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SERIOUS PHILOSOPHY¹

Abstract

What is serious philosophy? What does it demand of us? And is it true, as some suppose, that a philosopher can't be serious about his work unless he is solemn and humorless? Calling on ideas from C.S. Peirce, Haack argues first that philosophy is a serious form of inquiry, requiring real commitment and real intellectual effort, and then that playfulness and humor may actually be of help in such inquiry, while solemnity and self-importance will, for sure, impede it. "The serious philosopher," she concludes "must indeed work in earnest – but not in grim earnest."

“... the spirit ... is the most essential thing – the motive...” (C.S. Peirce)²

At dinner the night before I was to give a talk in her department, a young professor solemnly told me that there's no place for humor in serious philosophy. Since the paper on the relation of science and literature I was to present the next day was full of playful literary allusions and verbal jokes this was, to say the least, an awkward moment.³ Nonetheless, my paper was a serious piece of work – jokes and all. Now, thanks to *Spazio filosofico's* imaginative choice of theme, at last I have my opportunity to explore what's wrong with the idea that, to be serious, philosophical work must be humorless. It's been a long time coming; but, as the saying goes, better late than never.

“Serious,” of course, has a whole raft of uses, and many subtly-interrelated meanings. We laugh about the apocryphal billionaire who complains that household expenses are skyrocketing – “a million here, a million there, and pretty soon you're talking serious money”; meaning real money, a significant sum of money. Told something scarcely credible, we ask: “seriously?” – meaning: “really; no kidding?” We describe the measles as a serious illness, or a patient as in serious condition; meaning a grave illness, a

¹ © 2016 Susan Haack. All rights reserved.

² C.S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, eds. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss and (vols. 7 and 8) Arthur Burks, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-58, 1.34 (1869). (References to this work will be given by volume and paragraph number, followed by the original date as given by the editors.)

³ The paper eventually became chapter 8, “Stronger than Fiction,” of my *Defending Science – Within Reason*, Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2003 – later described by one reviewer, by the way, as “delightful,” as well as a “devastating” critique of the extravagances of radical rhetoricians of science.

potentially dangerous condition. We describe a crime as serious; meaning that it's not just a misdemeanor, it's a felony. We ask a friend who seems preoccupied and thoughtful, "why so serious?" – meaning: "why so solemn, why so glum?" But we also describe a hardworking, motivated young person as a serious student; meaning that he has a genuine desire to learn and is willing to do what's needed to succeed in this. And I, for one, think of some people in our profession as serious philosophers, really trying to answer the questions they are tackling, while others – these days, I sometimes wonder if they might not be the majority – seem more concerned to make a name for themselves, or to ensure a safe, comfortable professional life, or . . . , etc.

Etymologically, "serious" derives from the Latin, *serius*, "weighty," "heavy";⁴ and, in line with this, some of its many meanings point in the direction of "matters of significance, issues of real import" ("weighty"), and others in the direction of "grave, burdensome" ("heavy"). Hence my first approximation to an explanation of what's wrong with the idea that, to be serious, a philosopher must be humorless: it confuses two distinct strands in the complex mesh of meanings of "serious," two distinct sides of seriousness. It mistakenly supposes that, because philosophical questions are serious, i.e., have real significance, and because tackling them requires serious work, i.e., sustained thought and real commitment, a serious philosopher must eschew playfulness and go about his or her⁵ work, as the saying goes, in grim earnest. On the contrary, I shall argue, taking philosophy seriously and really working at it *doesn't* mean that you must set aside playfulness or humor; far from it. In fact, playfulness and humor may actually help in philosophical inquiry, while solemnity and self-importance will, for sure, stultify it.

I chose a line of Peirce's for my epigraph because, in my estimation, Peirce was one of the most truly serious of philosophers; because his reflections on what a genuine, committed philosophical thinker must do and how he should go about his work provide a starting point for understanding what serious philosophy is, and what it demands of us; and because he explicitly articulated the place in inquiry of a kind of intellectual free play. Moreover, implicitly and by example, his work allowed a real role – I'm tempted to say, a serious role – for humor; and on at least one occasion he suggested, albeit very briefly, what that role is. So, as I try first to articulate what serious philosophical work involves, and then to explain why this doesn't preclude humor, I shall often call on his ideas.

* * *

As Peirce saw it, and as I see it, philosophy is at its heart a kind of inquiry; that is, an effort to answer the questions that fall within its scope – and not, for example, a kind of therapy,⁶ or "just a kind of writing,"⁷ a genre of literature distinguished only by the

⁴ *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Springfield MA: Merriam Webster, 2003, p. 1136.

⁵ I will say this only once; but (to avoid giving the false impression that I have any kind of gender-agenda here) from here on I will use the generic "he" of standard English usage.

