

In Defence of Obfuscation

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Abstract

In this article I challenge the standard view that clarity and coherence in moral philosophy and ethics are always good and obscurity necessarily bad. The appraisal of clarity, I argue, entails a risk of reducing and misrepresenting the complex and multifaceted nature of good, productive and true thinking and communication. Uncertainty and obscurity do not necessarily lead to vagueness, imprecision or meaning-obstruction. There are productive forms of uncertainty and there are unproductive forms. Indeed, to be precise, lucid and truthful sometimes requires respecting and linguistically and conceptually reproducing the incoherence, obscurity and uncertainty of reality.

At the *What's the Point of Moral Philosophy* congress held at the University of Oxford recently, there was near-consensus among the gathered philosophers that clarity in moral philosophy and practical ethics is per definition good and obscurity necessarily bad. Michael J. Zimmerman explicitly praised clarity and accessibility in philosophical writings and criticized the lack of those qualities in continental philosophy especially, using some of Sartre's more recalcitrant writing as a cautionary example (although conceding that a similar lack of coherence can occasionally be found in analytical philosophy too). This seemed to be broadly and wholeheartedly supported by the rest of the participants.

This agreement on the intrinsic value of clarity happened at a gathering with the goal of determining the point of moral philosophy – namely, the meaning and purpose as well as tasks and aims of academic philosophy – generally speaking, in the specific cultural environment of

today and in the future. As such it was part of a sympathetic effort to take responsibility for making philosophy accessible and effective and for disseminating the insights and advances in research in the academic sphere to the broader public as well as to policymakers in the best, most fruitful ways. Nevertheless, this near-unanimous appraisal of clarity seems to entail a severe simplification of the complex and multifaceted nature of good, productive, effective and true thinking and communication and to overlook the value of obfuscation and unresolvedness in philosophical – and any other kind of – writing.

To be clear, this article is not a defence of sophistry, value relativism or nihilism. I am not proposing to prioritize persuasiveness, effect or entertainment over precision and truth. Rather, I want to highlight that truth is a complex phenomenon that requires complex conceptualization to be represented adequately in language and communication. To be precise, clear and



lucid sometimes requires respecting and linguistically and conceptually reproducing the incoherence, obscurity and uncertainty of reality. We are always only approximating a full understanding of truth and reality, and it is highly unlikely that we will ever have a full overview of or exhaustive insight into it. We will continue to make mistakes in our theorizing and wrong conclusions that will have to be revised or rejected in the light of new knowledge, and there will always be blanks, gaps of uncertainty in our understanding and theoretical accounts. Indeed, as Ingmar Persson pointed out in the opening talk at the summer congress, it is likely that not only will moral philosophy remain inconclusive, but its disagreements will even increase with time. Philosophy is becoming ever more observant of the complexity of matters, increasingly drawing new and more nuanced distinctions; and at the same time the conditions of modern life, new technologies etc. continue to

create more problems to preoccupy moral philosophy and ethics.

The uncertainty and obscurity of reality is in a sense a precondition for any meaningful utterance, a prerequisite for any attempt at stabilizing and fixating meaning in a system of thought, with concepts and language. The attempt to determine meaning comes from a perceived need for it and from a sense of a preceding unclarity. But it is not just reality and existence that entail uncertainties and unknowns. Language/discourse is itself characterized by a fundamental uncertainty that makes a precise and fully coherent representation of reality and truth – even if we had full insight into these – impossible. Language is (in)famously limited in its capacity to represent reality, and all communication entails some degree of uncertainty, incoherence and openness of meaning. It is both misleading and unnecessary to view this simply as a problem. Indeed, it can and should be appreciated as a quality.

‘To be precise, clear and lucid sometimes requires respecting and linguistically and conceptually reproducing the incoherence, obscurity and uncertainty of reality.’

In most fields it has historically been the convention to try to eliminate or reduce the inherent uncertainty in communication in order to establish as strong a sense of coherence of meaning and clarity as possible. But the twentieth century saw a new awareness and appreciation of the uncertainty of the physical world and human existence – as well as of the human perception and discursive representation of it. Here uncertainty appears at the centre of some of the most influential theories as both an object in groundbreaking discoveries and a driving force for new theories. In physics, the theory of quantum mechanics was established; wave/particle duality was discovered; and with the uncertainty principle Heisenberg showed that it is impossible to measure the position and the momentum of a particle with absolute precision: the more accurately one of the values is measured, the less accurately the other, which seemingly proves that the act of observation itself influences the observed object and demonstrates the uncertainty of scientific knowledge. The notion of observer-induced retroactive causal influence similarly undermines the classical realist and logical positivist positions; and Gödel’s incompleteness theorems show the limits of provability in formal axiomatic theories, demonstrating that in any sufficiently complex and coherent formal system there exist propositions that cannot be proved or disproved within that same system. In this same period in

