

Philosophy, Philosophizing, and Philosophical Change of Mind and Heart

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Nicholas Burbules's Presidential Address weaves a marvelous tale about the telling of tales, taking as its text many of the most famous episodes of *The Odyssey*. It is a rich, imaginative, provocative, and complex work, fully reflective of our President's own special intellectual virtues: originality, daring, and acute logical and linguistic sensibility. It is remarkably wide-ranging in scope — Nick clearly reads for at least twenty-five hours a day, and from every aisle of the bookstore. Perhaps most important, and most reflective of its author's philosophical outlook, it articulates a certain fatalism or dark acquiescence concerning our philosophical potential. Unlike other, more optimistic philosophers, Burbules is not at all sanguine about the ability of philosophy, or of philosophizing, to find answers to philosophical questions, solve philosophical problems, make progress, or render our philosophical accounts *better*. *Tragedy* is key to Burbules's philosophical world view. Without contradicting our esteemed leader, I will try nevertheless to articulate a more optimistic — I hope not Pollyanna-ish — vision of our efforts and our craft. And, as befits my role in Burbules's tale, I will wear my rose colored monocle as I partially defend the "monocularism" that Burbules criticizes.

On Burbules's reading of Homer's great work, *mêtis* — cunning; the ability to formulate an artifice, strategy, or plan, especially under duress — is Odysseus' distinctive virtue. Burbules suggests that *mêtis* is instructively seen as a feature of, or metaphor for, *philosophical* thought. He characterizes it very broadly, as both a disposition and a mode of reasoning. It can be used both wisely and otherwise; it can be both used and *mis*-used. It involves both open-mindedness and opportunism. Odysseus, thanks to his *mêtis*, is shrewd, subtle, sly, suave, wily, clever, cunning, deft, tactful, scheming, crafty, and more. *Mêtis* is a wide-ranging virtue indeed.

Although I agree with many of Burbules's claims about the place of *mêtis* in philosophy and philosophizing, his account strikes me as telling only half the story. The basic problem with Burbules's view, I believe, is that *mêtis* is too diffuse a concept to ground or constitute an account of philosophy or philosophizing. The virtues of "binocularism" he extols are virtues indeed. But the line between monocularism and binocularism is not as easy to draw as Burbules suggests. Moreover, the former also has virtues which philosophy abjures at its peril. Even if the distinction between them can successfully be drawn, philosophy and philosophizing need them both. Or so, at any rate, I will argue.

Burbules champions "monstrous philosophy": philosophical efforts which "contain differences within them," and in doing so render themselves incapable of being, literally, true and complete accounts. On his view, monstrous philosophy is especially apt during the process of *philosophical change*, when "things you were very sure of seem no longer tenable; when you come to look at familiar positions and

see them in a new light; when the frame or box around what you have always assumed to be true becomes apparent to you, and the existence of important considerations outside that frame becomes impossible to ignore.” This process involves “a recognition of greater complexity and uncertainty, and it is frequently accompanied by feelings of doubt, puzzlement... and real loss.”¹ Indeed, on Burbules’s view of it, “[t]he essence of philosophical change is the recognition of one’s *being wrong*, not as an error to be corrected but as an unavoidable imperfection in any philosophical thesis or system” (emphasis Burbules’s).

This account of philosophical change leads Burbules inexorably to a distinction between “monocular” and “binocular” philosophy, and a decisive preference for the latter:

Monocular philosophies can generate internal questions, and often these are of real import; but the limit of their capacity to question or criticize themselves is bounded by the assumptions that they cannot question because they do not even recognize them as assumptions. Philosophy requires a certain kind of binocularism, I think: the possibility of holding certain beliefs while at the same time seriously appreciating the perspectives from which those beliefs might be problematic.

Burbules’s plea for binocularism reflects his deep appreciation of the virtues in philosophy, of seeing things in new ways; of problem-posing rather than -solving; of enlarging the conversation; of philosophical creativity and open-endedness. Here he is undoubtedly correct — surely the Western philosophical tradition values these virtues, in theory and at least largely in practice. Burbules is certainly right to warn us against philosophizing in ways that “can freeze thought, [and] stop the asking of certain kinds of questions.” To the extent that “monocular philosophizing” — a wonderful phrase! — does that, I stand with him in condemning it.

