

CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT DIALOGUE (1.1)

IN THE SAME WAY THAT THIS ONE IS: SOME COMMENTS ON DOTSON

GRAHAM PRIEST

In her paper ‘How is this Paper Philosophy?’¹ Kristie Dotson discusses the nature of philosophy – or at least, the way that it is practiced – and recommends changes that would make it less alienating for much of the profession. I agree wholeheartedly with the spirit of her views. In what follows, I will disagree with some of the things she says (principally with some of her comments on me), but most of what I say can be seen as articulating the marked points of agreement.

1. PHILOSOPHY AND ITS INSTITUTIONALIZATION

First, I would distinguish between philosophy and the way in which it is institutionalized. Dotson starts her paper with a quotation from Anita Allen, asking ‘What does philosophy have to offer a black woman?’ My answer would be ‘The same as it has to offer anyone else’: it can enrich their perspectives on life, make them less gullible, give them intellectual pleasure, allow them to critique obsolete ideas and regressive social conditions, and so on.

This is not really what Allen was asking, however. Her point was that, given the way that philosophy is institutionalized today, the profession of philosophy offers little to a black woman looking for a profession. The way that philosophy is currently institutionalized is also Dotson’s concern. For her, this embodies a certain conception of what philosophy is, which is limiting, and even repressive.

Next, I think it wise to remember that philosophy has been institutionalized in different ways at different times. Thus, for example, most contemporary philosophers are university academics. But this tradition goes back at most to Germany in the 18th

PRIEST, GRAHAM: Boyce Gibson Professor of Philosophy, University of Melbourne, Australia; Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, Graduate Center, City University of New York, USA; Arché Professorial Fellow, University of St. Andrews, UK. Email: g.priest@unimelb.edu.au

¹ Dotson (2012). Page references are to this unless otherwise flagged.

century, and, in English-speaking countries, just over 100 years. Indeed, even in the present time, it is institutionalized in different ways in different countries. Thus, the institutional structures are rather different in France, Japan, and India, from what it is in the US. Even in English-speaking countries, such as Australia, matters are not exactly the same, though they are certainly more similar. What things are on the agenda, what is taken for granted, what is expected of philosophers, matters of race and gender, all change from place to place. In what follows I will restrict my remarks to the present and to the US, as does Dotson.

2. CONFORMING TO ORTHODOXY

All professions have gate-keepers. To a certain extent this is necessary to keep out charlatans and pretenders. But gate-keeping can go badly wrong, especially when the gate-keepers exclude people who have a legitimate perspective on matters which disagrees with their own – when the gate-keepers let in, so to speak, not all legitimate traders, but just the members of their own club. Such an orthodoxy is unhealthy. And such it is at present in philosophy according to Dotson. I think that Dotson is largely right about this.

I am not qualified to comment on the race/gender issue. But let me give a couple of other examples which are salient to me. The first is mentioned by Dotson herself: Asian Philosophy. In fact, there are *many* interesting, profound and radically different Asian philosophical traditions (Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism); Asian philosophy is not a monolith.² But it must be said that most trained philosophers know nothing of these. They were not taught them, and so do not teach them. (Clearly, the situation is self-reproducing.) Worse than this, though, the orthodox attitude (at least till recent times) has been that these areas are not philosophy at all: they are religion, mysticism, oracular pronouncements.³ It must be said that this is a view that can be held only out of ignorance. One cannot start to read and understand the texts involved without seeing that they are rich in philosophical views, criticisms, and debates.

Fortunately, then, this view is slowly changing. But it is still the case that few departments teach these areas. And most departments appear to be unworried by the fact that they are missing half of the world's philosophy. Check the adverts in *Jobs for Philosophers*, for example. I always advise PhD students who want to write their thesis on a topic in Asian philosophy that they must be able to sell themselves in other areas as well; otherwise they are unlikely to get jobs. Whether this is intended or not, the situation is most unhealthy gate-keeping.

It might be thought that gate-keeping of this kind does not infect hard-core analytic subjects, such as logic. It does. Paraconsistent logics, that is, those logics in

² Any more than Western philosophy is. There are many traditions in Western philosophy: thus, e.g., the Neo-platonist tradition is radically different from the Marxist tradition, etc.

³ See, e.g., the comments on Chinese philosophy by the noted historian of philosophy, John Passmore (1967), p. 217 f.

which contradictions do not imply everything, were first developed in the 1960s and 70s. I have watched their progress since this time with interest. They are now accepted by communities in computer science and mathematics. (For example, they have their own code in the 2010 Mathematical Subject Classification employed by *Mathematical Reviews* and the *Zentralblatt für Mathematik*.) But, though again the attitude is slowly changing, it is still the case that this branch of logic, and the philosophical ideas which are embedded in it, are largely anathema in philosophy. If the logics were obviously philosophically or technically flawed this would be acceptable. But they are not. The response of the orthodox philosophical community has been, at best, one of ignoring the ideas or dismissing them with a cavalier remark betraying a lack of thought; and at worst, one of outright hostility and even ridicule.⁴

