

Found Philosophy

Willard F. Enteman
Professor *Emeritus*
Rhode Island College

Introduction

I want to begin by expressing my gratitude to arrangers of this conference for the expression “engaged philosophy.” I am interested in it as a counterweight to the self-demarcated domain of so-called professional philosophy, though I am suggesting supplementing rather than supplanting. The primary purpose of this paper is to develop what I have begun calling “found philosophy” as an example of engaged philosophy.

Before turning directly to that expression, I would like to ask your indulgence for additional ways in which I will diverge from what seems to be unwritten rules at philosophy conferences. One rule is that we do not discuss teaching. It is curious to me that we who depend upon teaching give so little attention to it when we meet formally. This paper will violate that rule and unabashedly discuss teaching. A second rule I will violate is one that has us go to great lengths to avoid using the first pronoun singular or its derivatives. I am engaged – philosophically – in what I will discuss here. A third is that we never include reference to the venue of our conference. Presumably, philosophy scholars wish to give the impression that what they say is universal and eternal with nothing to do with the immediate. However, I was thrilled when I heard this conference would be held at the University of North Texas because I know of it as the home of great academic jazz programs. I will talk more about that later in the context of found philosophy.

In this paper, I will outline what I mean by “found philosophy” and then in an effort to give greater clarity, I will turn to four quite different examples. As some of you may have guessed, the expression “found philosophy” takes its inspiration from two more common expressions: “found poetry” and “found art.” The former refers to finding poetry where it would not normally be expected – for example, in prose. The expression “found art” picks up there and talks of art where it would not normally be expected. There are obvious cases of, for example, the drawings or weavings of indigenous people. Recognizing them as art took us getting over many prejudices. There are many other prejudices that keep us from recognizing found art until it is identified.

Found philosophy, then, is philosophy that is found in places other than those in which one might expect to find it. Certainly not in philosophy journals or books or even in papers delivered at philosophy conferences. My own presumption here is that one way or another most people sometimes do philosophy and only a small subset of the population makes doing philosophy something of an obsession and, thus, become professors of philosophy. Enough with abstractions. Let me turn to the examples I promised.

Native American Philosophies and Found Philosophy

For my first example, I will start with the area in which the notion of found philosophy first occurred to me. By way of background, I should say I taught a course in “American Philosophy” for many years. In general, I enjoyed it, but was not quite satisfied finding the right way to get it started. In ruminating about that, I realized what was missing was the philosophy that was being done before the first undocumented immigrants arrived here. I was sure Native Americans must have – as we say – “done

philosophy.” The task was, then to find it. It was not an easy task. I finally turned to looking at the large collection of Native American stories we are fortunate to have. The philosophic insights were many there.

As a result, I began my American Philosophy courses with a section on Native American Philosophies. The assignment was to find the philosophical views imbedded in the stories. I found students were unusually interested in doing that, and I was led, thereby, to propose an entire course on Native American Philosophies.

You may be amused by some of the background to the course. When I first proposed teaching such a course, many of my philosophical colleagues were – to say the least – skeptical. Their response can be summarized by the exact words of one of their number: “Native Americans did not do philosophy!” I was not to be deterred.

Much to my great surprise and pleasure, the course quickly became very popular. If you and your colleagues are like me, we often complain about the lack of student engagement in our courses. Well, I recommend teaching a course in Native American Philosophies. I have never taught a course which had so much enthusiastic participation by students throughout the entire semester. Students find it engaging to look in the material to find philosophy being done and to discuss the philosophy they find. One of their semester assignments is to find more philosophically rich Native American stories to be shared with their classmates. They carry out that assignment enthusiastically. Finally, even beyond your students’ interests, let me recommend this version of found philosophy to you as deeply rewarding and engaging.

Law and Found Philosophy

The topic of the next example – philosophy of law – is less controversial than Native American Philosophies. It is the method that is unusual. If we can judge by texts and syllabi that are posted on the web, the typical course is like mine was originally: it carefully examined a number of different views. So, we dominantly teach “isms” such as Realism, Pragmatism, Natural Law, Positivism, Feminism, Originalism, Critical Legal Studies and so forth. Successful students learn arguments for and against each ism and repeat what they have learned. However, most students remain disengaged. Even those who are considering going to Law School somehow figure out that is not what goes on there. On some occasions, the anthologies reproduce a few highly abridged cases in order to demonstrate how an opinion is illustrative of an ism. I noticed that students were more engaged in discussions of those cases. Having discovered found philosophy in my Native American Philosophy course, and knowing many of the legal cases are on the net, I began to assign unabridged cases and encouraged students to find the philosophies expressed by the justices.