But I do not agree that we should eschew “[b]road general principles or truths,” because, as Burbules puts it, they “cannot provide an account of the exceptions, or conflicted cases, that present us with the most deeply troubling dilemmas; in particular, they cannot draw the boundaries of their own scope of applicability.” For one thing, eschewing such principles and truths seems just as able to freeze thought as embracing them. For another, Burbules’s thesis concerning “broad, general truths” is itself a broad, general thesis which is surely not true of all such truths and principles. Finally, I do not agree that all such principles “cannot draw the boundaries of their own scope of applicability.” Principles of rationality, I believe, do just that.²

There is a further difficulty, I believe, in viewing *mêtis*, and binocular philosophizing, as a way of overcoming *aporia*, of “making your way when there is no map.” This seems to me an unduly overblown understanding of the latter expression, which risks trivializing it. The student in introductory logic class must also, in trying to prove elementary theorems, make her way without a map, since there is no algorithmic procedure for constructing (as opposed to checking) proofs. So it is in any creative endeavor — the creative writer, the creative scientist, even the creative accountant or bureaucrat, must make her way when there is no map — just as the philosopher must. In this respect, there is nothing special about the situation of the philosopher. To invoke *aporia*, and tragedy, here, seems to me overly dramatic.

Perhaps the main difficulty is this. *Mêtis* is a mode of reasoning best suited to “situations which are transient, shifting, disconcerting, and ambiguous,” according to Detienne and Vernant. Burbules says that “this is a pretty good characterization of philosophy.” I would say rather that it is a pretty one-sided characterization. Many philosophical problems are like this; many are not — or, perhaps better: while all philosophical problems have these features, they also have other, more permanent and less ambiguous, features.

Consider just a small sample of classic philosophical problems: (a) reconciling God’s moral perfection with the existence of evil; (b) coming to grips with Hume’s problem of induction; (c) identifying the determinants of personal identity (what is it about you that makes you at time t the same person you were at an earlier time t_1 ? — here Odysseus’ identity over time is an instructive case); or (d) characterizing the nature and structure of epistemic justification. All these problems have long philosophical histories; all have enjoyed occasional innovative reformulations and attempted solutions that have shed genuinely new light and afforded the opportunity to question previous assumptions. For example, John Hick’s Irenaean “soul-making” theodicy, and Peter van Inwagen’s re-articulation of the traditional “falling away from God” theodicy, are recent, innovative attempts to resolve (a); Goodman’s “new riddle of induction,” “grue” paradox, and solution in terms of “projectibility” and “entrenchment” are famous attempts to address (b); Derek Parfit’s ingenious and original treatment of personal identity, and his thought-experiments concerning brain transplantation, opened up whole new ways of conceiving and addressing (c); and a wide-ranging set of proposals, from a fairly large set of philosophically diverse pens, have issued in new theories concerning, and new ways of understanding, traditional questions concerning the nature (for example, internalist vs. externalist) and structure (for example, coherentist vs. foundationalist vs. contextualist) of epistemic justification.

My question is: Do these episodes of “seeing things in new ways” constitute the sort of binocularism that Burbules advocates? I am unsure, because Burbules’ formulation, in terms of *mêtis*, thinking outside of the box, and ambivalence, is not sufficiently clear. The problems just listed are fundamental, and hard, but not — or not only, or always — “transient, shifting, disconcerting, and ambiguous.” They are also deeply constant, resistant to solution but at the same time resistant to change. Attempts to resolve them do indeed reveal new ways of conceiving them, but they also reveal their fundamental character. The really deep problems resist solution, but do not change fundamentally. For example, Hick’s “soul-making” theodicy does indeed provide a new way of thinking about the traditional problem it addresses, but that problem nevertheless remains as it was before Hick: how can a morally perfect and all-powerful being permit suffering? Indeed, it is because Hick’s theodicy is offered from “within the box” that it has the philosophical depth and commands the philosophical interest that it does. Similar remarks apply to the other items on my brief laundry list of classic philosophical problems. I agree that thinking philosophically can rightly be seen in the ways Burbules recommends — as with proving theorems, there are no algorithms for thinking philosophically — but there is more to such thinking than those features Burbules emphasizes. And there is more

constancy in the problems themselves than Burbules's Homeric vision of philosophy acknowledges. In this sense, there is a place for monocularism, as there is for binocularism, in philosophy.

