bring to its readers' minds. Finally, "poetry," for Collingwood, is a success term: creating poetry requires *successfully* clarifying our worldview. Putative poems that fail in this aim are, to the extent that they fail, not poems at all. So when I speak of poetry, this should be read as referring to successful or exemplary poetry.

Here is not the place to defend this account. It does need to be said, though, that the standard objections—such as that Collingwood claims that artworks exist only in the mind, or are performances, or that "expression" in his account is vague—which are liable to render the reader unable to take seriously my relying on his account here, fail. It is worth noting too that although the theory may be imperfect, it is by no means idiosyncratic: the insights that Collingwood expresses through his particular theoretical framework are not tied to his theory and are frequently found expressed in different ways in different traditions. This is all to say that although I build on Collingwood's account of art in giving an account of poetic clarity, I am not thereby building on corrupt or precarious foundations.[18]

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18   Much recent Collingwood scholarship has shown the traditional standard objections have all rested on sophomoric understandings of his work. For the most recent and detailed exposition and defence of Collingwood's philosophy of art, see McGuiggan 2017.

Now, what is most pertinent about Collingwood's account of art is that it shows how technical terms are not necessarily virtues of clarity and can even, in certain contents, inhibit clarity. Let us see how.

Poetry uses language more inclusively than science does: the rules of meaning adopted strictly by the scientist are for the poet only cairns: they mark a path, they mark how others go—but they are no law. In addition to paying heed to words' formal definitions, poets cultivate an infinite sensitivity to their language: they find in it meanings that emerge from the words' melody, rhythm, appearance, and indeed in principle from anything about them. The reason poets need a sensitivity to this penumbra is that poetry *expands* our experience rather than *adds* to it as science does.[19] Correspondingly, it must expand rather than add to our language. Let me elaborate on this.

The distinction between expansion and addition is fundamental to our distinction between science, on the one hand, and poetry, on the other. We saw in section 3.1 that a chiliagon is entirely separate from other species in its genus, and from that genus itself: it is in no sense a circle or an octagon and is a polygon only in the sense that it falls under that genus. It is an addition to our conceptual vocabulary or experience. Accordingly, as we have seen, we should coin a new word—an

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19   At least, this is one reason. Alison Stone (2015) mentions some others, and Angela Davis (1998; see esp. 166–67 and the containing chapter) notes the importance of this use of language in the Black American cultural context (and its artistic crystallisations, such as Billie Holiday's richly ironic singing), but she also highlights what this attitude owes to Black Americans' history of enslavement and the dissimulation required by enslaved and post-slavery Black Americans. C. Thi Nguyen (2021, 250) mentions another: clarity about a matter can engender a sense of finality, a sense that our inquiry into that matter has been satisfactorily concluded. This feeling, he argues, can be gamed, and so it might sometimes be appropriate to remind one's reader than the inquiry is *not* concluded.

addition to our vocabulary—to refer to it. Matters are often otherwise, though: our experiences are often expansions or developments of our previous experiences. For instance, our concept of bravery might develop from primarily being to do with facing down physical peril to also and more profoundly being to do with putting the ways of childhood behind us. In such cases, our expanded experience has some fidelity to the earlier experience but is also an alteration of it. One familiar way in which this can happen is when we explicitly realise what we had previously only dimly or confusedly understood. To put it this way immediately brings to mind all those who have located art precisely here, where creation and revelation meet.[20]

Why, though, does expansion of experience require expansion of language? Why does it require "skill in metaphor and simile, readiness to find new meanings in old words, ability in case of need to invent new words and phrases which shall be understood as soon as they are heard, and briefly a disposition to improvise and create, to treat language as something not fixed and rigid but infinitely flexible and full of life" (*EPM*, 214)? Why is it that we "need relatively new words for relatively new things: words with which to indicate the new aspects, new distinctions, new connexions which thought brings to light in a familiar subject-matter" (205)?

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20   Some examples: Alexander Pope ("True wit is nature to advantage dress'd, / What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd" ("An Essay on Criticism," lines 297–298); Marcel Proust ("Chardin . . . la[id] hold on [a certain pleasure] and hoist[ed] it to the level of your conscious mind"; "Chardin," 1984 [1954], 325); Virginia Woolf ("[T]he living poets express a feeling that is actually being made and torn out of us at the moment. One does not recognize it in the first place"; 1929, 19); Audre Lorde ("Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought"; 1977, 8). That art is this sort of expansion of our experience is one of the core claims of *PA*.

