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On Not Being A (Typical) Philosopher

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Abstract: This essay accesses the difference between traditional professional philosophy and a practical-critical strain of philosophy found in Romano's *America the Philosophical*. While Romano eschews many of the forms that contemporary philosophy has taken in the second half of the twentieth century, he seeks to revive the thinking of Isocrates, an ancient thinker who was committed to rational discourse about matters of vital importance. Romano sees classical American philosophy, and especially Richard Rorty, as extending this legacy of Isocratic teachings. The essay concludes with a brief comment concerning philosophical trade publishing.

Keywords: Romano, Carlin; Isocrates; pragmatism; instrumentalism; relativism.

Most of the writers who make up the canon of classical American philosophy thought twice about calling themselves philosophers. Ralph Waldo Emerson—the founder of the "American Scholar"—was not a typical philosopher. "I think that philosophy is still rude and elementary," Emerson writes, "it will one day be taught by poets."¹ Henry David Thoreau wrote popular—and I mean popular—books and never held a professorship in philosophy. Neither did C. S. Peirce, for that matter, and he too made a living from his popular writings (not his seminal works of American pragmatism). William James, the American philosopher, hated a certain kind of philosophy. Really. He was, in his words, "unfit to be a philosopher" since "because at bottom he hates

philosophy..."² Richard Rorty, forget it. The American intellectual canon was (and hopefully still is) premised on its rejection of a certain strain of philosophy. Romano's *America the Philosophical* is written in the spirit of this tradition and he takes an almost sadistic glee in avoiding the "eleven-thousand-member black hole in American media and public life" that he calls the profession of philosophy.³

Romano objects to contemporary analytic philosophy's penchant for logic crunching, its inability to see the forest of everyday life for the trees of philosophical analysis; but the self-sabotage of

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Natural History of Intellect and Other Papers," in *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. 12, Boston and New York: Public Domain 1909, p. 12.

² William James, "Letter to G. H. Howison, July 17, 1895," in *Letters of William James (1920)*, ed. Henry James, New York, NY: Cosimo Publishing 2009, p. 22.

³ Carlin Romano, *America the Philosophical*, New York, NY: Knopf 2012, p. 184. [Henceforth cited as AP]

twentieth-century philosophy, according to Romano, was long in the making. In the Enlightenment's obsession with objective truth and abstract ideals, philosophy relinquished its claim to practical relevance. Before this, the legacy of Platonism that dominated late Ancient and Medieval thought set the stage for what John Dewey would call the "philosopher's fallacy" in replacing the intricate details of the real world for the broad strokes of abstract theorizing. So there was much for William James to hate about this supposed love of wisdom. Four years ago, when Romano's book first came out, its honesty and accuracy struck a nerve.

Most indignation about Romano's book, however, sometimes overlooked the positive program that Romano was proposing. He argued that despite the need to overcome (and perhaps dismantle) the nomen of philosophy, there is something that is worth preserving in this tradition: the legacy of the fourth-century rhetorician, Isocrates. Isocrates was one of the first to deflate philosophy's grand metaphysical and epistemological claims. He was a sophist, yes, but a certain kind—one who was a keen observer of present political and cultural circumstances and who was able to analyze and negotiate them (with reason, feeling, and imagination) in arriving at practical, provisional judgments. He was, on Romano's reading, a proto-pragmatist and it is his philosophy to which modern America is well-fitted. According to Romano,

America in the early twenty-first century towers as the most philosophical culture in the history of the world, an unprecedented marketplace of truth and argument that far surpasses ancient Greece, Cartesian France, nineteenth century Germany or any other place one can name over the past three millennia. [AP 6]

Despite agreeing with large swaths of the book, I am still afraid that this proclamation was somewhat premature. *America the Philosophical* was written in the age of Barack Obama. But I worry that America of today and tomorrow runs the very real risk of taking—or extending—an un-philosophical turn. It is a time when we might be understandably wary of sophistry.