Increasingly, I suppressed talking about the usual isms because the assignment was not to pigeon-hole but to actually find philosophy. Those assignments became the liveliest part of the course. Two results have followed. My introductory Philosophy of Law course now involves only reading cases. The second result is that I find myself, too, looking for the philosophy in cases. For example, we are told by many that “Originalism” is a consistent philosophy of law followed by some Supreme Court Justices. However, we discover that attempting to find the philosophical views expressed by the Justices irrespective of label is much more engaging. As an example, let me take a recent opinion that has come to public’s attention. It is called “*Citizens United*.” Popular commentary

has it that the case is about whether corporations may contribute to political campaigns and the originalists concluded – on so-called originalist free speech grounds – that they can. There is only sparse philosophy there. However, another philosophical issue that is important is the question of whether a corporation is a person. We call that metaphysics. The philosophic views are there to be seen in the opinions. Finding them and discussing them engages students and should engage us. Actually, if people had examined historic judicial opinions closely, they would have known the issue has been building since 1819 and the so-called “*Dartmouth*” case. I will leave you with one – somewhat depressing – conclusion: the metaphysical arguments are more sophisticated in *Dartmouth* than they are in *Citizens United*. In sum, in teaching philosophy of law and in doing research about law, we can examine legal opinions to find philosophy that is there.

Management and Found Philosophy

I turn now to two examples of found philosophy that I have not taught, though I have done some writing and research about the one I discuss here: philosophy of management. As a holder of an MBA and an occasional management instructor, I have had a long standing interest in what is typically assigned in undergraduate management courses. I will make my conclusion short: typically, the texts assigned are dreary, boring and superficial. Oh, yes, they are tricked out with the usual accompaniments that publishers hope will help inherently boring material keep the attention of students. However, they are basically pedestrian.

Well, let us follow the lead of philosophy of law a bit further. When management education was being brought from the domain of apprenticeship into universities, some of the educational leaders struck on the idea that in order to make management education

more legitimate in the eyes of the rest of the university, it should draw on an analogy to Law Schools and teach cases – though this time it would be management cases. Rules soon developed to the end that they should be actual cases primarily describing circumstances in which managers faced decisions. Some management programs have committed almost their entire teaching to the so-called “case method.” Others use more or less as professors may find useful, and some courses I have seen never take up cases. The result, however, is that there is a vast treasure trove of management cases for examination and review. The largest repository I know about holds over 10,000 cases. If you accept my view that everyone does philosophy, there can be little doubt that these cases contain philosophy waiting to be found. Let philosophy faculty and students join in finding the philosophical issues in cases. Let us as scholars, review the cases and work to find the philosophy contained therein. It would move us much further on the road to engaged philosophy. It might also make parents of students happy their child is taking a philosophy course!

Music and Found Philosophy

As I indicated earlier, I am thrilled to be invited to the home of one of our leading academic jazz programs. You may now imagine the task I have set myself here. I want to ask whether we can find philosophy in jazz. I am going to make the task even more difficult for myself and restrict myself to instrumental jazz. A primary characteristic of jazz is improvisation.

Let us ask, then, what may be said about the free will versus determinism debate in this context. First, I suspect a jazz performer would be baffled if a determinist were to tell him or her that what was improvised was fully determinable and predictable. In the

case of improvisation there is a wide – not infinite – choice of riffs to be played and none seem to be determined. Second, let us note that in principle at least the determinist's claim of predictability would require a psychologist who is in possession of complete theories and facts and who would have to be as musically knowledgeable as the player. We stretch credibility beyond the breaking point, and the only virtue of such stretching would be to save determinism. Thus, we conclude that in regard to jazz, the deterministic program is in trouble and the introspection of the improvisation is not undermined. Philosophy is found.

I will go one step further. The previous two paragraphs bring to mind the works of Bergson and his interest in the relation between free will and the concept of time. I will conclude this meditation by discussing the concept of time, music and found philosophy. In doing so, let me make the reasonably common distinction between isotropic and anisotropic concepts of time. With respect to time, the former is invariant and the latter may vary. For example, if we consider the claim that Plato is born before Aristotle that relation remains no matter when in time the statement is made. However, the truthfulness of a claim that Enteman enjoys jazz varies with respect to the time it is spoken. The standard response of those who accept only the isotropic view – think here of a long tradition stretching from Parmenides through Mc Taggart to Grünbaum – is that the anisotropic view is reducible to the isotropic. Time then is, as they say, “tenseless.” The standard response of those who accept what we will call the anisotropic view – think here of a long tradition stretching from Heraclitus to Bergson to Čapek – is that anisotropic time cannot be reduced away.

Now, let us bring this home. Let us consider two different aspects of music: the score and the performance. The score is a fine example of an isotropic rendition of music. The relations are invariant no matter from what perspective they are viewed. On the other hand, the experience of an improvised performance is an example of the anisotropic. Consider, for example, the solo by Jess Stacey in “Sing, Sing, Sing” at the seminal 1938 Carnegie Hall Concert. Neither Jess nor the rest of the band knew Benny was going to turn to Jess for a solo. However, he delivered an amazing performance. It is possible to “backwards transcribe” improvisation. I am told there are at least 23 different transcriptions of that version of Sing, Sing, Sing. However, if we compare listening to the performance itself with a backwards transcription (even if it is replayed faithfully), it is not the same. In improvisation, the anisotropic is irreducible even in principle. Thus, the isotropic concept of time alone is insufficient.

We have found philosophy in a most unlikely place: in a jazz concert. Another point is important: what we have found does not depend on introspection. It is, as the empiricists would want, inter-subjectively testable. If only we had a group here, we could finish this by showing that finding philosophy this way is truly engaged philosophy. (Oh, and let me add one thing more: if you do this with students – and, of course, it does not have to be jazz – I suspect they will never forget how to distinguish isotropic and anisotropic concepts of time.)