The answer, I propose, is that, by default, if there is isomorphism between subject matter and its presentation, then that presentation is content-directedly clear. Let us fill out this suggestion with reference to some poetry, namely, the final two stanzas of Billy Collins's "Irish Poetry."

> Only later, by the galvanized washstand,
> while gaunt, phosphorescent heifers
> swam beyond the windows,
> did the whorled and sparky gib of the indefinite
> wobble me into knowledge.
>
> Then, I heard the ghost-clink of milk bottle
> on the rough threshold
> and understood the meadow-bells
> that trembled over a nimbus of ragwort—
> the whole afternoon lambent, corrugated, puddle-mad.

This poem is a loving pastiche of its subject. One way in which this is so is in its use of pastoral images, and in how it sometimes stretches these too far: one can imagine how a heifer, silhouetted against a grey-green field in mist, could be radiant in its simple and clear life; one could just about imagine such an adjective from Wordsworth—but phosphorescent? The image is certainly striking.[21] But let us slow down and focus on the gentler word. Describing an animal as *radiant* is perhaps not quite stretching language: although cows do not emit light, they could seem to emanate, to someone in a certain state of mind, simple health or a certain bovine contentment. We call faces radiant without hesitation. The dictionary allows this use of "radiant"—but even here we should not complacently say that to use the word in this way is not to

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21   It is, you might say, prepostoral (Joyce 2012 [1939], 86.21).

use language non-literally: at one point it was non-literal.[22] The earliest use of the first sense of "radiant" recorded by the *OED* is circa 1450; of the second sense, 1589. So the first sense is prior, and the second an expansion of the word. Even now, to call a cow radiant is, if not a stretch, at least a flex.

Collins stretches language to varying degrees in "Irish Poetry." Consider how he describes the afternoon. "Lambent," for instance, can easily (and beautifully) apply to afternoons, unless one is so literal minded as to think that "afternoon" can refer only to some window of time; "corrugated" is more of a stretch, but it is illuminating in the way that good poetry can be, rather than ridiculous (in the way that good poetry can be) as "phosphorescent heifers" is. And "puddle-mad"? This one rather calls us up short: it does not, like "lambent afternoon," immediately resonate, or, like "galvanized washstand," pass one by as a literal description, or, like "phosphorescent heifers," steal a smile; it but promises insight, and invites us to see whether adjective and noun can cast light on each other, to see them from different angles, to bash them together even, and in so doing to—one hopes—learn more about each.

None of Collins's linguistic yoga is for its own sake: it is done for the sake of illumination. He is concerned primarily to illuminate the tradition of poetry that stretches roughly from Wordsworth to Heaney, but he is also engaged in the more standard poetic enterprise of illuminating our experience of the world: of, for example, a certain sort of day, a certain sort of quotidity—and always also to our reactions to them. (Even calling a heifer phosphorescent is not *just* a joke: if we

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22   On not taking the distinction between "literal" and "metaphorical" meanings too strictly, see G. E. R. Lloyd (1990, chap. 1, and 2015, 5–6). Indeed, Lloyd advocates replacing the dichotomy with the scalar notion of "semantic stretch." This is entirely in keeping with my attitude.

are happy to call it radiant (the description asks), why not also phosphorescent?) And, as "puddle-mad afternoon" illustrates, this illumination is not just an illumination but also a refinement or clarification: in engaging with a poem, we put not only the words but also our concepts and attitudes to question. *What is it*, I ask myself, *that Collins sees in this sort of afternoon that allows him to describe it as puddle-mad? Is it something I also see in afternoons, without knowing it?* I put the vision of the afternoon in front of me and look closely: at the puddles as I remember walking along a certain road, or as I see them from my kitchen window, or as I wait for a shower to pass in the narthex of my childhood village's church after Mass; I look at how the surface of the puddle shakes under the impact of the raindrops and ask whether I consider this dance at all mad. I ask whether—even allowing that I think the puddles mad—I could ever consider such a grey and oppressive afternoon itself mad. And so on. Here I am stretching not just the words Collins uses; I am not just developing my linguistic praxis; I am also expanding my experience: revising my experience of Heaney in the light of "phosphorescent," bringing the idea of madness to bear on shimmering drizzly Irish Sundays.