I am certainly not suggesting that discrimination on the grounds of being an Asian philosopher or paraconsistent logician has been as damaging to people as discrimination as on the grounds of race and gender. That would obviously be false. I cite these examples simply to widen the ambit of Dotson's critique. There is an interesting sociology of our profession to be written on these matters. I hope that, one day, written it will be.⁵

3. JUSTIFICATION AND A CULTURE OF PRAXIS

Dotson suggests that we might improve the situation in philosophy by replacing the current regime – in which anyone who wants to be taken seriously by the profession must justify their work against the accepted standards of orthodoxy – with a “culture of praxis”.⁶ According to her, such a culture has two features (17):

- 1) Value placed on seeking issues and circumstances pertinent to our living, where one maintains a healthy appreciation for the different issues that will emerge as pertinent among different populations.
- 2) Recognition and encouragement of multiple canons and multiple ways of understanding disciplinary validation.

Explaining 1), Dotson says (24): ‘the first component of a culture of praxis is a value placed on seeking issues and circumstances that are pertinent to our living’. This sounds too narrow to me: it would appear to restrict philosophy to matters in ethics, social and political philosophy. This is an important part of philosophy; but only a part. Philosophy also concerns itself with many matters, including (sometimes technical) issues in the philosophy of physics, mathematics, the philosophy of mind,

⁴ In this context, it is worth looking at the introduction to the second edition of Priest 1987.

⁵ There is clearly a connection between power, knowledge, and its control. Perhaps no one has understood and investigated this more thoroughly than Foucault. A Foucauldian study, not of prisons or sexuality, but of the institution of philosophy, would make compelling reading.

⁶ I was a rather puzzled as to why she chose the term ‘praxis’. I don't see how what she suggests concerns action essentially. And the word has already been used by, e.g., Marxist philosophers in connections with positions that actually do – notably the Yugoslavian Praxis group. (See Sher 1977.)

and so on. One would hardly want to rule these things out. But maybe Dotson does not mean this. At another place she glosses this condition as (17): ‘investigations that contribute to old, new, and emerging problems, discussions and/or investigations’. This clearly does not limit philosophy in the same way. (So maybe ‘live matters’ would be better than ‘life matters’?) And understood like this, I entirely agree with her. Philosophy should be continuously engaged with the new problems that are thrown up by science, politics, art, religion, or whatever. In fact, one does not have to know much about the history of philosophy to know that new problems posed by these areas have been its life blood. This is not, of course, to say that old problems are not worth engaging in as well. It is just to say that philosophy should not become fossilized.

The second condition is a little trickier. Multiple theories and views are necessary for healthy philosophy (which is not to say that all views are of equal value, or that all philosophising is equally good). I have no disagreement with this point. (I will return it in a moment.) But Dotson counter-poses her suggested approach to philosophy with a regrettable “culture of justification”. I think that this is not the best way to put the point. It might be taken to suggest that philosophers should not try to justify their views. Such, I take it, would be a mistake. It is in the testing of a view against others that it proves its mettle. This involves attempting to justify it. Philosophy is not just about thinking up new ideas, problem solutions, etc. One needs to have one’s evaluative/critical faculty fully engaged. Dotson, indeed, acknowledges as much (18): ‘It is true that valuing the contribution of one’s works as part of a culture of praxis does not move us entirely away from methods of justification...’; (19) ‘I take a culture of praxis to be calling for better applications of justifying norms in a way that also distributes the burden of making changes’.

What Dotson is really against, I think, is having to fit philosophical ideas in with the justifications *required by orthodoxy* – with the insistence that only orthodoxy is really philosophy. Such legitimates both a certain kind of philosophy and a regime of power that enforces it. I agree with her on this. As history shows, orthodoxy is rarely right. Forcing philosophy to fit into such a straightjacket is a prime way of preventing philosophical (and social) progress.

4. PHILOSOPHY AS CRITIQUE

Finally, to the topic of Dotson’s critique of my own account of the nature of philosophy.⁷ In Section 6.1 Dotson gives a fair summary of my own view of philosophy. The nature of philosophy is essentially unrestricted critique: everything is fair game for challenging and questioning. This does not mean that we should not invent and explore new views: quite the contrary. Critique is at its most powerful in the light of rival theories.⁸ (Neither is this to say that all philosophers must be

⁷ As explained in Priest 2006.

⁸ The view should not be confused with what Moulton 1996 calls the ‘Adversary Paradigm’ in philosophy, where, as in a court of law, the main aim is simply to knock down one’s opponent. I emphasize here also that critique is of ideas, not people. My view is no endorsement of point-scoring,

primarily critics.) There can obviously be a professional division of labour between those who critique and those who build the different views which make critique bite. (See Priest 2006, 206.)

After summarizing my view, she explains why she takes it to be at odds with hers.⁹ My account sits happily with her point 1). She says herself that (25):

Priest's account is far easier [than Lourde's] to reconcile with the value of seeking "live" questions. Priest at no point in his article specifies a body of relevant questions. Hence the creation of a single body of appropriate problems and/or questions seems to be antithetical to his approach.