⁶ As some followers of the later Wittgenstein maintained. See Gary Hagberg, "On Philosophy as Therapy: Wittgenstein, Cavell, and Autobiographical Writing," *Philosophy and Literature*, 27 (1/2003), pp. 196-210.

names it drops.⁸ And if this is right, obviously, a serious philosopher must be really inquiring, really trying to discover the truth of the question(s) at issue.

But what does this amount to in the specific? What, as William James might have asked, is the *particular go* of it?⁹ It means, as Peirce says, that a serious philosopher, like any serious inquirer, must “draw[] the bow upon truth with intentness in the eye, with energy in the arm” (1.235, 1902); he must really want to find the true answer to the question, or questions, that concern him. This, as Peirce’s splendid metaphor reveals, has two aspects:¹⁰ the serious philosopher must really want *the truth*, not just some comfortable or convenient conclusion – that’s why he needs “intentness in the eye”; and he must really *want* the truth, not just vaguely wish he knew it – that’s why he needs “energy in the arm.” And this in turn means that he must “possess such virtues as intellectual honesty and sincerity and a real love of truth” (2.82, 1902), “a craving to know how things really [are]” (1.34, 1869), and the “peirceistance” and “peirceverance” to which Peirce ascribed his own achievements.¹¹

Alluding to James’s doctrine of the Will to Believe – about which, not surprisingly, he has reservations – Peirce describes the genuine desire to figure out the truth as the “Will to Learn” (5.583, 1898);¹² and a recurring theme in his work is that this Will to Learn, the essential spirit of serious inquiry, is well-characterized as the “scientific attitude.” In the current intellectual climate, some may suspect that the latter phrase betrays a kind of scientism, a too-deferential attitude to the sciences. But this would be a mistake. When Peirce tells us that he wants to make philosophy scientific, he isn’t suggesting, as some scientistically-inclined philosophers do today, that philosophy can simply look to the

⁷ As Richard Rorty once wrote. Richard Rorty, “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing” (1978-79), in Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Brighton: Harvester 1982, pp. 90-109, particularly p. 92 (Rorty is writing about Derrida; but seems he to sympathize with, even to endorse, this Derridian theme).

⁸ Rorty tried to make us believe that this idea of philosophy as “just a kind of writing” is “pragmatist,” and does better justice than the analytic tradition to the kind of meliorism one finds in James and the hankering one finds in Dewey for “wisdom” rather than simply knowledge. However that may be, nothing in my conception of philosophy-as-inquiry precludes there *also* being a role in philosophy for aspiration, for thinking about how we might make things better. See Susan Haack, “Pining Away in the Midst of Plenty: The Irony of Rorty’s Either-Or Philosophy,” *The Hedgehog Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture*, 18 (2/2016), pp. 76-80.

⁹ William James, *Pragmatism* (1907), eds. Frederick Burkhardt and Fredson Bowers, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1975, p. 95. James is quoting a story told about Clerk Maxwell as a boy.

¹⁰ I didn’t appreciate this doubleness until a commentary from Mark Migotti drew it to my attention. See Mark Migotti, “For the Sake of Knowledge and the Love of Truth: Susan Haack between Sacred Enthusiasm and Sophisticated Disillusionment,” in Cornelis de Waal (ed.), *Susan Haack: A Lady of Distinctions*, Amherst NY: Prometheus Book, 2007, pp. 263-276; and my reply, “Engaging with the Engaged Inquirer: Response to Mark Migotti,” in the same volume, pp. 277-283. And somehow, until I began writing the present essay, I didn’t notice that that this doubleness was already implicit in Peirce’s metaphor.

¹¹ I rely on Joseph Brent, *Charles Sanders Peirce: A Life*, Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1992, p. 16.

¹² James’s *The Will to Believe*, dedicated to Peirce, had been published the year before. William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897), eds. Frederick Burkhardt and Fredson Bowers, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1979.

sciences for answers to its questions.¹³ Far from it: think of his shrewd comment that to conduct an experiment to determine whether induction is valid would be “like adding a teaspoonful of saccharine to the ocean in order to sweeten it” (5.522, c. 1905). And neither is he suggesting, as other even *more* scientistically-inclined philosophers do today, that philosophical questions are illegitimate, and should simply be abandoned in favor of scientific ones.¹⁴ Far from it: think of that long list of issues he describes as giving “a small specimen of philosophical questions which press for industrious and solid investigation” (6.6, c. 1903). No: his point is that, if philosophy is to be more than endless disputation, it needs to take a lesson from the history of science to heart: that we humans *can* figure stuff out, *can* make real intellectual progress – *if*, but *only* if, we want to badly enough, and are sufficiently persistent in our efforts.