There is nothing unusual about "Irish Poetry" in this. We may think ourselves quite sophisticated for giving coffee a central place in our lives till we hear J. Alfred Prufrock describe measuring out his life in coffee spoons; we may think ice cream simple and innocent till we hear Wallace Stevens give an emperor dominion over it and call its curds concupiscent; we may not have connected the colonial erasure of Sapokanikan to the desperately impoverished van Gogh's painting over his old canvases till we hear Joanna Newsom weave them together; we may not understand the anguish and hatred in religion till we hear Joshua Bennett

yearn for . . . a means
to honor how elders

taught me to pray:

Lord, if you be
at all, be
a blade.

Again and again, poetry stretches words until and so that we are forced to look afresh at them, and by the same token at the concepts and attitudes that underlie and surround them. Randall Jarrell (1951, 76) quotes Goethe: "The author whom a lexicon can keep up with is worth nothing."

Objections can and have been made to Collingwood's account of poetry. I have argued elsewhere that Collingwood is able to answer all of them (see n. 18 above), but I will add this: as with our account of science above, it is not pertinent whether our account of poetry is good: the purpose of this paper is to give a good account of the clarity of philosophy, and I discuss poetry only as a way of sketching a variety of clarity and a context in which it seems appropriate.

This said, one objection is pressing and relevant enough that I will dispatch it here. It might be doubted whether I have done more than argue that poetry *allows* this sort of expansion and development of concepts. It is another question whether poetry would do so more clearly were it to adopt scientific clarity. The response is to remember the distinction between audience- and content-directed clarity. In an audience-directed way, it may be that scientific clarity is clearer. It seems unlikely: even if a poem could be paraphrased (*per impossibile*[23]) into language that is scientifically clear, it would be done as

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23   On the impossibility of such paraphrase, see, most recently, Currie and Frascaroli 2021.

poems' commentaries already are done: copiously—allusions spelled out, complex sentences reworded, obscura explained—and repetitively,[24] as simultaneous meanings are sequentially decoded. The result is that what can be grasped in a few lines by a receptive reader can take paragraphs. It is reasonable to wonder which of these two expressions, potent concision or genial loquacity, is clearer. From the point of view of audience-directed clarity, it seems that we have here just two different traditions: audiences in the tradition of poetry, attuned as they are to poetic devices, will find poetry clear but will (qua poetry lovers) find the norms of scientific clarity unclear; and vice versa. Whatever about this, though, audience-directed clarity is distinct from content-directed clarity. Concerning this question, I take what I have said above concerning the isomorphism of poetry's stretching of language to its stretching of the concepts and attitudes underlying and surrounding this language to be satisfactory.

We have, then, two sorts of project, the scientific and the poetic, and two corresponding norms of clarity. Scientists, whose concepts are additions to our experience or (in other words) discrete from other concepts, properly use strictly defined, technical terms to refer to these wholly new and discrete things. This use of language is appropriate to its subject matter and so is content-directedly clear. Poets, whose concepts expand or develop our experience, appropriately do not use technical terms, which would inhibit clarity for them. What is content-directedly clear in poetry is language that is stretched and grown.

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24   Or in Arendt's (1975) less neutral characterisation, "loosely and at random."

4 | Philosophical Clarity

What has this all got to do with philosophy? Well, Analytic philosophers often think that philosophy is engaged in the same sort of project as science. Not (normally) exactly the same project, but a project similar enough to it that similar methodologies, and so similar norms of communication, should obtain.[25] In particular, Analytic philosophers characteristically make a virtue of using technical terms(,) as scientists do.[26] Philosophy that fails to adhere to the norms of communication appropriate to this project—such as Continental philosophy or the more theoretical branches of literary criticism, which often ignore or even flout them—is then branded unclear, with the accusation that this is needless naturally consequent. What I have argued in

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25 This attitude has manifestations from the conscious emulation of science by the Vienna Circle at the foundation of Analytic philosophy; to the growth of "experimental philosophy," which utilises scientific empirical methodologies in service of its philosophical conclusions, in recent decades; to occasional attempts to advocate a reconceptualisation of philosophy as a science (a prominent example is McGinn 2012). The attitude is so common (according to David Bourget and David J. Chalmers [2014 and manuscript], about 50 percent of philosophers consider themselves to be naturalists) that it has even picked up a pejorative: "science envy." See Smith 2008 for a criticism of this "scientism" of Analytic philosophy from a Collingwoodian perspective.

