

COMMISSIONING A TAXI DRIVER: OF PHILOSOPHICAL PROFESSIONALISM

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Abstract

Isaiah Berlin said in a number of occasions that he had no personal interests in philosophy, and that he was like a taxi driver, who didn't work without a commission. During his life Berlin however dealt with a wide variety of topics, and the interesting question is, how did he choose those topics? And more importantly, why did he insist on having the disinterested motives of a taxi-driver?

This essay discusses the requirements of philosophical professionalism from these starting points, in essence in the emphasis of the role of analytical skills in locating and defining philosophical topics and issues. These capabilities are however found wanting, even according to Berlin's own account. The background of his insistence of the taxi-driver attitude is traced back to the presuppositions of analytic philosophy of Oxford in the 1930's, where Berlin had his training.

Keywords: Isaiah Berlin, philosophical professionalism, teaching philosophy.

1 INTERESTS AND COMMISSIONS

Isaiah Berlin said often that he had no special personal interest in philosophy, and this is surely in some sense evident considering the wide variety of the topics he dealt with during his life. Moreover, Berlin said that he was like a tailor or a taxi driver, who moves nowhere without a commission, as in his discussion with Beata Polanowska-Sygułska: "My book on Marx was commissioned, but the essay on Namier was not. Everything else, every single piece I've written, everything else was ordered. I'm like a taxi-cab. If I am not summoned, I remain still. I don't move."¹ What is interesting here is the basis on which did he in fact take his commissions, because in spite of what he claims here, he did not select the topics randomly simply from commissions alone. In fact, he denies this explicitly in his conversations with Iranian-born philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo,² who asks: "You once compared yourself to a tailor who doesn't work without getting commissions. But I don't think, that your essays are a result of pure chance. Do you feel very close to the thinkers whom you work on?" Berlin's reply is: "No, it is not pure chance. I do not do all I am asked to do. I refuse more orders than I accept." So, the question is, on what basis then did he refuse and/or accept his commissions?

Berlin continues the dialogue by giving reasons for selecting Vico to work with. But these reasons for this choice seem to me to be intended to emphasise the attitude that "I have no philosophical interests of my own". He explains: "I reflect, at times, on how I came to work on Vico... The piece on Vico I wrote because I was asked to say something about him by the Italian Institute in London. I knew the head of the Institute and he asked me to give a lecture on some Italian topic. I love Italy and Italians. I said to myself 'Why not'?"

"I love Italy and Italians". A nice motive to work on Vico – and on any Italian other philosopher, for that matter. But when Berlin explains his reasons, it becomes evident that this is not an entirely *laissez-faire*-attitude; not just any Italian philosopher would do: "But the Italians are not rich in first-class thinkers – who, apart from Machiavelli, Vico and Croce? Marsiglio of Padua? Pomponazzi? Pareto? Compared to Descartes? Leibniz? Kant? Wittgenstein? So I chose Vico, a deeply original thinker, whose genius was fully appreciated only long after his time." Clearly then, even if Berlin says that he never had any philosophical interests, that doesn't mean that he does not find certain topics more interesting than others. What makes

¹ Berlin & Polanowska-Sygułska 2006, p. 119.

² Jahanbegloo & Berlin 1993, p. 95.

Vico “a deeply original thinker”? or him or anyone else “a first-class thinker”? Berlin must have some criteria for interesting topics and when Jahanbegloo concludes in another conversation with him that “So, you distinguish between good philosophy and bad philosophy?”, Berlin’s reply is simply: “All philosophers do that. Good and bad applies to every human endeavour.”³ The question thus persists; why and how did Berlin choose his topics? And more importantly, why did he insist on being a philosophical taxi driver?

2 THE GOALS OF PHILOSOPHY INSTRUCTION

In order not to make this a mere exegesis of one man’s personal attitude towards philosophy, let me expand the terms of the question. The conviction that in your profession as a philosopher you are commissioned as a taxi driver has always appealed to me personally, for a couple of reasons. I suppose the first thing is that I myself never had any special topics very close to my heart. Nor have I been drawn to philosophy because of some grand philosophical idea or great revelation by some classic in my youth. I have no idea, for instance, what my first philosophical book was. I could just as well have been doing something else in my life; my being a philosopher was a mere coincidence, nothing more.