Again, some may suspect that Peirce’s talk of “love of truth” betrays an antiquated style of truth-worship, or suggests a conception of the serious inquirer as a kind of connoisseur whose passion happens to be, not rare stamps or important art, but true propositions. But this too would be a mistake. When Peirce speaks of the need for “intellectual honesty ... and a real love of truth,” he means, I take it, that the serious inquirer must face the evidence squarely, and honestly acknowledge where it points even if he finds the conclusion disappointing, frustrating, or threatening. If he is inquiring into whether *p*, what he wants is to end up with the conclusion that *p* just in case *p*, with the conclusion that not-*p* just in case not-*p* (and, of course, with the conclusion that it’s more complicated than simply *p* or not-*p* if it *is* more complicated than that). Put another way, the genuine inquirer doesn’t want just to collect and catalogue true propositions; he wants to discover real phenomena, real laws, and true explanations.¹⁵

A serious philosopher, like any serious inquirer, must seek out all the relevant evidence and arguments he can; assess as fairly as possible where all this points; take into account what further relevant evidence there may be that he can’t lay hands on; acknowledge that there may be relevant considerations that he doesn’t realize *are* relevant;¹⁶ and always be prepared to revise or reformulate his conclusion if he realizes it is unclear, imprecise, ambiguous, or potentially misleading, and to abandon it altogether

¹³ An important influence seems to have been W.V. Quine, “Epistemology Naturalized,” in Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, New York NY: Columbia University Press, 1969, pp. 69-90. As I showed in *Evidence and Inquiry* (1993), Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2009, chapter 6, this paper is multiply ambiguous; and on one reading what it proposes is that epistemological questions be turned over to psychology to resolve. This scientistic idea is exemplified in Alvin Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1986; and is roundly criticized in Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry*, chapter 7.

¹⁴ This second scientistic idea, also found in Quine’s paper, is exemplified in Paul Churchland, *Scientific Realism and the Plasticity of Mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), and “Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 78 (2/1981), pp. 67-89; Patricia Churchland, “Epistemology in the Age of Neuroscience,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 84 (10/1987), pp. 544-53; and in Stephen P. Stich, *From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science*, Cambridge MA: Bradford Books, 1983. It is roundly criticized in Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry* (note 13 above), chapter 8.

¹⁵ See also Susan Haack, “Confessions of an Old-Fashioned Prig,” in *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays*, Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 7-30.

¹⁶ See Susan Haack, “Epistemology: Who Needs It?” (first published, in Danish and in Italian, in 2011), *Kilikya Felsefe Dergisi (Cicilia Journal of Philosophy)*, 3 (2015), pp. 1-15, and *Philosophy South: Filosofia UNISINOS*, 16 (2/2015), pp. 183-193.

and start again if it turns out he was mistaken. This is asking a lot. Serious inquiry is *demanding*, in more ways than one. It requires not only intellect but also humility, a willingness to acknowledge when you've been looking in the wrong place or relying on mistaken or ambiguous assumptions, and need to start over; a kind of self-abnegation, to accept the risk that you may wrestle with some question, perhaps for years, only to fail, or only to find the answer just after someone else beats you to it; and the fortitude to accept that the truth may not be what you hoped it would be,¹⁷ and that your discovering it may make you unpopular, or even damage your professional prospects.

Only *after* I had painfully thought through the ideas in that last paragraph for myself did I discover that Peirce had written long before, in a paper on "Telepathy and Perception," that anyone who devotes his life to psychical research must accept:

- that it would be hard and incessant work, mostly drudgery, requiring him to be occupied mostly with knaves and fools;
- that it would cost him a great deal of money, considering all that it would prevent him from earning;
- that it would never bring him much honor, but would put a certain stamp of obloquy upon him;
- that even among the company of those who professed to love the truth, ... there would be found in the more richly endowed sciences, individuals who would treat him in the narrowest and most despicable spirit of the east wind;
- that after his whole life had been poured out into the inquiry, it was not unlikely that he might find that he had not found out anything (7.609, 1903).¹⁸

It's a scary thought: but things aren't really very different if you devote your life to philosophy; where – though I wouldn't go so far as to say that you're "occupied mostly with knaves and fools" – you must all too often deal with the self-deceived, with the self-promoting, with obfuscators, with followers of intellectual fashion.

Like any serious inquirer, a serious philosopher will shun what Peirce calls "sham reasoning" (1.57, c. 1896), making a pretense of inquiring when all he's really doing is seeking out reasons for the truth of some predetermined conclusion to which he is already unbudgeably committed; and what I have called "fake reasoning,"¹⁹ making a pretense of inquiring when all he's really doing is seeking out reasons for some predetermined conclusion to the truth or falsity of which he is indifferent, but which he believes it will be to his benefit to advocate – whether by making him famous or by ensuring that he is perceived in his professional circles as sound, right-thinking, and safely conformist.

Thus far I have spoken categorically, as if philosophers could be neatly classified into one of two classes, those who are serious and those who aren't. But it's clear on even a moment's reflection that this is a considerable oversimplification. In real life, things are

¹⁷ Hence James's shrewd comment about the "patience and postponement, [the] choking down of preferences ..., wrought into the very stones and mortar" of the "magnificent edifice of science." (James, *The Will to Believe* [note 12 above], p. 17).