26 Technical terms are roughly as common in Analytic philosophy as in science (Hobbs 2014, 34) but are far less common in Continental philosophy, in which they are about as common as in English in general (32). The recentness of this preponderance is worth noting: even at the time of *EPM*, Collingwood was able to write: "In philosophical literature, technical terms are regarded with some suspicion. They are slightingly described as jargon, and philosophers who use them much are derided as pedants or criticized for evading the duty of explaining themselves and the even more urgent duty of understanding themselves" (*EPM*, 202).

this paper so far should give us reason to think that this dismissal is too quick, and so let us now take seriously Collingwood's suggestion that "the philosopher must go to school with the poets" (*EPM*, 214).

It is not just writers such as Derrida and Žižek, whom many Analytic philosophers are happy to mock as charlatans, who use poetic devices in doing philosophy.[27] For most of the history of philosophy, poetic devices have been standard. I have mentioned Heidegger, but we can find examples anywhere from Plato's dialogue to Nietzsche's aphorisms, and more subtly in every nicely turned phrase and colourfully contoured trolley problem.[28] Philosophers can no more resist poetry than anyone else can (except, perhaps, for poets: "[A]rt always throws off the appearance of art" [Mann 2015 (1947), 79]).

Of course, it may be that all of these philosophers were, in this respect, confused about the nature of clarity and the modes of communication appropriate to the investigation in which they were engaged; but the charge of systematic confusion among philosophy's greatest minds is not one that should be accepted lightly. And indeed, there are good reasons to reject it, which it is the task of this section to develop.

First, a number of commentators have argued that these philosophers do philosophy through the poetic devices they employ. Second,

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27   On the Analytic rejection of Derrida, see Schliesser 2016. On Žižek, see Blake 2015. Schliesser and Blake each argue that the criticisms of Derrida and Žižek that they discuss are poor by the critics' own standards, and that the fact that the criticisms were nonetheless made (and lauded by peers) indicates the critics' ideological blinkeredness. The present paper is of a piece with Schliesser's and Blake's efforts to remove these blinkers. How well these writers' philosophical reputations would thereafter fare is not something on which I offer an opinion.

28   Bradatan 2017, in arguing (along the lines of the present paper) that philosophers ought to go to school with the poets, reminds us that even Kant had some literary flair.

Collingwood, in *EPM*, gives a general account of the nature of philosophy that supports these specific analyses. I will now consider Collingwood's account and then turn to supporting examples. Note, though, that my argument does not amount to a *proof* that philosophers who use poetic devices do so in aid of clarity. Instead, I first sketch a general account of philosophy according to which such devices *can* aid clarity, and then demonstrate that this logical space is not vacant.

Philosophy, for Collingwood, is the "exploring [of] one's own mind . . . and bringing to light what is obscure and doubtful in it" (*EPM*, 214). This might already strike the reader as uncannily similar to his account of poetry, and indeed it is. In philosophy, as in poetry, "no concept can ever come to us as an absolute novelty; we can only come to know better what to some extent we knew already" (*EPM*, 205). Indeed, Collingwood explicitly says that in so far as poetry and philosophy are successful, there is no difference between them:

> Good philosophy and good poetry are not two different kinds of writing, but one; each is simply good writing. In so far as each is good, each converges, as regards style and literary form, with the other; and in the limiting case where each was as good as it ought to be, the distinction would disappear . . .
>
> Subject without style is barbarism; style without subject is dilettantism. Art is the two together. (*PA*, 298–99)

This bold (or risible) equivocation of philosophy and poetry should not concern us. This is for two reasons. First, the account succeeds or fails as an account of each discipline independently of whether it succeeds or fails as an account of the other. In particular, if (as I argue below) philosophy sometimes rightly treats concepts as extensile, then poetic clarity will be appropriate to it regardless of what we should say about poetry itself.

Second, I am only offering an abstract and partial characterisation of poetry and philosophy. Collingwood devotes a book to the characterisation of each, and *EPM*, for the most part, characterises philosophy in opposition to science in particular. The present paper can do no more than hint at a proper characterisation of each of these three disciplines and all their connections and distinctions.[29] I focus where I do first because whether concepts have hard edges or whether they can be stretched and can flow into each other is a *basic* difference between science and poetry, from which the many other distinctions Collingwood articulates in *EPM* emanate; and second because this difference is sufficient to support the core claim of this paper, namely, that clarity can have a different face to the one it shows in science.

