

# PHILOSOPHY AS SELF- EXPRESSION

In March 2020, sheltering in place like others in Massachusetts and around the world, I found myself unable to concentrate. My mind was abuzz with static: anxiety about the state of the world and about my aging parents in England; an irrepressible urge to check the news or to scan my Twitter feed, again. I just about kept up with teaching my classes, now online, at MIT. But I could not sustain attention well enough to do research. Reading philosophy was difficult, writing it impossible. I felt remote from friends and colleagues, missing the society of philosophers; I wanted to connect with them somehow.

Thus the origin of Five Questions, a podcast in which I ask philosophers five questions about themselves. Let me admit up front: the idea of recording a podcast during the lockdown is the opposite of original. But Five Questions is distinctive in that it's about philosophers as people – not just about their ideas. In part, that's because I wasn't up to wrestling with arguments. But I had a second inspiration, too: the philosopher and novelist, Iris Murdoch. In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch refused to isolate the personality of philosophers from the character of their views. “To do philosophy is to explore one's temperament”, she wrote, “and yet at the same time to attempt to discover the truth. ... It is always a significant question to ask about any philosopher: what is he afraid of?”

Temperament and fear bookend my podcast episodes. I have been conscious of their influence from my first experiments in philosophy. I remember staring at tree trunks in the playground at the age of six or seven, stunned by the fact that there was anything at all. The thought that there might not have been induced a lurch of anxiety I now recognize as Sartre's “nausea”. Wonder and worry: these emotions are what led me to philosophy.

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It's not just that certain temperaments incline themselves to philosophical questions; rather, it's that one's temperament appears to shape one's philosophical positions. I'm increasingly aware, for instance, of my impatience with “revolutionary” views in metaphysics and epistemology on which common sense is overturned – an impatience that reflects my timid disposition.

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The idea that temperament shapes philosophy has an intermittent history. Among its advocates have been Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Nietzsche, but the canonical version is due to William James. The idealist doctrine that the mind is more real or more basic than matter “will be chosen by a man of one emotional constitution”, he wrote, “materialism by another”. Idealism appeals to those who feel, or want to feel, a sense of intimacy with the universe. Materialists experience this proximity, by contrast, as “a narrow, close, sick-room air”; they prefer to live in a more expansive, alien cosmos, and so, in their philosophy, they do.

In a widely neglected essay from 1937, the philosopher Ledger Wood took things a few steps further. Wood offered a series of tentative laws relating the peculiarities of one’s psychology to one’s philosophical orientation. For example: “1. *Realistic, naturalistic, and materialistic systems of philosophy are not infrequently the product of an extroverted personality; whereas idealism is ordinarily associated with the sensitive, introverted type.*” Aristotle, Bacon, Hobbes, and perhaps Descartes are extroverted naturalists; Plato, Kant, Fichte, and Schopenhauer idealist introverts. Wood notes exceptions, such as Spinoza, an introverted naturalist, and Hegel, an idealist extrovert – but contends that they prove the rule, since their views elude conventional categories.

## PHILOSOPHY TURNS OUT TO BE A FORM OF CRYPTIC SELF-EXPRESSION, A MANIFESTATION OF AVERSIONS AND DESIRES, INHIBITIONS AND OBSESSIONS

Wood’s evidence is at best impressionistic, though recent attempts at rigour are not encouraging. An essay published in *Philosophical Psychology* in 2010 delivered the breaking news that “philosophers are alike in being more *reflective* than their peers,” even controlling for level of education; it relied on the Cognitive Reflection Test, in which subjects face a series of trick questions to

which the “obvious” answer is wrong. Philosophers are reflective: who knew?

The more interesting, more troubling prospect is that philosophical opinions, superficially rooted in argument, turn instead on temperament, on non-rational aspects of our underlying character. You think you’re a materialist because you have good reasons; in fact, you’re an extrovert who finds idealism claustrophobic. Philosophy turns out to be a form of cryptic self-expression, a manifestation of aversions and desires, inhibitions and obsessions.

What’s worrisome here is that philosophy is meant to pursue the truth. You could read philosophy as poetry: Wallace Stevens admired the trope of the infinity of the world but found Leibniz disappointing, “a poet without flash”. Or you could read it as fiction, with William H. Gass: “no novelist has created a more dashing hero than the handsome Absolute, or conceived more dramatic extrications – the soul’s escape from the body, for instance, or the will’s from cause”. But you would be missing the point. The same Iris Murdoch who inspired my podcast insisted, in a BBC interview with Bryan Magee, that “philosophy is certainly *not* self-expression ... philosophy of course is argument, and you can say, well, is the conclusion true and is the argument valid?” An audio clip of Murdoch saying just that begins each episode of Five Questions.