philosophy, philosophy, phenomenology rejects the logical positivist conception of an objective reality and defines reality from an experiential and subjective vantage point. And in language studies, the notion of the referentiality of language and the idea that meaning arises in a relation between signs and the world are undermined by Saussure, who puts the concepts of the arbitrary and the differential character of the sign at the centre in linguistics and semiology, thereby showing the meaning of a word to be a value delimited by the other words in an enclosed, self-organizing and non-referential language system.

These innovations and developments reflect a broad and general recognition of the incompleteness and uncertainty inherent in all seemingly consistent and complete systems and of the potentially unresolvable ambiguity of (physical) phenomena which also gain influence in literary theory. New Criticism makes the ambiguity of poetic language the main focus of literary studies. Roman Ingarden develops a phenomenological theory of literature in which the concept of ‘Unbestimmtheitsstellen’ (places of indeterminacy) designates a fundamental form of literary uncertainty. The notion of uncertainty remains central in poststructuralist theory where various cognate terms are launched, including indistinction, indiscernibility, indeterminacy and undecidability. Here the emphasis is shifted from the uncertainties inherent in the textual system to the uncertainty of the interpretative act and reading strategies of uncertainty are developed by theorists such as Geoffrey Hartman, Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man. Parallel to these developments in science and the humanities, uncertainty comes to be foregrounded in an unprecedented manner in literature and narrative fiction, used as a structuring principle and a guiding philosophical idea by authors such as Ford Madox Ford, Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust, Robert Musil and Virginia Woolf. In modernist literature, uncertainty appears as criterion of truthful and realistic rendering of reality and human experience – reflecting the insight that interpretation and discursive representation of reality are inevitably forms of reduction and simplification of those phenomena.

These developments in the arts and sciences show an acute awareness that truth and reality

are slippery, inherently uncertain phenomena that cannot be separated from, viewed or understood outside, language and discourse, but are entangled with the inherently uncertain systems of interpretation and representation.

'Meaning' and truth can, then, be conceptualized not as single, fixated and decidable, but as phenomena in a relatively open space of uncertainty and possibility. Communication of and theorizing about them can, accordingly, be meaningfully conducted as *suspensive* rather than *conclusive* activities – in criticism and philosophy as in any other discipline. Thinking, interpreting and communicating can, and sometimes should, take the form of vacillation, between specific options of truth, solutions and conclusions to problems. The acts of interpretation, communication and of making meaning should involve decision and determination of meaning as well as reproduction of the openness and uncertainty. This is a balancing act, then, by which the thinker and writer attempts to determine and instil specific meanings in a text while also accepting, representing and exploring uncertainty.

Another merit of the resistance to interpretative closure and fixation of meaning in communication of philosophy is that it allows for a greater degree of experimentation and creativity. There can be value in not knowing exactly where one is going with a theory and an argument, to keep meanings open, to abstain from conclusion. Theoretical uncertainty can be highly meaning-productive for the thinker – and textual uncertainty likewise for the reader. Uncertainty can have an interesting effect of modifying the awareness of the reader. It can prompt a reflective and critical reading-mode and be used to invite the reader to think along, instead of presenting her with final solutions, that is, to participate in the theoretical experimentation and production of meaning of a text. Gaps and points of uncertainty and obscurity are highly reader-engaging. Uncertainty and obscurity in a text can activate the reader's ability to recognize and reflect on the uncertainties of the text itself and of reality and communication in general. It can facilitate a deeper involvement of the reader with the philosophical content of a text and make the reader move from a non-reflective to a reflective and critical mode of reading and

thinking, and it can activate meta-awareness about interpretational choices and the readerly inference and co-production of the meaning of a text. It can make reading a more self-conscious act and stimulate critical and independent thinking

It is important in this context to stress the value of diversity in forms of communication in philosophy. Different modes of representation have different advantages and disadvantages; different subject matters call for different forms of communication, just as different contexts of communication and audiences do. It is also relevant to point to the benefits of experimentation, risk-taking, boundary-testing and play. Ideas, concepts and arguments cannot be separated from the discourse, signs and form by which they are formulated and communicated, and experimentation with thoughts and theories as well as with their formal and aesthetic presentation is highly meaningful in both art and science, arguably even a prerequisite for progress. Philosophical writing should not be restricted, monocultural and conformist, but ideally characterized by a variety of modes of expression, experiments and creativity. There is good and bad writing in all genres and traditions, experiments that fail and ones that are successful, in continental as well as analytical philosophy.

