

Up and Down Again

The Story

Of Mr. Incognito's

Academic Journey

Essays

by

Mr. Incognito

edited by

Karl von der Graduate

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Editor's introduction

A while ago I came into contact with Mr. Incognito, the author of these essays. A manuscript of his literally, so to speak, fell into my hands. I found the piece interesting, so I ended up as its editor. The book came into print on CosmicusBooks under the title "Questions About Philosophy".

After the book was published, Mr. Incognito contacted me, telling me he was pleased to see a material effect of his labours. Now he had some essays he would have me read, if I was willing.

We met at a pub one cold, quiet morning in February. It was the sort of day that promises, or demands, clarity. The sort of day that might help to calm down one's mind, or stir it up with exaggerated expectations. My task would be to listen and understand; I remember it felt as if maybe it was the perfect day for that, maybe not at all.

Mr. Incognito was already seated in a corner as I came in. There were two cups of coffee on the table. He stood up and apologised that the coffee was probably lukewarm. No need to apologise, I said.

We went straight to our topic. No politeness ceremonies, no talk about the book I had edited, no

personal information exchanged either way. Just ‘business’.

The man was not as I had imagined him to be. While the book he had written was systematically organised, he himself appeared to be quite the opposite. While the book was well written, I should almost say that his *speaking* was not. He wasn’t eloquent, I mean, but rather struggling to express himself. While in his book one finds a calm and steady thinker, his appearance in real life didn’t correspond. He was shy; obviously unaccustomed to and uncomfortable with talking about himself.

It quite took some explanation before I understood what the essays he brought with him were supposed to be about. At first it appeared as if what they had in common was that all had been *rejected in review*. He told me he had sent them to various philosophical journals and gotten them in return. A collection of unsuccessful attempts.

Hardly a good organising principle for a book, I thought, but kept my mouth.

Then he began to talk as if there was some deep, inexpressible theme that connected the essays. He was unable to say just what this theme was, beyond descriptions like “unarticulated yet implicit criticism”, “hidden misleading structures”, and “institutionalised

misunderstanding”. He offered one obscure and imprecise term as the explanation of another. I began to feel frustrated: I regard myself as a patient man, willing to listen and try to understand, but I’m not that interested in mysticism. So, his inability to make his point accurately was beginning to put me off.

I don’t know exactly how it came about, but as he kept explaining I slowly began to perceive a clearer image of his concern. Maybe it was the lukewarm caffeine that began to do its work. Maybe it was a reward for patience. Anyway, the bits and pieces he had brought into the conversation must have belonged together in a way, and I gradually started to understand how.

Looking back on those more than three hours of talking I have two different memories: one of confusion and frustration, and one of illumination and understanding. One of nonsense, one of sense. I have two different stories about the same event; which of them is most correct I can’t say, but the fact that both remain in my memory probably suggests that there is something true in both.

In order to introduce Mr. Incognito’s essays I’ve decided to render my *positive* memory of our meeting. The memory is of a conversation much more efficient and illuminating than the one that actually took place, so it’s not a *report*. I’m making both him and me less

fumbling and stuttering than we were that February morning, with the intention of helping a reader's understanding of what this book is about.

So, here is how our meeting continued, as I charitably remember it: After his awkward opening words on the material as a *collection of rejected work*, Mr. Incognito began to speak in general terms about the problems he had experienced with academic philosophy. He hadn't gotten anywhere in academia. I asked him in a polite way the obvious question of whether it would not be better for an unsuccessful academic to work hard in order to become a *successful* academic; to learn, adjust, and improve. He wouldn't accept that proposal, however, at least not in his own case. There were 'things' or 'principles', he said, effectively preventing him from doing philosophy in the way academia requires. He had things on his mind, he explained, that had turned out to be unapproachable from *within* academia. There were restrictions and regulations in academic philosophy that he simply wouldn't observe. He had concerns that were of a non-scholarly kind, and those concerns were at the centre of his attention. His lack of success was due, he asserted, to his unwillingness to part with his central interest.

What exactly he referred to was hard to see. In one way they seemed to make sense, for the idea that

there may be reasons to stay out of a certain business isn't new or improbable. One may have moral scruples about going into particular dealings, and academia might turn out to be one such. Academia isn't *perfect*. Yet exactly how those scruples were justified, and what foundation he had for his qualms, that I couldn't say.

In retrospect, I think what made me glimpse the substance of his winding explanations was some phrases that he showed me. He passed me a sheet of paper with a selection of sentences. They were all taken from the rejections he'd received when submitting his essays to various journals. The sentences were these:

This is not an academic research article in its present form.

The paper is more like a literary comment than a philosophical paper which one might find published in a journal like [...]. It lacks focus in the sense that it does not follow a straight-forward dialectical goal. It is rather hermeneutic than argumentative in approach.

