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Response to Danielle Macbeth

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Response to Danielle Macbeth, "The Place of Philosophy"

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Danielle Macbeth has two principal goals in "The Place of Philosophy": to diagnose the plight of contemporary Western—and especially analytic—philosophy, and to argue for an alternative conception of philosophy's role, according to which engagement with its history and with the philosophies of other cultures becomes crucial. I have a great deal of sympathy with both halves of her project, and feel I have learned a considerable amount from her essay. As Macbeth herself emphasizes, though, the a priori and dialectical nature of philosophy urges readers to see for themselves whether a given work of philosophy is fully convincing, and if not, then to engage in constructive criticism. In that spirit, I propose that we consider whether Macbeth's "humanistic" conception of philosophy as aimed at "natural truth" might itself be insufficiently human-centered, still in thrall of the idea of a single truth.

At the core of Macbeth's account is the distinction, based upon but distinct from a related distinction defended by Bernard Williams, between an absolute conception of reality and a human conception of reality. The former concerns "reality as it is disclosed to *any* rational being, regardless of its biological and sociocultural form of life, through the medium of the purely rational mathematical languages we have developed over nearly three millennia."¹ The latter concerns "reality as it is disclosed in our everyday lives through the medium of the natural languages we speak." This "human" reality, she says, is

¹ Danielle Macbeth, "The Place of Philosophy" (this issue), p. 16.

crucially mediated by our “biological and sociocultural form of life.” Nonetheless, Macbeth insists that our profound shaping by acculturation does not lead to relativism, because some truths are “valid for (available to) all human beings, all rational beings with our sort of body and form of sensibility.”² These are the “natural truths,” according to which “all human beings ought to perceive and think about at least some aspects of the sensibly perceptible world in some one, *true way*.”

I propose we consider two examples as aids in understanding what natural truths may (or may not) be about, and how to go about discovering them. The first is Macbeth’s: she says that “one and the same person *can* learn to see a thing, say, some fish in a pond, both more (say) atomistically, as someone appropriately acculturated will tend to see it, and also more holistically and relationally, as someone differently acculturated might.”³ The second example derives from Owen Flanagan’s recent *The Geography of Morals*, which spends three chapters considering whether or not it makes sense to strive to extirpate anger, as both Buddhists and Stoics have argued. Is there a natural truth about how to see fish, or about whether to rid oneself of anger?

Macbeth is not committed to *all* matters of everyday living being amenable to natural truth; she explicitly distinguishes it from matters of taste, in which one person simply experiences things differently from another (her example concerns ice cream flavors). When it is possible to learn to experience things one way or the other, though, Macbeth proposes that we turn to philosophy, whose proper role is to assess which way of seeing is best. As she puts it for her own example, philosophy should tell us “how rational

² Macbeth, “The Place of Philosophy,” p. 21.

³ Macbeth, “The Place of Philosophy,” p. 22.

animals like us ought rationally to perceive and think about fish.” She fleshes out this process in the following way:

Perhaps, for example, the atomistic conception is merely an appearance to be explained by appeal to the sociocultural and intellectual forces that were in play already in ancient Greece and would eventually reach their full flowering in early modern science. Perhaps that is a good way to think about fish on the way to realizing modern science, but nonetheless altogether wrong if one wants to understand the nature of the fish themselves. If so, one will discover this only by reflecting on the rise of modern science and its roots in the distinctive intellectual culture that was ancient Greece.⁴

Macbeth’s essay is methodological, so she does not pursue further the question of how we ought to see fish, other than to reiterate that philosophical investigation of questions like this can “get things right”: there is a (natural) fact of the matter to be discovered.

