

Responsible Philosophy: Comments on Bryan Cross's *The Plain Person and the Catholicity of Philosophy*

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Bryan Cross, in his paper *The Plain Person and the Catholicity of Philosophy*, argues that contemporary philosophical practice is in disorder. Intractable disputes amongst philosophers lead to widespread and severe disagreements regarding most major philosophical questions, which in turn have led to a shift in the conception of philosophy (and even the self-conception of philosophy by its practitioners). This has resulted in the relegation of philosophy to a cultural 'back seat', so to speak, *vis a vis* other disciplines, most notably science. As a solution to this problem, Mr. Cross advocates an invocation of MacIntyre's 'plain person'. Roughly put, to resolve the seemingly irresolvable disagreements that philosophers have amongst themselves, we must reason 'in a universal way' from a shared body of knowledge already acquired 'in the pre-philosophical period of every human life' (Cross, p. 8). Finding this common ground (which includes reasoning that is accessible in principle to every human being from implicitly or explicitly shared ground principles) will allow philosophers to resolve disputes and find agreement on these fundamental questions. This will preserve the universal nature of the answers that philosophy as a discipline not only requires, but are entailed by the nature of philosophical questions themselves.

I will limit my comments on Mr. Cross's paper to three areas: 1) It may be that the problem of irresolvable disputes among the philosophical community is not as serious as it seems to be for two reasons. First, historically, philosophers have done good work in coming up with knowledge which has engendered general agreement. In these cases,

the subject-matter simply ceased to be the subject-matter of philosophy. Second, even under the category of modern philosophy, some areas seem to be more subject to Mr. Cross's worries than others. While ethics especially may be in disarray, other areas of philosophy enjoy a symbiotic relationship with other disciplines. For example, philosophy of mind and neurophysiology seem particularly well-suited to inform one another and to come to conclusions which display the general agreement about the truth that both philosophers and science are after. 2) Regarding ethics in particular, I have two worries about the use of the 'plain person' solution. First, if moral concepts are acquired by some combination of psychological conditioning, social conditioning, upbringing, and life-experience, then there is no guarantee that there *is* a 'plain person' perspective in which there are agreed-upon premises. Second, our pre-theoretic moral intuitions are in relevant ways hopelessly jumbled and at times contradictory themselves. If the job of philosophic inquiry is, in part, to correct these conflicting intuitions and to clarify concepts, even if there is agreement in a pre-philosophic state, must we do philosophy to get to *rational* agreement? If so, are we able to invoke the 'plain person' to resolve disputes? 3) Finally, as Mr. Cross alludes to in his paper (p. 2), the nature of these disputes may well be exacerbated by the way philosophy is done in a university setting. Perhaps one way to reach agreement (or, at least, greater agreement) is to look at the way philosophy is done professionally, and fix the system.

While I am sympathetic with Mr. Cross's concerns and in general agreement with his recommendations for resolving these intractable disputes within the philosophical community, I wonder whether the nature of these disputes is as grave as he takes them to be. Historically, what philosophers did under the name of 'philosophy' included topics

that we now include under the rubrics of physics, physiology, neurobiology, cosmology, astronomy, and so on. As philosophers discovered a shared body of (confirmed) knowledge, bits and pieces of philosophy ‘fell off’, so to speak, and became what we now call the sciences. We are in a period now in which psychology is attempting to break off from philosophy and become a science; while the attempt has, in my opinion, failed as of this time, we can still hold out hope that, with help from neurobiology (among other disciplines), psychology can escape philosophy and become a science on a par with physics, etc. The point here is that, if the above is correct, it becomes unsurprising that philosophy is riddled with seemingly irresolvable disputes, since philosophers are left with the questions that have not been answered to the satisfaction of all (or most) yet. Once these answers are achieved, the confirmation or disconfirmation of theories will no longer be the subject matter of philosophy, as there will be nothing left for philosophers to do. Philosophy is a despairing enterprise; on one account of what it is to do philosophy, the end of philosophy is to not have to do it anymore.