¹⁸ The passage comes from §2, headed "The Scientific Attitude," of "Telepathy and Perception." The bullets are mine, added for ease of reading.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Susan Haack, "Preposterism and its Consequences" (1996) in Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* (note 15 above), pp. 188-208, particularly pp. 189-90.

usually complicated and messy, motives almost always in some degree mixed and ambivalent. *Both* “intentness in the eye,” the “craving to know how things really are” and “energy in the arm,” persistence, perseverance, doggedness, are matters of degree. So a gradualist, synechistic picture of some philosophers as more serious, in the relevant sense, and others as less so, would be closer to the truth. Wouldn’t the picture be better yet, you might wonder, if it allowed that some philosophers may be intellectually honest enough, but not very hard-working or patient, and others hard-working and patient, but not altogether honest? Interestingly enough, no; not really. There’s an asymmetry here: intellectual honesty must have priority. Without some minimal measure of “honesty and sincerity,” industry and patience can do more harm than good, because they enable the sham or fake inquirer to make a better pretence of inquiring;²⁰ whereas an honest inquirer short on industry or patience will only do less well than he might have done had he worked harder or more patiently.

None of this is to suggest that only serious philosophers ever arrive at true conclusions. The claim a sham or fake reasoner seizes on to defend *may* be true; in fact, when there are sham reasoners or fake reasoners defending claims that are mutually inconsistent, it’s certain that the proposition one side or the other defends *will* be true. Moreover, even the most serious inquirers may arrive at false conclusions. But then how, if at all, is serious philosophy really better? Peirce writes that “if you really want to learn the truth,” you will “surely be led into the way of truth, at last.” But notice that he doesn’t say that you will be led “*to the truth*”; and that he continues, “the more voraciously truth is desired at the outset, the shorter by centuries will the road to it be” (5.582, 1898). So what he means isn’t that *you* are guaranteed to get the truth if you want to wholeheartedly enough, but that if you are serious your work will contribute something to the truth’s being discovered eventually, whether by you or by someone else. The idea is “to pile the outworks of truth with the carcasses of this generation ... until some future generation, by treading on them, can storm the citadel” (6.4, 1898).

Probably the truly serious philosopher has always been the exception rather than the rule. (After all, when Plato proposed that in the ideal city philosophers should be kings, he hastened to add that he meant *real* philosophers, not those pesky Sophists.)²¹ Peirce complained about the sham reasoning characteristic of “seminary philosophers” (1.129, c. 1905) and the “academic professors” of his day (1.51, c. 1896); and about the sophisticated but pointless chatter of self-indulgent dilettantes:

... among *dilettanti* it is not rare to find those who have so perverted thought to the purposes of pleasure that it seems to vex them to think that the questions on which they delight to exercise it may ever get finally settled, and a positive discovery which takes a favorite subject out of the arena of literary debate is met with ill-concealed dislike. This disposition is the very debauchery of thought. (5.396, 1878).

²⁰ See Susan Haack, “Out of Step: Academic Ethics in a Preposterous Environment” (first published, in Spanish and Chinese, in 2010) in Haack, *Putting Philosophy to Work: Inquiry and Its Place in Culture*, Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2013 (expanded edition), pp. 251-268 (text) and 313-317 (notes), p. 266.

²¹ See Plato, *Republic*, V, 474b-c.

[The pragmaticist] is none of those overcultivated Oxford dons – I hope their day is over – whom any discovery that brought quietus to a vexed question would evidently vex because it would end the fun of arguing around it and about it and over it. (5.520, c. 1905).

Sadly, the situation today is no better, maybe even worse. To be sure, “seminary philosophy,” though by no means extinct, is much less common now than it was when Peirce wrote. But secular forms of sham reasoning abound, now in support of one or another of the myriad fads and fashions to which our profession presently seems so susceptible: “feminist” this, that, and the other; “naturalized” everything; “neurophilosophy”; “experimental philosophy”; the enduring Kripke-cult; the impulse to formalize every aspect of our discipline; and so on. And fake reasoning is ubiquitous. Professionally-ambitious philosophers blithely propose wildly implausible ideas: no one believes anything;²² it is pointless,²³ superstitious,²⁴ or politically incorrect²⁵ to care whether your beliefs are true or are false; there *is no* truth, no meaning, no values of any kind;²⁶ physics can explain everything;²⁷ science is just a kind of confidence trick, nothing more than power, politics, and rhetoric;²⁸ etc., etc. Those who propound such absurdities presumably hope – consciously or, more likely, in a convenient fog of self-deception – that this will make them famous, or at least notorious; and the not-so-ambitious who happily climb aboard one fashionable bandwagon or another presumably hope – consciously or, more likely, in a convenient fog of self-deception – that this will provide opportunities to join a clique and, better yet, a publication cartel.²⁹ And as for taking such pleasure (not to mention profit) in endlessly arguing “around and over and about” the same issue that you’d be really put out if it were actually resolved – well, what could better illustrate Peirce’s point than the resurgent debates around and over and about the “Gettier paradoxes,” first proposed fifty-odd years ago?³⁰

²² See, e.g., Paul Churchland, *Scientific Realism and the Plasticity of Mind* and “Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes”; Patricia Churchland, “Epistemology in the Age of Neuroscience”; Stich, *From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science* (note 14 above).