It is noteworthy that Jacques Derrida, arguably the most vilified representative of post-structuralism and deconstruction, established a valuable distinction in this context, namely between undecidability and indeterminacy. Derrida focuses on undecidability as a textual feature (from the point of departure of deconstruction's radically widened definition of a 'text'). Basing his concept of undecidability on Gödel's theory of the incompleteness inherent in all seemingly closed and coherent systems, he presents undecidability as a fundamental trait in the system of language and a precondition for all meaningful discourse. While one of the main purposes of Derridean deconstruction is to demonstrate the fundamental uncertainty of reality and discourse and to trouble the determination of meaning and point out the arbitrariness of hierarchization of meanings in texts, its aim is not to reject meaning altogether or to advocate for any sort of relativism – of which it has often been accused. Derrida presents undecidability

as a restricted form of uncertainty and contrasts it to the notion of indeterminacy in order to refute the accusation that deconstruction leads to meaning-relativism. Undecidability for Derrida is a delimited form of uncertainty, then, in the sense that the possibilities between which the meaning of a text oscillates are here determined and stable. Indeterminacy, in contrast, is a type of unlimited uncertainty of meaning without any demarcation, that is, uncertainty in the sense of there being no identifiable, determinate possibilities of interpretation and so no possibility of oscillation or interpretative movement between options of meaning, no possibility of concluding anything, not even tentatively or provisionally. In an interview printed in *Limited Inc.* (1988), Derrida stresses the importance of this distinction in response to being confronted with the accumulation of charges of nihilism made by critical readers against deconstruction.

‘Language is (in) famously limited in its capacity to represent reality, and all communication entails some degree of uncertainty, incoherence and openness of meaning. It is both misleading and unnecessary to view this simply as a problem. Indeed, it can and should as a quality.’

I do not believe I have ever spoken of ‘indeterminacy’, whether in regard to meaning or anything else. Undecidability is something else again... I want to recall that undecidability is always a *determinate* oscillation between possibilities (for example, of meaning, but also of facts). These possibilities are themselves highly *determined* in strictly *defined* situations (for example, discursive – syntactical or rhetorical – but also political, ethical, etc.). They are *pragmatically* determined. The analyses that I have devoted to undecidability concern just these determinations and these definitions, not at all some vague ‘indeterminacy’. I say ‘undecidability’ rather than ‘indeterminacy’ because I am interested more in relations of force, in differences of force, in everything that allows, precisely, determinations in given situations to be stabilized through a decision of writing (in the broad sense I give to this word, which also includes political action and experience in general). There would be no indecision or *double bind* were it not between *determined* (semantic, ethical, political) poles, which are upon occasion terribly necessary and always irreplaceably singular. Which is to say that from the point of view of semantics, but also of ethics and politics, ‘deconstruction’ should never lead either to relativism or to any sort of indeterminism.

Uncertainty and obscurity are not, then, simply meaning-obstructive. There are unproductive forms and uses of uncertainty; and there are highly productive forms that generate and nurture meaning.

The appreciation of (as well as the frustration with) uncertainty of meaning seems to be an almost intuitive human one. The value of uncertainty – its meaning-productive function, its affective dimension, its effect of reader-engagement and its function of disrupting existing meaning-systems and conventions for communication – is often implicitly agreed upon among scholars, critics and readers in relation to fiction and creative writing. Indeed, positive

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critical judgements and valuations of literature and other art forms often rely on precisely an appreciation of the uncertainty of meaning and its effect of bewilderment and thought-provocation. And for good reasons, as I have tried to argue.

To be sure, philosophy differs from narrative fiction in significant ways; but there are also strong commonalities between the two. Moral philosophy and ethics should obviously take its responsibility for productive, clear and truthful communication and dissemination of insights and knowledge seriously. This includes, I

argue, making room for, even encouraging, uncertainty, obscurity, as well as experimentation and creativity in relation to both content and form. Uncertainty and obscurity are not the same as vagueness and imprecision. Indeed, uncertainty sometimes leads to a greater degree of precision and adequacy in the representation of reality and truth. And even losing track and getting lost in obscure areas of thought or being led astray into unknown theoretical wildernesses sometimes lead to unexpected insights and shortcuts to valuable knowledge and wisdom.

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