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You could think of the podcast as an uncontrolled experiment. Is philosophy a form of self-expression? Would that undermine its claim to rationality or truth? Instead of trying to answer these questions myself, I crowdsource them, drawing on the life and work of others. In each episode, I ask a philosopher, “Does your temperament influence your philosophy; if, so, how?” and “What are you afraid of?” – along with three additional questions that make up five.

I’ve enjoyed these philosophers’ company and I’ve learned from their replies. One thing I knew already: philosophers make distinctions. Does your temperament influence your philosophy? Jennifer Hornsby pushed back: “Do you mean the style of my philosophy or the substance?” Even if one’s temperament affects the substance of one’s philosophy,

it's another thing to say that one's philosophy explores it – a distinction pressed by Richard Moran. Several of my interlocutors asked why it should be thought especially significant to ask of a philosopher, “What is she afraid of?” The original context for the question was Murdoch second-guessing her own defence of objectivity in ethics and the unity of the Good: is she subject to evasion or wishful thinking? But if we are dealing with the “hermeneutics of suspicion” – the idea that a text might be the product of hidden social or psychological forces – why expect the author of that text to be of any use? It may be fruitful to ask *about* a philosopher, “What is she afraid of?” That doesn't mean it's fruitful to ask the philosopher herself.

Despite these caveats, most of my guests played along, drawing connections between their temperament and their philosophy. David Velleman confessed his fierce attachment to autonomy, his dislike of being told what to think or what to do; his philosophy puts autonomy at the foundation of ethics. Susan Wolf shared her fear of being a jerk, which relates not just to her work on moral responsibility, but to more recent essays on meaning in life, which contend that a meaningful life must be one whose value can be seen from the outside, not just from one's own perspective. Gideon Rosen linked his placid temperament with his philosophical conservatism, his suspicion of mystery and depth, of philosophy that heralds radical transformation.

## **IF PHILOSOPHY ASPIRES TO KNOWLEDGE, AREN'T PHILOSOPHERS BOUND TO DENY THAT TEMPERAMENTS – AS OPPOSED TO ARGUMENTS – DETERMINE WHAT THEY THINK?**

I know, I know: this is far from a random sample. I decided whom to invite, which stories to share. Plus there was a measure of self-selection: those who doubted the impact of their temperament on their work

were unlikely to agree to being interviewed. Still, some of the demurrals were revealing. When I asked one of my first philosophy professors, D. H. Mellor, if he would record an interview, he told me he “didn't think much of [the two] compulsory questions”, not finding any deep connection between his temperament or his fears and his philosophy. Yet it was hard not to see in his resistance to Murdoch's questions the temperamental distaste for bullshit that informs his terse, no-nonsense work in metaphysics.

Still, I took his point. If philosophy aspires to knowledge, aren't philosophers bound to deny that temperaments – as opposed to arguments – determine what they think? The very idea of philosophy as self-expression threatens to be anti-philosophical, undermining the enterprise it purports to describe. That is the threat. Let me try to explain its power – and why I'm not intimidated by it. I don't believe that admitting the effects of temperament on philosophy, even self-consciously, makes philosophical inquiry any more precarious than it always already is.

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Suppose you disagree with me about a philosophical question. It might be the question, whether philosophy is self-expression. Or maybe you are an idealist, where I am an obstinate materialist. Suppose that we do everything we can to share the evidence and arguments that bear on our convictions. We talk for hours on long, frustrating walks, write e-mails to each other in threads that stretch a hundred messages deep. The disagreement persists. Situations like ours are endemic in philosophy, where the ratio of arguments offered to arguments that convince is astronomical. Suppose I cling to my belief: I know that I am right and you are wrong. What do I have to say about our situation to make sense of that?

I could say: if we kept taking walks and exchanging e-mails, perhaps till the end of time, you'd come around. But there's no reason to believe it's true. There's more than one internally consistent, self-confirming picture of the world. The essayist John Jeremiah Sullivan recounts this feature of his prior faith:

Everything about Christianity can be justified within the context of Christian belief. That is, if you accept

its terms. Once you do, your belief starts modifying the data (in ways that are themselves defensible), until eventually the data begin to reinforce belief. ... That is why you can never reason true Christians out of the faith. It's not, as the adage has it, because they were never reasoned into it – many were – it's that faith is a logical door which locks behind you. What looks like a line of thought is steadily warping into a circle, one that closes with you inside.

I don't know about Christianity but that strikes me as a good description of a worked-out philosophical view. If it's encompassing enough, I won't be able to reason you out of it.