²³ See e.g., Richard Rorty, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,” *Common Knowledge*, 1 (3/1992), pp. 140-153, particularly p. 141.

²⁴ See e.g., Stephen P. Stich, *The Fragmentation of Reason*, Cambridge MA: Bradford Books, 1992, p. 98.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 118.

²⁶ Alex Rosenberg’s book, *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life without Illusions*, New York NY: W.W. Norton, 2011 focuses on ethical values; but at a 2014 conference in Amsterdam he cheerfully acknowledged that truth and meaning would also have to go.

²⁷ A claim repeated many times in Rosenberg’s book (note 26 above).

²⁸ See e.g., Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts*, Beverly Hills CA: Sage 1979; Harry Collins, “Stages in the Empirical Programme of Relativism,” *Social Studies of Science*, 11 (1981), pp. 3-10; Kenneth Gergen, “Feminist Critique and the Challenge of Social Epistemology,” in Mary M. Gergen (ed.), *Feminist Thought and the Structure of Knowledge*, New York NY: New York University Press, 1988, pp. 27-48.

²⁹ That is, a group of mutually-supportive academics who discuss and cite each other’s work, referee each others’ papers favorably, invite each other to conferences, write blurbs for each others’ books, ..., and so forth.

³⁰ Indeed, Gettier’s idea wasn’t even new; he was simply rehearsing something Bertrand Russell had noticed fifty years before. Edmund Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” *Analysis*, 23 (1963), pp. 121-123. Bertrand Russell, “Knowledge, Error, and Probable Opinion,” in Russell, *Problems of Philosophy*, Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 1912, pp. 131-139, pp. 131-32. A flurry of intensive

It's hardly surprising if outsiders sometimes perceive philosophers as engaged in pointless games – often, as engaged in pointless verbal games, “mere semantics.”³¹ But serious philosophy is serious business. For one thing, it can have significant real-world consequences. Whether any kind of criminal-justice system is defensible, for example, depends in part on the answers to philosophical questions both about evidence and truth, and about agency, free will, and responsibility; whether it's reasonable to devote significant social resources to supporting scientific work depends in part on the answers to philosophical questions about the method, or methods, of the sciences, the legitimacy of scientific claims to knowledge, and the scope and limits of what the sciences can do; how best to organize and manage universities depends in part on the answers to philosophical questions about human cognitive capacities and limitations, about what kinds of environment encourage honest, thorough, careful inquiry, and what kinds encourage haste, sloppiness, carelessness, corner-cutting, and fraud; and so on.

To be sure, some philosophical work will have only the most indirect bearing on real-world issues; and some may have none. And I'm not suggesting that only philosophy with real-world relevance, direct or indirect, is serious; the smallest and driest detail, even if it bakes no bread, may contribute something vital to our understanding of the world and our place in it. Peirce grants that some readers may find his work in logic³² so “dry, husky and innutritious” that it's “impossible to believe there's any human good in it”; but, he continues, it will be no more tedious than the multiplication table, which everyone acknowledges is nonetheless “worth the pain of learning” (2.17, 1902). I do mean, however, to insist that philosophy is serious inquiry; it is not a game, not an enterprise to be undertaken frivolously – as the saying goes, it is no joking matter.

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But doesn't this mean that, after all, the serious inquirer really must eschew playfulness and humor? Indeed, isn't this what Peirce meant when he wrote that “in order to be

discussion followed Gettier's paper; but in due course there seemed to be a growing sense that the real issues lay elsewhere – just as I was arguing, in detail, in “Know' is Just a Four-Letter Word,” a paper written in 1983 that offered a diagnosis of the source of these “paradoxes” that showed that the cycle of redefinitions of “knowledge,” counter-examples, and new redefinitions was doomed to failure. In 2009, in the midst of a resurgence of Gettierology, I finally put the paper into print. *Evidence and Inquiry* (note 13 above), second edition, pp. 301-330. Not unexpectedly, however, my diagnosis seems to have been of no interest to analytic epistemologists, who show no signs of giving up the delights of devising yet more redefinitions, counter-examples, etc., *ad nauseam*.

³¹ For example, I was startled to read, in medical statistician Austin Bradford Hill's famous lecture, “The Environment and Disease: Association or Causation?” *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 58 (1965), pp. 295-300, pp. 295-96: “I have no wish ... to embark upon a philosophical discussion of the meaning of ‘causation.’ ... Disregarding such problems in semantics, we have this situation. ...” But the classic illustration is Jonathan Miller and John Cleese's painfully funny parody of Oxbridge philosophy, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUvf3fOmTTk>.