Indeed so. Life, in the widest sense, is always throwing up new questions and issues. They are all grist to the philosopher's mill.

The problem that Dotson sees is, rather, with point 2). She explains (26):

Now, where his position might appear irreconcilable to the second components of a culture of praxis is whether Priest is committed to a single method of disciplinary validation, i.e., discernable critique. This is where the culture of praxis idea might appear to be incompatible with Priest's definition.

What is meant here by 'validation'? Earlier in the essay Dotson distinguishes between justification – which is a form of legitimation – and validation, as follows (7, fn. 3):

It bears noting that I see a difference between process of legitimation and process of validation. Legitimation takes as a sign of positive status congruence with dominant patterns and standards, where validation refers to evaluative processes more broadly. Validation, here, refers broadly to all processes aimed at establishing the soundness of some belief, process, and/or practice as such. Like legitimation, validation is an evaluative concept, but it is not confined to evaluation according to some accepted patterns and standards. In accordance with this distinction, legitimation is a kind of validation insofar as it attempts to establish the soundness or corroborate a practice. Yet legitimation is not the sole form of validation available.

Now, critique, it is true, can be seen as a method of validation in a certain sense. Surviving critique, does, after all, serve to support a theory. But it is not the case that there is only one right way of critiquing a view. The methods of Plato, Aquinas, Hume, Nietzsche, Schlick, and Derrida (to say nothing of Asian traditions) are

putting down those with whom one disagrees, and so on. (See Priest 2006, 207.) Such an attitude is, in fact, detrimental to genuine and productive critique.

⁹ She also flags another possible criticism of my view which might be raised (23), to the effect that permanent critique may paralyse action. This is no part of the view at all. All views are provisional in a certain sense. We need to act on them none the less.

obviously radically distinct. Any way of critique that is cognitively cogent falls within my definition.¹⁰

Immediate after raising her concern, Dotson appears to pull back a little (26):

Answers to the question, “what is philosophy,” like Priest’s definition, imply a delimiting perspective on disciplinary engagement. However, this is only an implication. It actually becomes a delimiting perspective if we take Priest to be offering a universalizable definition of philosophy, i.e., critique as a univocally justifying norm. That is to say, within a culture of justification that admits one set of justifying norms, Priest’s account of philosophy as critique could easily become a constrictive definition of philosophy.

Well, I do take critique to be a defining feature of philosophy. But it seems to me that this is as much a limitation as moving your body is a limitation on communicating. There are many ways of communicating (speaking, writing, sign language, even blinking), but they all use the body in some way. Similarly, the fact that philosophy involves critique necessarily limits *philosophy* in no way whatever. *Any* account of philosophy, unless it be entirely vacuous, is going to put some constraints on what counts as philosophy. Indeed, Dotson’s account is *absolutely no different* in this regard. And if anything is to be ruled out in philosophy, it is surely the mindlessness of blind, uncritical, acceptance, more at home in religion and political ideology than in thoughtful investigation. Indeed, such activities can hardly be called *investigations* at all.

I add, also, that I do not expect my account of philosophy to be taken as a piece of dogma, any more than any other part of philosophy.¹¹ It is as critiqueable as anything else in philosophy. *A fortiori* it cannot constrain and ossify the subject.

5. A RAPPROCHEMENT?

Having said this, it is not clear to me that Dotson and I disagree all that much.¹² She thinks, if I may put it in my own words, that my account of philosophy is unacceptable only if it is wielded by an entrenched and elite orthodoxy in such a way as to become unduly constrictive. I agree that it should not be so taken. For my part, I see no reason to disagree with what she says about philosophy – or at least my understanding of her thoughts. It is but an aspect of things which I take to be more fundamental.

Indeed, it seems to me that Dotson’s paper itself fits into precisely the definition of philosophy which I have given. She provides a critique of a certain

¹⁰ The adjectival phrase here is meant to rule out personal abuse, bribery, deceptive advertising, etc., which may all be very effective at a personal level.

¹¹ See Priest 2006, 207. The question ‘What is philosophy?’ is of course itself a philosophical question.

¹² Much of what she is reacting against, is, I think, the negative connotations of the term ‘critique’. She suggests (in correspondence) that ‘scrutiny’ is a term she can live with. So can I: the definition of philosophy given in Priest 2006 is actually as follows (202, italics original): ‘[P]hilosophy is precisely that intellectual inquiry in which *anything* is open to critical challenge and scrutiny’.

social/philosophical practice, articulating a different account, and arguing that it is preferable. That is exactly what I take philosophy to be. So, how is Dotson's paper philosophy? In that way. In the same way, so is this one. Critique and counter-critique go hand in glove. Nor, as I hope I have shown, does critique have to be confrontational. With an open-minded spirit, critique helps us all to understand better.¹³

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¹³ Many thanks to Kristie Dotson for very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.