In any case, I will not argue that Collingwood's account of philosophy is a good account of *all* philosophy. We will turn to his account's limitations in due course, but first let us see how *far* it gets us.

I have reminded us that philosophers often use poetic devices, but it might be questioned whether they do so *in aid of content-directed clarity*. This is a question that, to be answered generally, would require a comprehensive study of philosophers' uses of poetic devices that is obviously beyond the scope of any single paper. But that philosophers *sometimes* use devices to this end is plain. For instance: Alexander Nehamas (1985) argues that Nietzsche uses literary devices throughout his oeuvre, for example, using irony to keep the truth content of his

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29   By the same token, a full defence of Collingwood's accounts of poetry and philosophy is beyond the scope of this paper. I have made my excuses with regard to poetry in section 3.2. There is little by way of a critical reception of his account of philosophy that I can adduce to establish that it is similarly reliable. Rather, in so far as the proof of a metaphilosophy is in how successful it is at allowing us to make sense of philosophy, this paper is one brick in the construction of a defence of it. This said, Mink 1969 and the introduction to *EPM* by Connolly and D'Oro contain excellent critical discussion.

claims at arm's length without simply disavowing them. Stephen Mulhall (2007, chap. 6) argues that Wittgenstein uses the ambiguity of the semicolon in § 255 of his *Philosophical Investigations* to make a philosophical point precisely about the importance of shades of meaning in our language.[30] Sally Haslanger (2000, 33–34) argues that feminist theorists often deliberately stretch terms such as "gender" and "race" in order to better theorise the world. Adorno (1994 [1963]; see esp. 113ff.) argues that Hegel's stretching of language and avoidance of technical terms is demanded by the nature of his philosophy. Sara Ahmed's avowed philosophical method is of "turning a word this way and that, like an object that catches a different light every time it is turned; attending to the same words across different contexts; allowing them to create ripples or new patterns like texture on a ground" qua feminist: "I think of feminism as poetry . . . I make arguments by listening for resonances" (2017, 12).[31] Collingwood explicitly understands moral philosophy as an attempt to refine—that is, stretch—our moral categories, and he sketches (1992 [1940]) a dialectic from a Utilitarian notion of duty that only encompasses utility-maximisation to a richer notion of that concept, tangibly stretching the word over the course of

30   Wittgenstein of course also frequently used poetic devices (see, e.g., Pichler 2016).

31   On the importance of poetry to feminist philosophy, see also Robin James's (2018) discussion of poetry and intersectionality. Note also the exchange between Spencer Case (2019) and Justin Weinberg (2019): Case cites several examples of marginalised groups "inflating concepts" (what I have been calling "stretching concepts") such as "violence" and "gaslight" in order to draw attention to subtle but real harms. Case considers this to be rhetorical sleight of hand, but Weinberg defends it. The political salience of these particular concepts has, I think, confused Case; as my discussion of "radiant" reminds us, concept inflation is ubiquitous in a living language, and not as such philosophically licit or illicit.

the argument. Paul C. Taylor (2016, 98) notes that Du Bois "tweaks the meaning of 'propaganda,'" and he endorses this philosophical strategy. Raymond Geuss's *Not Thinking Like a Liberal* is an autobiography, and he is explicit that he chooses this form for its philosophical fruitfulness (2022, 9–11). And so on.

Suppose that this is right: Collingwood's account of philosophy applies pretty well to these various examples (or most of them), and these examples are not (too) exceptional. There is still plenty of room to keep philosophy and poetry separate. Most obviously, it can be argued that the enterprise we call "philosophy" is not monolithic, and that although some strands of it converge with poetry (to the extent they succeed), other strands are engaged in a fundamentally different enterprise—one that is better aligned to science, for instance. Philosophical logic, in particular those parts of it that connect to computer science, is the obvious case in point. Symbols are as common in this subdiscipline as in mathematics, and the success of systems built on discoveries here is surely proof enough of the wisdom of treating this sort of philosophy as akin to science.

Actually, I think that this objection is right. Collingwood would not: he denies that any philosophy is akin to science (*EPM*, chap. 1, esp. §1.4). But this is not a battle this paper needs us to pick a side on.[32] All it needs is that *some* strands of philosophy are well captured by Collingwood's account. (And although I suggest that these strands are particularly common in Continental philosophy and literary theory, this can only ever be a rough and tentative generalisation. That Collingwood accounts for *some* strands of philosophy is more important than whether these are most prominent in this or that tradition.)