³² Peirce was a pioneer of what is now called “modern logic,” developing a unified propositional and predicate calculus a few years after, and independently of, Frege. See C.S. Peirce, “On the Algebra of Logic” (3.154-251, 1880), and “The Logic of Relatives” (3.328-358, 1883); and O.H. Mitchell, “On a New Algebra of Logic,” in *Studies in Logic by Members of the Johns Hopkins University*, Little, Boston MA: Brown & Co., 1883, pp. 72-106 (a book edited by Peirce, though his name does not appear).

deep it is requisite to be dull” (5.17, 1903), and – replying to F.C.S. Schiller’s complaint that professional philosophers had made their subject “abstruse, arid, abstract, and abhorrent” – that some branches of science “are not in a healthy state if they are *not* abstruse, arid, and abstract” (5.537, c. 1905)? I don’t think so. There’s an honorable place in serious inquiry both for playfulness and for humor – perhaps, indeed, *especially* in the serious business of philosophical inquiry; and, again, Peirce knew this.

The first part of the argument is the more straightforward. A serious inquirer of any kind needs to come up with new ideas – possible explanations, suggestive accounts, tentative theories. He may also need to invent new words and phrases or to modify old ones to express these new ideas; and so on. And all this, while no doubt it will be informed by his background knowledge, is very different from systematic study, regimented inference, or even concentrated thought; it involves allowing the imagination to run free – in short, it is a kind of intellectual play, imaginative “work” that may be best done in your sleep, or while you’re taking a walk to shake off mental cobwebs or distracting yourself from your frustration with a question you can’t budge by taking time off to dust the furniture or vacuum the carpets.

Peirce writes:

There is a certain agreeable occupation of mind which, from its having no distinctive name, I infer is not as commonly practiced as it deserves to be; for engaged in moderately – say through some five to six percent of one’s waking time, perhaps during a stroll – it is refreshing enough to more than repay the expenditure. Because it involves no purpose save that of casting aside all serious purpose, I have sometimes been half-inclined to call it reverie [But i]n fact, it is Pure Play ... a lively exercise of one’s powers. Pure Play has no rules, except this very law of liberty (6.458, 1908).

This “Pure Play,” he continues, may take the form of aesthetic contemplation, of simple daydreaming, *or* of considering some striking aspect of the world and wondering what might explain it. This last Peirce calls “musement” (*ibidem*). To be sure, musement needs to be followed up by such more disciplined kinds of mental activity as carefully articulating details, checking out evidence, and spelling out arguments. Nevertheless, it is an essential part of the serious business of philosophical inquiry.

Well, OK, you may say; so there’s a place in the earliest stage of philosophical inquiry for this kind of mental loosening-up, for free play of the imagination. But this is still very far from showing that humor, let alone jokes, may also contribute to the serious business of philosophy as a whole. So what’s the second, less straightforward part of my argument?

Allow me to begin a little obliquely, by explaining why – whatever that solemn young professor I mentioned at the beginning may have thought – humor surely can contribute to the effective communication of serious philosophical ideas. To be sure, much of what’s published in philosophy today is written in a bland, chewy, impersonal prose larded with cliquish technicalities – a “style,” if you can call it that, presumably intended (insofar as there’s any particular intention behind it at all) to convey an impression of objectivity, professionalism, and the *au courant*. But this kind of academic automatic-writing invites, in response, a kind of academic automatic-reading – readers just look out for the jargon, the in-group phrases that enable them to pigeon-hole the author as belonging to one familiar clique or another, and then coast from there with no need for

any real thought. And it has another, ironic consequence, tempting some of those who, like myself, find this bland style repellent, to adopt instead a brash, even vulgar tone more appropriate to popular journalism than to the communication of seriously thought-through ideas. So, far from contributing to communication, the deadly, deadpan pseudo-professional style-of-no-style that now seems increasingly *de rigueur* can only too easily impede it.

Real communication requires making a real connection with your audience; and humor can help you do this. Introducing a paper on tricky epistemological topics by quoting Donald Rumsfeld's famously convoluted observations about "unknown unknowns" in U.S. military intelligence in Iraq, for example, as I once did,³³ made the real-world importance of what might otherwise seem "arid and abstract" epistemological questions about relevance and comprehensiveness of evidence nicely vivid. Concocting an imaginary conversation between Peirce and Rorty entirely from their own words³⁴ proved a devastatingly direct way to show how disastrously Rorty's "pragmatism" diverged from the real thing – far more rhetorically effective than the detailed scholarly argument I relied on elsewhere.³⁵ Quoting Kierkegaard's image of the intellectually grandiose philosopher as a man who builds himself a magnificent castle but then, finding it too drafty and uncomfortable to live in, moves into a shack nearby³⁶ proved an effective way of revealing how Popper's philosophy of science shifts up and back between an official falsificationism that is really a thinly-disguised and quite incredible skepticism (the castle), and a ramshackle quasi-fallibilism (the shack).³⁷ The story of my hopeless – and, in retrospect, hilarious – misreading of the instructions for assembling a flat-pack luggage-rack proved a good way to introduce the idea that exploring and classifying various kinds of *mis*interpretation can contribute to our understanding of interpretation.³⁸ And so on. Of course, the humor had better be *relevant* humor: simply breaking off to ask "have you heard the one about the minister, the priest, and the rabbi who go into a bar?"³⁹ – though it will, to be sure, give your audience a brief respite – does nothing to help get your point across, and may well distract their attention from it.