I could say: I get it right and you get it wrong because I have ineffable evidence you somehow lack. Peter van Inwagen once proposed as much:

How can I believe (as I do) that free will is incompatible with determinism or that unrealized possibilities are not physical objects or that human beings are not four-dimensional things extended in time as well as in space, when David Lewis – a philosopher of truly formidable intelligence and insight and ability – rejects these things I believe and is already aware of and understands perfectly every argument that I could produce in their defense? ... I suppose my best guess is that I enjoy some sort of philosophical insight (I mean in relation to these three particular theses) that, for all his merits, is somehow denied to Lewis. And this would have to be an insight that is incommunicable – at least I don't know how to communicate it – for I have done all I can to communicate it to Lewis, and he has understood perfectly everything I have said, and he has not come to share my conclusions.

I don't think we have a clue what such insight could be. Evidence can be rendered in words if it is evidence at all.

No, if I am right and you are wrong, the difference lies not in our evidence or arguments but in what epistemologists call our “prior probabilities”: the basic standards of plausibility we bring to all the evidence and arguments we confront. (I don't mean that there's a biographical moment at which we have only “priors” without evidence; our prior probabilities are abstractions from our present beliefs.) If one of us is getting at the truth, acquiring knowledge, while



the other is not, one set of prior probabilities must resonate more closely with the facts; it must be more in tune with the reality we are trying to make out. Those whose priors are mistaken are out of luck.

This may seem discomfiting. But we have to learn to live with it if we're to allow for knowledge in the teeth of intractable disagreement. Scepticism is no way out, since the ground on which it would rest – the impossibility of knowledge under radical disagreement – is itself afflicted by disagreement, so by its own lights unsound. We have no choice but to shoulder what John Rawls called “the burdens of judgment.”

This is where temperament comes in. For the traits of character that influence our philosophy – placidity, fear of disapprobation, independence of mind – are related to our prior probabilities. Our temperament shapes our sense of what is plausible. I said before that my timidity makes me wary of revolution in metaphysics and epistemology; the world is more or less the way it seems to common sense. I could have spoken just as well

of intellectual sobriety, which I think of as a cognitive virtue. Like ethical virtues, the virtues of cognition are not universally shared; that doesn't mean that virtue, or knowledge, is impossible.

There's a reflexive element in this, too. It is a facet of my temperament that I don't care so much about persuading others of my views; I don't expect to be successful when I try; and I don't mind that others disagree, so long as they are not determined to convince *me*. I'd be surprised if there's not a connection between my relative indifference to agreement and both the image of philosophy I've been urging on you, my reader, and the way in which I've been doing it. I am temperamentally disposed to be unperturbed by the influence of temperament on philosophy.

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I concede: it could all be wishful thinking – that philosophical knowledge is possible, that my temperament resonates with the truth. But I'd need to see an argument for that and I doubt that I'd be convinced. Perhaps you think I've got things backwards: that it's your conflicting temperament that is on track. I don't blame you: what else are you supposed to think?



**¶ Plegmaticus.**  
 Unser complex ist mit wasser mee getan  
 Daruñ wir subtilhat mit mügen lan.



**¶ Sanguineus.**  
 Unser complexion sind von lusten vil  
 Darumb sey wir hochmütig one zyl.



**¶ Melencolicus.**  
 Unser complexion ist von erden wech  
 Darüb sey wir schwärzmüsigkept gleich



**¶ Cholericus.**  
 Unser complexion ist gat von feüer  
 Schlahē vñ haegen ist vnser abentüer.

But that doesn't persuade me that you're right, or that I'm wrong. (If you have a few choice words to describe the character you read in these recalcitrant remarks, feel free to air them now; I promise I won't mind.)

What do I get from reading philosophers with whom I sharply disagree, where the conflict can be traced to our disparate priors? Often arguments I've not considered, problems to address, neglected possibilities, ideas. But also a created world, built from words or concepts, that is the self-expression of an individual, the realization of a unique temperament. There's a delight in experiencing this not unlike the pleasure one takes in a novel or a poem. Some philosophers are great writers; some who are not great writers create conceptual art. I don't need to agree with the guests on my podcast to love the worlds they have made for themselves.

But I also care about the facts. The dream would be to read, or to be, a philosopher whose views both succeed as self-expression and get things right, whose works explore their temperament yet at the same time uncover the truth. Insofar as it accords with an emotional disposition – melancholic, phlegmatic, choleric, sanguine – the fact that this temperament is in tune with reality means that certain sentiments towards the world are objectively apt. There's a right way to feel about life, the universe, and everything.

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