32　Neither do I pick a side in chap. 2 of *This Is Art* (2017), although I do there say a bit more by way of motivating Collingwood's position. See also Forsberg 2012, esp. §§ 3 and 5.

It could be objected that this goal, though apparently modest, actually involves the bold claim that there is no unified theory of philosophy to be had; that at best there are two sorts of philosophy, one akin to science and the other to poetry. In fact, I do not think that this is such a bold claim at all, but in any case I am not committed to it, because there could yet be some more general account of philosophy to be had that unifies these two strands.

Even if all this is accepted, it could still, finally, be objected that the goal of this paper—namely, establishing that Collingwood's account of philosophy and the clarity appropriate to it is good as applied to some philosophy—is not nearly as exciting as establishing that it is a good account of *all* philosophy. Maybe so, but it is still important: if we know *in abstracto* that poetic devices can not only not impinge on clarity but also positively *serve* that goal, then one obstacle to fairly adjudging their use *in concreto* is removed. (This, again, is why it is not particularly important to our present purposes whether Collingwood's account succeeds as applied to any particular philosophical tradition.)

To see that this obstacle needs removing, we need look no further than the dismissive attitude Analytic philosophers notoriously take towards (what is seen as) the relatively poetic Continental philosophy.[33] Let us consider one example. In his characterisation of Continental philosophy, Pascal Engel (1999) writes that argument in Continental philosophy is not as explicit or abstract as it is in Analytic philosophy.

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[33] That this dismissiveness is common among Analytic philosophers is no secret. See Vrahimis 2019 for a historical overview and see, as an illustration of the tendency, *Philosophy and Literature*'s "bad writing" award of the late 1990s (collated at "The Bad Writing Contest: Press Releases, 1996–1998"; URL: www.denisdutton.com/bad_writing.htm), which mocked as obfuscatory single sentences, extracted from their contexts like bleeding chunks, penned by writers in Continental philosophy and literary theory. And see n. 27 above.

It is "very often analogical, drawing on similarities between particular words and concepts, moving from quotation to quotation, rather than by developing the implications of a particular view" (222). This characterisation of Continental philosophy is vague, but I read Engel as saying that Continental philosophers stretch language by focusing on words' penumbra and overlap (their similarity and analogousness), which is to say that their project is what I have called poetic. "No wonder," he continues, "that [Continental philosophy]'s style is often obscure, even when it does not indulge in systematic obscurity" (222).

This last sentence is telling. The first "obscurity" here, though Engel does not explicitly state it, is clearly laden with a negative evaluation: it is on a continuum with the second, "systematic" obscurity that Continental philosophers often "indulge in"—one can only *indulge* in a vice. Engel lays the ground here that permits the more moderate Joll to propose that this obscurity requires justification in virtue of its *pro tanto* or at least prima facie badness. But what if Continental philosophers, in eschewing technical terms, are doing so precisely to be clear? In that case, then by "drawing on similarities between particular words or concepts," they are far from being on a continuum with obfuscation: they are diametrically opposed to it. This does not mean that their style is not in need of justification, but it does mean that if there is a problem, it is going to be of a different sort from that which Engel diagnoses, and the justification will be different from that which Joll demands.

Do Continental philosophers eschew technical terms for the sake of clarity? I do not offer any more by way of answer here than to make the obvious point that, whatever the answer is, it will not be monolithic. People speak, and speak in the ways they do, for all sorts of reasons, and there is no shortcut to knowing whether this or that person speaks for this or that reason, or whether they would speak more clearly were

they to articulate themselves by other norms.[34] A single paper obviously cannot answer this question for the whole of Continental philosophy, and no more for any of the other philosophical traditions. But the clarification of "clarity" that I have offered at least allows us to *ask* it.

Acknowledgments

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34 I have intimated some of these other reasons above (see n. 19 above), but additionally stylishness could indeed be a more important virtue among Continental writers, for instance; or expectations about the relative responsibility of the reader and the writer could differ across cultures (see Hinds 1987). Schliesser 2012 suggests additional reasons, and there can be any number of further reasons too. All these explanations are of course compatible, even within a single utterance.

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