

Editorial: ‘Mere Rotatory Motion’

Aristotle observed that ‘there is a faculty called cleverness; and this is such as to be able to do the things that tend towards the mark we have set before ourselves, and to hit it. Now if the mark be noble, the cleverness is laudable, but if the mark be bad, the cleverness is mere smartness’. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144a 23)

Aristotle is here talking about reasoning about morality. What he says has profound implications for that: it implies that if the clever moral philosopher’s mark is bad, then the result will be dismal or worse, moral corruption even, maybe all the worse just because it is smart. But rather than pursuing this line of thought here, one wonders if Aristotle might have extended his thought about cleverness away from moral reasoning to philosophy more generally.

If we are prepared to allow that he might have done, then, at the end of *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin is being thoroughly Aristotelian. Ruskin writes that ‘we usually fall into much error by considering the intellectual powers as having dignity in themselves, and separable from the heart; whereas the truth is that the intellect becomes noble or ignoble according to the food we give it, and the kind of subjects with which it is conversant... It is not the reasoning power which, of itself, is noble, but the reasoning power occupied with its proper objects.’

What, philosophically speaking, are its proper objects? This question takes on a particular urgency now for professional philosophers, pressed as they are to produce more and more publications of ever greater cleverness, complexity and technicality in order even to secure an academic post, let alone to retain it. In Britain over and above normal academic appointment and preferment there is a national state instituted ‘research excellence’ exercise. Every few years this exercise is run and, on its outcome, government funding of university departments depends. A natural consequence of this is that academic appointments are made with the research exercise in focus: will the appointee do well for the faculty in the national research exercise?

Few academics are happy with the state of affairs which pressures them to publish in this sort of way; many question the sorts of things which will count well in these competitions. Some might doubt whether these pressures have actually raised the standard of philosophical publication, let alone philosophical life more generally. Others might even agree with Ruskin, who continues the earlier

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passage thus: 'Half of the mistakes of metaphysicians have come from not observing this; namely, that the intellect... is yet mean or noble according to the matter it deals with, and wastes itself away in mere rotatory motion, if it be set to grind straws and dust.'

How much contemporary philosophical writing, brilliantly clever as much of it is, is 'mere rotatory motion'? One has a sneaking feeling that some, even many, philosophers might worry that a lot of it is indeed grinding straws and dust. The problem, though, for those who worry in this way, is that the situation which has brought this about is one that is actually run by academic philosophers. They appoint and promote, they review and endorse publications, they run the research exercise. Is the profession caught in a process which it administers, but from which, because of professional pressures, there is no clear exit?