Like Macbeth, one of Flanagan’s goals is to promote cross-cultural, comparative philosophizing. In some chapters he argues for this on more methodological grounds, but in three of the central chapters of his book, he makes the case by engaging in comparative investigation and seeing what happens. As I have said, his focus is on anger. He looks both at anti-anger arguments and at arguments that purport to show that anger is natural or inevitable. He sums up as follows:

My overall assessment is that there are no arguments in philosophical psychology or cognitive science that show that anger, in the ways we do it, is original and natural, or that it cannot be modified. Furthermore, there are credible metaphysical beliefs

⁴ Macbeth, “The Place of Philosophy,” p. 24.

and social practices in Buddhism and Stoicism that undermine the standard reasons we offer to justify anger; possibly, at the limit, these traditions provide reasons we ought to accept for wanting to extirpate anger altogether.⁵

So far, it sounds like he is edging toward concluding that it may be a Macbeth-style natural truth that anger is bad. Certainly the types of investigation and argument that Flanagan has conducted seem to be what Macbeth imagines could lead us to natural truths. One might also get this impression from Flanagan's statement that "superwide, cross-cultural, reflective equilibrium provides a better system of checks and balances, as well as greater imaginative resources, than narrow, parochial, culture-bound tests of reflective equilibrium."⁶

However, Flanagan's actual conclusion is rather different. First of all, he emphasizes the difficulty and potentially radical nature of changes that might result from investigations across cultures and forms of life:

A Catholic or Jew or Aristotelian or secular WEIRD [Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic] person cannot just decide to become a Stoic or Buddhist about anger, as far as anger goes—eliminate it!—and leave the rest of one's form of life intact. There would have to be adjustments, possibly massive, in other locations in the form of life, in how one thinks about the nature of the self, about the good life, about salvation and afterlives, about other virtues and vices.⁷

This is not to say that such changes are impossible, but broader changes may bring with them unintended consequences, which both have costs and make assessing the changes

⁵ Owen Flanagan, *The Geography of Morals: Varieties of Moral Possibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 214.

⁶ Flanagan, *The Geography of Morals*, p. 318n14.

⁷ Flanagan, *The Geography of Morals*, p. 216.

more difficult. Let us first think about costs. One possibility is that one (or a group of people) endeavor to change their form of life in order to eliminate anger, but then find that aspects of their new form of life are worse than their old life. Flanagan also points out that even if one does not change, making an effort to engage in super-wide reflective equilibrium may undermine, at least to some degree, one's confidence in one's own values and form of life. It may be tempting at this point to look to Richard Rorty's notion of "irony" as an answer to Flanagan's worry about our values having a weaker hold on us: perhaps a weaker, ironic level of commitment is precisely what is good for us? I am sympathetic to this move, but do note that at least in Rorty's own case irony seemed to fit comfortably alongside complacency. Rorty writes about comparisons with other cultures only in the most abstract and distant ways, and himself seemed to be quite uninterested in the difficult, sustained kinds of comparison that Flanagan illustrates for us.⁸ Having an ironic, partial detachment from our values should not lead us to think that nothing is really at stake.

The question, finally, is what exactly *is* at stake. Is it "natural truth"? I certainly think that Macbeth and Flanagan have shown that there is a coherent philosophical project built around critical reflection on the ways that we see and value all aspects of our world. This project takes seriously the work of natural and social scientists, but combines these findings with the historical and cultural contexts of our current narratives and forms of life. Philosophy can and should strive to guide us in how to see, value, and live better. Where I believe that Macbeth has overreached is in suggesting that there are singular ways in which

⁸ See Richard Rorty, "Cosmopolitanism Without Emancipation: A Response to Jean-François Lyotard." In *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

we can see, value, and live best. It is striking that for all her emphasis on cultural forms of life, culture drops out of her definition of natural truth. Natural truths are constrained by biology and not just rationality, but they are “the same for all human beings whatever the contingencies of their history, language, and culture.” Perhaps there are such truths, but I suspect that the answers to whether to see fish individualistically or holistically, and whether to experience anger, are not among them. Instead, these are matters on which we can strive to learn to do what we do better, rather than to do them in the single best way. And in cases when (as Flanagan says) we “we hit the wall and see no ways to solve some serious problem inside our form of life with the resources at our disposal,”⁹ cross-cultural philosophy can help us to explore new options.

⁹ Flanagan, *The Geography of Morals*, p. 318n14.