But there are also other, less personal reasons for me to endorse the idea of a philosophical taxi driver, which arise mainly from the area of philosophical education. In our research plan seminars – where students are instructed in their thesis work – I have been in the habit of urging the students to become philosophical taxi drivers. One reason arises from the fact that our department is very liberal concerning the choice of personal topics in seminars and theses. This may sound like a nice, tolerant idea, and the students love it when they can bring in any of the strange philosophers they have discovered God knows where, but it does have its downside. For one, we cannot have systematic teaching, instruction or discussion in the seminars since the selection of topics there has very little in common. This is an extremely difficult situation for us as instructors.

The taxi driver attitude allows me to explain firstly – to myself as well as to the students – why I have never paid any attention to this or that particularly deserving philosopher before, that is, that this is my first commission with him or her. Secondly, why should I dig myself into the ideas of strange philosophies that I have had no previous interest in? I need a commission for that, and it is only now, in the seminar, that I have been commissioned. More importantly, the taxi driver attitude promises that I may be able to instruct in all the topics that come my way.

But there is yet one more important issue involved. The fundamental thing I tell the students in the seminars is that we will try to train them to become professional philosophers – that they are to become professionals with the ability to identify philosophical questions, to understand philosophical logic and argumentation, key concepts, central theories, etc. Berlin also lists such abilities: “I think that professional philosophers are needed because if they are any good they do clarify ideas; they analyse words and concepts and the ordinary terms in which you and I think, and this makes a great deal of difference to the progress of thought.”⁴ In other words, this is what is sometimes called ‘the analytic enterprise’ of philosophy. This is a legacy of the early days of analytic philosophy in Oxford, where Berlin had his philosophical training.

These same professional skills are then evidently required of me as an instructor. Even if I did not originally recognise the philosophers the students wish to work on in the seminars, I should be able to make sense of them pretty quickly and analyse texts with my professional abilities, and be able to instruct the students working with them soon enough. Moreover, I should also be a role-model here: philosophical professionalism in the flesh.

Right?

3 FROM ANALYTICAL SKILLS TO HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

The purpose of the philosophical training is that the students will become professional philosophers whom anyone can sign up to conduct a philosophical enquiry on any topic. They will be able to fill out this commission with their skills. They will be taxi-drivers, just waiting at the taxi-stand for philosophical commissions.

Now I believe that Berlin uses the concept of a taxi driver to refer to this kind of professionalism: that one is capable of taking up any old topic, analysing it and pinpointing the philosophical questions it involves, and no personal interest in the topic is necessary.

This is surely such an appealing idea. But at this point any normal student will start asking serious questions. How does one apply the analytic skills? How does one identify philosophical questions? It is not

³ Ibid. 142.

⁴ Ibid. 29.

that the philosopher simply starts analysing texts and concepts and waits for the philosophical problems to just pop up? You need to know what you are looking for, what concepts to concentrate on, and what philosophical problems in general look like.

Philosophical training is usually done through assigning students topics, which involve problems generally accepted as philosophical; issues or questions that fall nicely within the established traditional categories of philosophical topics. This is understandable; we also have a tradition of 2500 years, which we are trying to teach the students. They would usually love to have topics on burning contemporary issues, but we shouldn't give them those; they are not yet professional philosophers, and as such are unable to either identify the philosophical questions or analyse the concepts and arguments.

Philosophical enquiry is then not merely a question of applying analytical skills, but also a question of identifying philosophical questions. In general, that is, answering the question of what philosophy is. Berlin starts his famous essay *The Purpose of Philosophy* by asking "What is the subject-matter of philosophy?" and immediately replies that "[t]here is no universally accepted answer to this question. Opinions differ...".⁵ Of course Berlin is right in this. When we start seriously to analyse what sorts of questions are specifically philosophical ones, we indeed have no clear and settled answers. It is a topic each philosopher sees differently and has done so throughout the history of this rather strange enterprise.

Berlin of all philosophers knows fully well the importance of history to philosophy; he was so well-read in it himself, and his method was to dive deep into history. Jahanbegloo asks Berlin: "In many of your essays you try to show the emergence of ideas by bringing them to light through the life and personality of their authors. Do you consider your work a philosophical investigation or an historical one?" Berlin answers:

"How can I distinguish? Let me explain: take, for example, the history of philosophy. Some histories of philosophy throw little light on it because, unless the writer is or has been a student of philosophy himself, unless he has brought about philosophical problems as such, he cannot have any idea of what it is that made someone else think these thoughts or be tormented by these problems. He cannot truly grasp what questions philosophers have attempted to answer or analyse or discuss. He will simply write that Descartes said this, Spinoza said that but that Hume did not think that either was right. That is all quite dead."⁶

The way I interpret this passage on the basis of what I have already said is that analytic skills, and historically defining certain problems as philosophical ones go hand in hand. Analytical skills as such are blind; they cannot determine what questions are philosophical. We need something else to direct those skills at their targets. For Berlin that is the history of philosophy.