Further, some sub-disciplines in philosophy may be more subject to the ‘intractable disagreement problem’ than others. Philosophical ethics and philosophy of religion come to mind as areas in which we have widespread disagreement. It may well be that the invocation of the ‘plain person’ could be of some use here. However, other areas seem to be doing fairly well. Philosophers of mind particularly seem to take the discoveries of neurobiology seriously, and in so doing are making some kind of progress. I see this relationship as a symbiotic one; the role of philosophers is to raise questions and ‘point the way’, so to speak, for scientific research. Scientific research will also inform philosophic inquiry; if we have a theory of mind which is inconsistent with well-

confirmed neurobiological theories, then we might well say ‘so much the worse’ for the philosophical theory. We may be able here to distinguish between what we might call ‘pure speculative philosophy’ from ‘scientific philosophy’. Pure speculative philosophy, with little or no input from science, must rely upon method. Here is where I think the ‘plain person’ can be informative; if we go back to our pre-philosophic state, and can agree upon a method of reasoning and some basic premises, then that would seem to help insure our conclusions as well as engender agreement.

In its application to the disputes in ethics, I have two worries regarding the ‘plain person’ solution. First, one could argue that our pre-theoretic moral concepts are cobbled together from psychological facts about ourselves (human nature?), psychological conditioning, social conditioning, and life-experience. Of course, one could see the above sentence as a philosophical claim, and thus not pre-theoretic at all. In any case, one wonders whether there even are any (pre-philosophic) moral concepts to which plain persons would agree. Even if there are such concepts, would we be able to qualify that agreement as rational? Second, our pre-theoretic (‘common sense’) moral concepts are often muddled, and sometimes result in contradictions. It has often been taken as the job of philosophy to clarify and codify concepts. If we must, in order to get moral philosophy ‘off the ground’, at the very least use philosophical inquiry to clarify our starting-point, are we already past the ‘plain person’? One possible answer to this would be to say that, pre-philosophically, we must at least agree on methodology. Presumably this would require a commitment to rationality, or the notion of having reasons. Can we do even this pre-philosophically? The worry here is that in order to do meta-philosophy as Mr. Cross advocates, we must first agree upon a methodology (in this case,

presumably, reason or rational argumentation). However, there are still some questions that would need to be answered here in order to define our ‘starting point’ of the plain person. What if we have disagreements about the very nature of rationality (which have, of course, occurred in the literature)? Can we resort to the plain person to resolve these sorts of disputes?

As a final point, the cause of the seemingly intractable disputes may lie in the system under which professional philosophy is produced today. While there are some advantages of the system under which professional philosophers work today (e.g., peer-reviewed journals, and an increased speed and quality of communication between philosophers), there are disadvantages. Most professional philosophers work in a university setting in which copious work/research output is rewarded by advancement and job security. In this sense, then, professional philosophers (*qua* human beings) have reason to possibly pay less attention to the virtues of the practice of doing philosophy (and by extension, the goods internal to the practice of doing philosophy), and more attention to the goods external to the practice (job advancement, prestige, job security, and so on). It may be of little wonder that philosophy produced under such circumstances has less regard for the truth and more sophistry than it formerly did. Bluntly put, for contemporary philosophers, disagreement puts bread on the table. I do not mean to paint the practice of philosophy with too broad a brush; no doubt there are many (hopefully a vast majority) of philosophers that pay close attention and (dare I say) revere the quest for truth. But in order to put our house in order, we may need to look closely at the system under which philosophy is produced today. As MacIntyre noted, sometimes institutions that govern practices become corrupt. It is up to professional

philosophers today to re-dedicate ourselves to the pursuit of the goods that are internal and integral to the practice of philosophy. In this, I think Mr. Cross and I are in complete agreement.