This being said, Romano picked his particular sophist carefully. In the late fourth century BCE, Isocrates composed a series of arguments that has come to be known as *Against the Sophists*—that's right—against sophistry.⁴ (Romano is fully aware of

this piece and seems to use its argument to frame his argument against philosophy on the whole). In *Against the Sophists*, Isocrates outlines the guiding principles of the true rhetorician: originality, timeliness, and appropriateness (or the fitted-ness of a response to a given situation). According to Romano, this is what the history of philosophy, and particularly the recent history of analytic philosophy, lacks. In truth, much of contemporary philosophy is largely derivative and, in some cases, unknowingly derivative, which is to say redundant; it fails to address present political or cultural concerns; and it often provides theories that are ill-fitted to the realities of individuals and their communities. This is changing, but not quickly enough.

But something continues to trouble me in this framing of Isocrates. The bit of fame that the Greek does enjoy is not traced to his arguments in *Against the Sophists*, but to his role in teaching two very famous (some might say infamous) individuals: Glaucon and Thrasymachus, figures that get immortalized in Plato's *Republic*. I know that Romano has a gripe with Platonism, and a well-founded one, but I have a gripe with Isocrates' students, so perhaps we need to thread the needle carefully.

In Book II of the *Republic*, Glaucon offers what I take to be one of the central challenges to morality in the form of the Myth of Gyges, the Turkish farmer who uses a magic ring (Frodo-style) to sneak into a palace, seduce a queen, kill a king, and take over the land and become incredibly rich. When I tell my students this story, most of them are horrified but some have a different reaction: admiration bordering on adulation. "Gyges is so smart, so original!" they say. "He knows just the right time to strike! And he knows exactly how to negotiate the situation. What a genius!" It is almost like Gyges read *Against the Sophists*.

Socrates spends the rest of the *Republic* trying to convince his listeners that Gyges is, in fact, a moral monster (and he generally convinces me) but some of my students never buy it. They are the ones who admire Gyges. They also do not object to Thrasymachus, Isocrates' other famous student, who is less circumspect than Glaucon in presenting the moral stance, which might follow from certain sophistical teachings: justice is serving the interest of the stronger. America may have been based on open discourse and rational argumentation, as Romano often suggests, but it also incubated a form of political and ideological exceptionalism that seems to fit Thrasymachus quite nicely. Justice is what works (for the stronger). Manifest

⁴ Isocrates, "Against the Sophists," in *Isocrates I*, transl. David C. Mirhady and Yun Lee Too, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press 2000, pp. 61-6.

Destiny, Gunboat Diplomacy, twentieth century *Realpolitik*—all of these fit very nicely with the might-makes-right attitude expressed by Isocrates' students.

So how might Isocrates (or Romano) respond to this sort of criticism?

I think it has to turn on a passing remark—a very important one—Romano makes in the closing pages of *America the Philosophical*:

Unlike the sophists or rhetoricians targeted by Plato, Isocrates throughout his work voices a moral sensibility. One can't guarantee honesty, but one can try, and philosophy is the best training for it. [AP 552]

I would like Romano to comment on this moral sense. How minimal or robust does it need to be? At the end of *Against the Sophists*, Isocrates states that while no particular philosophy can adequately define the good, practicing rhetoric is the best propaedeutic in cultivating virtue. Is this what Romano has in mind? If so, I am on board, although I might point out that this is not altogether different from Socrates' refusal to give a general definition of piety in the *Euthyphro*, and his suggestion, at many points, that philosophy—the pursuit of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful—is the proper way to spend one's life. Socrates notes that this pursuit is always not quite, provisional, on-the-way, fallible.

There is a sort of modesty to this Socratic project, one that attracted a number of classical American thinkers whom Romano highlights in the book. Emerson's 1820 essay "The Character of Socrates," keys in to the on-going, authentic investigation that motivated much of ancient thought.⁵ And it was the pragmatist John Dewey who, in the 1930s calls for a back to Plato movement but, to be clear, the Plato of the dialogues, the dramatic and investigative Plato, not the Plato of the Forms. Peirce and his idealist friend, Josiah Royce, held that leading ideas, directed toward truth in the long-run, might help us avoid the dangers of sophistry. And James and Dewey both reflected on meliorism—the idea that progress is real and possible—a moral sensibility that runs askance of Gyges.