But none of this is yet enough to show, as I have claimed, that humor can play a useful role not only in the communication of ideas, but also *in the process of inquiry itself*.

³³ See Haack, "Epistemology: Who Needs It?" (note 16 above).

³⁴ See Susan Haack, "We Pragmatists...: Peirce and Rorty in Conversation" (1997), in Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* (note 15 above), pp. 31-47.

³⁵ See, e.g., Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry* (note 13 above), chapter 9; "Philosophy/philosophy, an Untenable Dualism," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, XXIX (3/1993), pp. 411-26; "Pragmatism, Old and New," *Contemporary Pragmatism*, 1 (1/2004), pp. 3-41, reprinted in Haack (ed.), *Pragmatism, Old and New: Selected Writings*, Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2006, pp. 15-57.

³⁶ See Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals* (1846), in Alexander Dru (ed.), *A Selection from the Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1938, p. 156.

³⁷ See Susan Haack, "Federal Philosophy of Science: A Deconstruction – and a Reconstruction" (2010), in Susan Haack, *Evidence Matters: Science, Proof, and Truth in the Law*, New York NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 122-155, p. 129.

³⁸ See Susan Haack, "Misinterpretation and the Rhetoric of Science: Or, What was the Color of the Horse?" *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 72 (1998), pp. 69-91.

³⁹ You haven't? Well, OK: A minister, a priest, and a rabbi go into a bar; and the bartender asks: "Is this a joke?"

The first step towards seeing what that role might be is to notice that inquiry and communication are in some ways quite similar: thinking something through is a lot like holding an intense discussion – only not with another person, but with yourself.⁴⁰ And sometimes, as Peirce says, you will need to think through details that aren't inherently very interesting. In fact, while coming up with a bold but seemingly promising idea is exhilarating, working out all the picky details can be painfully hard, and more than a little nerve-wracking – there's always the risk that, when you tug at the loose end of an apparently tiny problem, the whole thing will unravel, and you'll have to start over. This part of the work, when you think you've dealt with one problem only to realize that you've created another, and so on, really *can* be, in Peirce's phrase, a kind of drudgery. But a joke, a pun, or an amusing caricature of the attractive-but-absurd idea whose grip you are trying to break – just as it can aid communication by giving an audience a little respite and a little nudge towards comprehension – can serve to ease the drudgery. To be sure, a brisk workout or a stiff drink might also do the trick. But the joke, the pun, the caricature offer a different, and in a way a better kind of tension-breaking: because they have content, they can not only provide relief from the drudgery, but also potentially suggest ways to move forward in inquiry.

There are examples in even the driest of writers. Think, for example, of Frege's splendidly exasperated comment on Mill's empiricist account of numbers: "What a mercy, then, that not everything in the world is nailed down ... [or] $2 + 1$ would not be 3!"⁴¹ And there are many examples in Peirce's writings. The young editors of the *Collected Papers* remark on the "humor, freshness, [and] pithiness of phrase" found in Peirce's lectures and his very extensive unpublished work,⁴² but in fact the published works too are lit by flashes of mordant wit. I'm especially fond of that comment that "Descartes marks the period when Philosophy put off childish things and began to be a conceited young man" (4.71, 1893); and of Peirce's marvelous caricature of the nominalism he believed had long prevailed in British philosophy:

Just as if a man, being seized with the conviction that paper were a good material to make things of, were to go to work to build a *papier mâché* house, with roof of roofing paper, foundations of pasteboard, windows of paraffined paper, chimneys, bath tubs, locks, etc., all of different forms of paper, his experiment would afford valuable lessons to builders, while it would certainly make a detestable house, so these one-idea'd philosophies are exceedingly interesting and instructive, and yet are quite unsound (6.7, 1891).

Most immediately to the present purpose, though, is a little-noticed passage in Peirce's 1903 Harvard lectures, where he is developing his theory of the universal categories, and has just described pure self-consciousness, the most degenerate form of Thirdness,⁴³ as "a mere feeling that has a dark instinct of being a germ of thought." And then he notices

⁴⁰ As Peirce was well aware; and as, of course, Plato had said long before (*Theaetetus*, 189e), thought is "a talk which the soul has with itself."