4 GAMES AND BLIND FOXES

But one problem still remains: why does he stress that he has no interest in the topics he has taken up as commissions? And why does he insist that his reason for picking them up is patently non-philosophical... like the love of Italy...?

I think Berlin was more hopeful than honest in stressing the non-philosophical character of his choice of topic. I have already mentioned that he considers Vico a 'deeply original thinker', that Berlin didn't pick up just any Italian philosopher, and that he gives similar appraisals of most of the thinkers he dealt with. In fact he thus had a clear vision of what philosophical questions are and this gives him the criteria for selecting the people and ideas he worked with. Perhaps as a philosophical taxi driver, his first commissions were merely accidental but after that he surely directed the enquiry where he wanted, towards what he thought were interesting philosophical questions. But why on earth did he insist on the non-philosophical character of the original commission?

What I boldly claim now is that the concept of a philosophical taxi driver was a game, a similar to the epigram he made of the distinction between hedgehogs and foxes. Of this distinction Berlin said, "I never meant it very seriously. I meant it as a kind of enjoyable intellectual game, but it was taken seriously. Every classification throws light on something; this one was very simple."⁷ The taxi driver statement is also a simple distinction, which reveals much more than a direct statement. It is here I think we are to look for Berlin's insistence on the disinterested motives of the philosophical taxi-driver in that both games share the same preoccupation with distaste for systems, yet another legacy of the Oxford analytic philosophy.

"The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." In this comment Berlin divides writers and thinkers into two categories: hedgehogs, who view the world through the lens of a single defining idea (Berlin's examples are Plato, Pascal, Hegel, and Nietzsche) and foxes, who draw on a wide variety of experiences and for whom the world cannot be boiled down to a single idea (Aristotle, Erasmus, Montaigne).

⁵ In Berlin 2001.

⁶ Ibid. 23.

⁷ Ibid. 188.

The background of this stance is immediately traceable to the logical positivists' mistrust of speculation and system-building, with Hegel as a prime example. Berlin tells Jahanbegloo, "I do not find all-embracing systems, vast metaphysical edifices congenial... The Hegelian system seems to me a dark, deep cave of Polyphemus, from which few return—all the footsteps point one way, as the Latin poet pointed out."⁸

Once you have a system, you also have the measuring stick for worthy philosophy; that is, whatever falls under or within the sphere of that system. And if you have a system, you have an obvious interest and purpose in philosophy, that of subsuming or reducing things into it. By stating that he has no philosophical interests, Berlin is in effect saying that he has no system. Berlin is a fox, completely and thoroughly.

Let me finish with the example of Berlin himself, which I believe supports my interpretation that analytic skills do not help you in locating the philosophical problems. The central idea of philosophical taxi-driver, i.e., that the professional philosopher may just jump into any old topic and start philosophical inquiry in it, is not plausible. As I said, students in our seminars often bring with them topics on philosophers I know nothing of. So I am supposed to be a professional and start analysing and clarifying what they say. But unfortunately, this often does not work. I am unable to understand them; and it is not just the lack of my philosophical skills; I have seen a number of more prominent philosophers struck dumb in a similar situation. I was therefore happy to read Berlin encountering similar problems:

"The most difficult task for philosophers from different camps is the task of translation. Perhaps it is a hopeless business. But I refuse to be pessimistic. I did make sense of what Alexandre Kojève said about his Marxified Hegel, and of Marcuse too. Although we made friends and talked about music and literature and many other subjects, I could not understand a word of the philosophical writings of, for instance, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, who is much admired in France, I am told; nor, I must admit, of my friend Alan Montefiore's friend, Derrida."⁹

Evidently then even the analytical skills do not suffice. If somebody wants to commission me to do an enquiry on Derrida, I simply have to say, "sorry, I am not able to do that." My analytical skills would not be of too much use here; I would profit more from a thorough historical knowledge of phenomenology and structuralism. I have to know the tradition or doctrine well enough before I can even commence the analytic process.

As a conclusion I would then say that Berlin may have been a taxi driver in the sense that he took commissions, that he needed someone to get him going. But he was surely an exclusive taxi driver; one who had the luxury of choosing his clients as well as directions.

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⁸ Ibid. 30.

⁹ Ibid. 49.