Why am I underscoring this similarity between

a reading of Isocrates and Plato? Plato and the pragmatists? It is not to reject Romano's thesis, but, perhaps, to temper it. We need to articulate a few ground rules that will keep Isocrates from traveling the paths of Glaucon and Thrasymachus. Many of Romano's heroes—the American pragmatists, for example—were accused of opening the door to a vicious relativism. For much of the twentieth century, pragmatism was described, by many critics, as a crass instrumentalism—an anything-goes conception of philosophy that was so inclusive, so free-wheeling, it lost its grip on reasonable discourse.

When Romano and Jason Stanley came to heads at a conference at Harvard in 2011, it was not pretty. Stanley went after Romano for not appreciating the value of technical argumentation in supporting particular ideals and beliefs. Stanley's implication at the time was pretty clear: average folk should leave philosophizing to real philosophers. Romano, completely exasperated with the heights of intellectual balloon-flying, mounted a counter-attack. Nancy Bauer, in her recent, and extremely good book, *How to Do Things With Pornography*, outlines the ensuing debate and makes a suggestion that might mediate the divide between Romano's Isocratic philosophy and Stanley's analytic approach.⁶ She points us back to a certain reading of Plato, writing,

any philosopher worthy of the name was obligated not just to commune with the forms but to come down from the mountaintop and attempt to attract the citizenry to the sublime, if almost imperceptible, beauty of reason. [HTP 116]

I think that this is the way to interpret "America the philosophical" and, oddly enough, Stanley's popular writing after 2011. They are at their best when they are inviting us to experience the beauty of reason.

A Few General Comments

A word about philosophical trade publishing: It is hard. First you have to convince an agent that you can write. Really write. Then you have to convince a large publisher, such as Knopf, that your book will actually sell. This means reaching an audience that many philosophers still regard as unreachable. Then you have to convince yourself that you can actually pull this

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Character of Socrates," in *Two Unpublished Essays: The Character of Socrates, The Present State of Ethical Philosophy*, intr. Edward Everett Hale, Boston & New York: Lamson, Wolfe, & Co. 1895, pp. 3-39.

⁶ Nancy Bauer, *How To Do Things with Pornography*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015. [Henceforth cited as HTP]

whole thing off. You sex up your book knowing full well that your academic reputation is on the line and, even if you ruin yourself in this respect, you know people still might not buy it. If they do not, your hopes of reaching a wider audience in the future are next to nil. As you write, you have to tread a fine line between intellectual integrity and accessibility, between content and voice. This is a line that few academics ever confront.

Criticizing *America the Philosophical* on the metrics of professional philosophy is relatively easy. It is not written for academic philosophers. It omits figures and topics that contemporary philosophers regard as matters of vital importance. But I think that we are missing the point if we get stuck on this. Romano's book has a narrative—and that is, at least in my limited experience, the only thing that sells a philosophical trade book—and the narrative necessarily narrows the scope of the project. That is trade publishing. If you opt out, I think you have to be very careful about criticizing those who do not. Before you criticize Romano, try doing what he has done.

A final comment about what I think Romano is up

to in this book. He is not presenting a comprehensive history of American philosophy. He is not explaining how classical American philosophy—in all of its various forms—fits with the broader historical canon. No one—I hope—goes to this book hoping to satisfy traditional philosophical curiosity. Grad students will not read this so that they can teach a seminar on Royce or Peirce. This is not going to happen (if they were, I would be much more disturbed). This should not come as any huge surprise. He tells us, at the outset what he thinks of professional philosophy. I take him to be doing something a little different here. He is trying to develop an original philosophical thesis that will pique the interest of the widest possible audience—those who know their Rorty and Dewey but also those who have never heard of them. And we should be under no illusions—Rorty and Dewey are not household names. Romano has, quite admirably, tried to write a household book, one that has served as a much-needed Trojan horse in a culture that has yet to make up its mind about whether to be philosophical.