Consider one last example, that of the philosophy of W.V.O. Quine, arguably the most significant philosopher (writing in English) of the second half of the twentieth century. Is Quine's work monocular or binocular? Certainly it is the latter, in its revealing critiques of several fundamental but previously unchallenged assumptions of Rudolf Carnap's positivism. It is equally clearly the former, in its relentless development of Quine's naturalistic alternative, and its focus on problems, both general and technical, generated from within its "frame," and its concomitant neglect of challenges launched from outside that frame. Both these aspects of Quine's philosophy are, I trust it is uncontroversial, important. But it is far from clear that they can be neatly separated into monocular and binocular components. Here again we see both that the monocular/binocular distinction is not always clear, at least in application; and that, to the extent that the distinction can be drawn, monocular philosophy is as significant as its binocular cousin.

Of course Burbules explicitly acknowledges that he is not trying to impose his Homeric vision of philosophy upon us, and so he might well agree with me about the limitations of that vision. But then I wonder what his thesis comes to. Is his claim that the Homeric vision is preferable, or superior, to other visions? Or is it, on his view, just another vision? If the former, I respectfully demur — not because I disagree, but because the *mêtis* view of philosophy and philosophizing is, I believe, only half the story.

But here I am no doubt guilty of what Burbules calls "fossilization." I wonder if this is avoidable. After all, he too has settled into a "set of positions," many of which are articulated in his essay, concerning tragedy, loss, the unavoidability of aporia, and so on. But it is important to acknowledge that defense of one's fossils also demands philosophical creativity. Whether or not sticking to one's position amounts to the familiar philosophical disease of "hardening of the categories" depends very much on the details of the philosophical dialogue, of the arguments and criticisms advanced.

I hope I will be forgiven for mentioning one additional point of deep agreement. It warms my heart to hear Burbules affirm that there is at least something essential to philosophy and its practice, when he writes: "Of course we are trying to give good arguments, to be as clear as possible, to critique views that are confused or ill-considered. If we are not doing that, we are not doing philosophy." To this I can only say: Amen!

There is much more to Burbules's essay than I can comment on here. His discussion is full of rich and insightful observations, and compelling analyses and arguments. In the end Burbules and I diverge, not just in substantive conviction, but in temperament. For him, philosophy is ultimately tragic; my view is more optimistic. Philosophical progress is difficult, of course, and it does indeed often involve, as he insists, elements of failure and loss. But to make these basic is to see the glass as half-empty. There is no obligation, no reason, to favor seeing it that way. This

divergence is a happy one, for it challenges us both to do better. I have enjoyed no more insightful and incisive critic; over the years I have benefited enormously from his criticisms, suggestions, and insights. It is an honor and a pleasure to acknowledge his contributions, and to thank him on behalf of us all for his deep, and deeply stimulating, essay.

1. Over the years Burbules and I have disagreed over the place of psychology in philosophy. Here, once again, I find Burbules's comments insightful, but mainly about matters psychological — in this case, about the *process* of “philosophical change,” and how it *feels* to be in a situation of such change. For example, in his comments on Wittgenstein's philosophical change, his analysis is at bottom psychological: this is what Wittgenstein *felt*. If I may be blunt: who cares? How do we get from the psychological point, that philosophical change *feels* the way Burbules describes, to the philosophical points he wants to defend, for example, that all philosophical theses are “wrong,” and “unavoidably imperfect?” Indeed, Burbules's driving question — how can we have “an attitude toward philosophy that is productive and not paralyzing?” — seems itself to be more psychological than philosophical, as does his focus on the ambivalence and doubt characteristic of binocular philosophizing. (Of course, Burbules challenges my no doubt over-simple philosophy/psychology dichotomy.)

2. By contrast see, Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason* (Routledge, 1988), 132-33. I think that Burbules would have done well here to distinguish the self-applicability of truths, principles, and theses from that of concepts. Burbules's remarks concerning rationality deserve much fuller treatment than I can give them here. I think he insufficiently pursues the question: In what way can *mêtis* be understood as a manifestation, or aspect, of rationality? In particular, the failures of or inappropriate uses of *mêtis* that he discusses seem to me to be cases simply of failures of judgment, or of practical rationality, and are analyzable as such. So I disagree with Burbules's remarks concerning Elster, the Sirens, and Scylla and Charybdis. I regret that I cannot pursue these matters here.