⁴¹ Gottlob Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic* (1884), Engl. transl. J. L. Austin, Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 9^e.

⁴² Hartshorne and Weiss, "Introduction" to C.S. Peirce, *Collected Papers* (note 2 above), p. iii.

⁴³ According to Peirce there are three universal categories: Firstness, or pure feeling; Secondness, or reaction, existence; and Thirdness, or generality, connectedness. See *Collected Papers* 5.41 ff. (1903).

how perilously close to pretentious nonsense that sounded, and breaks off to tell an anecdote:

I remember a lady's averring that her father had heard a minister ... open a prayer as follows: "O Thou, All-sufficient, Self-sufficient, Insufficient God." Now pure Self-consciousness is Self-sufficient, and if it is also regarded as All-sufficient, it would seem to follow that it must be Insufficient.

And then he adds:

I ought to apologize for introducing such Buffoonery into serious lectures. I do so because I seriously believe that a bit of fun helps thought and tends to keep it pragmatical (5.71, 1903).

"A bit of fun helps thought and tends to keep it pragmatical": that's exactly right. The right kind of "buffoonery" can serve *both* to refresh the mind, *and* to keep your intellectual feet on the ground.

* * *

Keeping your thought "pragmatical," not losing your intellectual footing, requires you to be vigilant against slipping into pretentious obscurity or time-wasting intellectual busywork and, above all, to be keenly aware of your fallibility and your limitations. The first step towards finding out, as Peirce reminds us, is to acknowledge "that you do not satisfactorily know already"; that's why no "no blight can so surely arrest intellectual growth as the blight of cocksureness" (1.13, c. 1897). And an important step towards acknowledging that you don't know is to remember the many times you *thought* you knew, but then discovered that, after all, you didn't.

And this leads me to the last theme I have room for here: self-importance, the blight of over-confidence, is a major hindrance to inquiry; and one good way of avoiding this trap is to cultivate the habit of laughing wryly at yourself when you realize you're in danger of succumbing to self-importance, to overreaching, to taking yourself too seriously. That's probably why the touches of humor you find in the work of serious philosophers are so often wryly self-deprecatory. Think of Rudolf Carnap – usually unremittingly serious in manner as well as in content – unexpectedly breaking off to warn himself that if he's not careful he'll end up producing a theory "wonderful to look at in its exactness, symmetry, and formal elegance, yet woefully inadequate for the task ... for which it is intended."⁴⁴ And then there's Peirce, who writes in an unpublished manuscript that "[i]t appears that there are certain mummified pedants who have never waked to the truth that the act of knowing a real object alters it. ... They are curious specimens of humanity, and ... I am one of them..." (5.555, c. 1906); and once wryly observed that there was a "kink in [his] damned brain" that "prevent[ed him] from thinking as other people think."⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Rudolf Carnap, *Logical Foundations of Probability*, Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1950; second ed., 1962, p. 218.

⁴⁵ My source is E.T. Bell, *Men of Mathematics*, New York NY: McGraw Hill, 1949, p. 519.

The academic environment today, with its constant demands for abstracts, proposals, reports of results, and lists of achievements, encourages self-aggrandizement and exaggeration – *and*, inevitably, the vice Peirce calls “the vanity of cleverness” (1.31, 1869). The phrase perfectly captures a phenomenon all too common in today’s academy, the over-confidence of those who, priding themselves on being smart, forget that serious philosophical work requires not just quick wits, but also creativity, willingness to take intellectual risks, commitment, patience, mature reflection – not to mention intellectual luck. But clever undergraduates are encouraged into graduate programs; clever graduate students land academic jobs in fancy places; clever professors build impressive résumés, snag “prestigious” grants, publish in the most “prestigious” journals and with the most “prestigious” publishers.⁴⁶ Cleverness soon begins to seem like the main thing, even the only thing. No wonder, then, that those who make it, in an institutional sense, seem so susceptible to the vanity of cleverness.⁴⁷ No wonder, either, that we so easily forget, not only that the serious philosopher needs much more than just smarts, but also that an ability to laugh at yourself, to smile ironically at what you now realize were hopelessly unrealistic intellectual aspirations or wildly premature celebrations of half-baked solutions, makes you a better inquirer, while taking yourself too seriously makes you a worse one. All the more reason, then, to say plainly by way of conclusion that the serious philosopher must indeed work in earnest – but not in *grim* earnest.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Why the scare quotes? Because in our hunger to make a name for ourselves we forget the etymological connection between “prestige” and “prestdigitation,” i.e., sleight of hand, conjuring. See Susan Haack, “Credulity and Circumspection: Epistemological Character and the Ethics of Belief,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 88 (2014), pp. 27-47, particularly §3.

⁴⁷ See also Haack, “Out of Step” (note 20 above), p. 265.

⁴⁸ My thanks for Mark Migotti for helpful comments on a draft.