While this piece is not without merit, it does not live up to the standards expected of a journal submission.

This paper is patently not a scholarly discussion of a scholarly topic, but rather a profession of faith or allegiance.

The manuscript includes a number of interesting remarks, but it is just not a piece of scholarly research work.

In these formulations a specific problem became manifest. He had been rejected as failing to meet with a sort of *formal* requirement. His writings didn't comply with the protocol for "scholarly research". What he seemed to want to communicate to me was that there is something outright wrong *with that protocol*.

I asked him if his issue was with what 'research' in philosophy really is. "Yes", he said, "exactly. Research work; scholarly work. Can there even be such a thing in philosophy? In the strict, scientific sense of the 21st century? Isn't philosophy rather about heading *beyond* all questions that can be *researched* in that scientific sense?"

Now I felt we were going somewhere, so I followed up, "Do you mean that academic philosophers are trying to be scientists? That they *pretend* to do science when in fact they don't?"

“Partly”, he said. “Of course, *some* of what they do is science, you know, the philological, linguistic, historical, or mathematical studies. And of course, they shouldn’t abandon that. But in those pursuits, they’re not engaged with the core issues of philosophy. And when they *are* engaged with the core issues, they’re *not* doing science.”

I asked, “Some would say that they are?”

He looked down at the table, as if needing a moment to maintain his composure, then said, “Yes, some pretend that they do philosophical science and gain terrain in philosophy, that philosophical theory is steadily improved by work of the kind they’re doing. Most of their peers appear to believe them. I object to that. It’s an illusion.”

“You object, but don’t get the message across?”

I suggested.

“No, for I don’t object in a ‘scholarly research’ style. And I don’t see how that could be done either, without self-contradiction.”

We sat in silence for a while, giving me time to consider what I’d heard. I looked again at the phrases of rejection, then I asked, “what is it in practice you cannot do which they require?”

“Well, look at this”, he said. “*The manuscript includes a number of interesting remarks, but it is just*

not a piece of scholarly research work. That's a referee's comment about a paper that *explicitly* questions what scholarly research in philosophy might be. The fact that the paper is then just dismissed on the grounds that it isn't scholarly research is fascinating, I think. The referee admits that there's an issue, but rules out a substantial discussion of that issue by rejecting it on formal grounds. That rejection, in a way, expresses my point much more succinctly than I could have expressed it myself."

"Can you explain that again?" I asked.

"Well," he said, "I can't in scholarly fashion *claim* that philosophy isn't science. I can't say that philosophy is essentially not scholarly research – and present *that* as a result of scholarly-philosophical research. That doesn't cohere as a scientific claim. It isn't such a result. So maybe when a referee says that it is interesting to criticise the academic notion of scholarly research – but rejects it because it isn't scholarly research, he has accidentally made the point for me, more sophisticated than I could make it by myself."

"What remarks do you think he found 'interesting'?"

"I think he, too, would consider the possibility that what I say about the protocol of academic philosophy is true. But then he has expectations; he is

trained in a tradition and a genre. Therefore, it is interesting, but..."

Then he said a sentence that took some hold of me: "You simply can't get past the censure with papers that criticise the principle of censure in a coherent way."

"Is academic philosophy *totalitarian*, you mean?" I asked, thinking about other institutions of censure that don't allow criticism. Officials that do their jobs blindly, a system of reward and punishment. "That would be your words," he said. Then he thought for a moment, and added:

"But, well, when criticism of the principles of censure is stopped *by censure* and not by argument, then there's at least a smell of totalitarianism. Would a totalitarian censure allow criticism of the principles of censure? No. Would a democratic censure allow that? Yes. So, yes, in that respect academic philosophy is more totalitarian than democratic."

The depth of this problem had only gradually occurred to him, he said. And it isn't an easy one to fix. For what you'd ideally want to do isn't to replace the current censure with a new one, or with *no* censure. The only way about the problem is that editors and peers grow in understanding and sensibility. The protocol of academic philosophy must be well *interpreted*. The solution is simply more *phronesis*. There is nothing

wrong with the word “research” in itself. Philosophy is research, of course. Not in the same way as the special sciences, but research is what it is, kind of. The same with “scholarly”. One must be *informed*, of course. One needs *training* to do philosophy well. But there are many ways in which scholarly information and scholarly techniques can totally eclipse the *philosophical* in academic philosophy. Scholarly work can make people unconcerned with the problems at heart of philosophy. It can make them indifferent to the fate of the philosophical spirit. The rule of editing should be to develop a sense of importance. An editor should not allow himself ever to dismiss a piece as “simply not scholarly research work”. If it is interesting and important enough, it is worth its ink. After all, the name of the business is “philosophy”, not “scholarly research”.

After this we sat again in silence for a while. Then I asked him what his alternative was. I mentioned a book I had read, called “Passionate Philosophy”, written by a guy who had also grown frustrated with specialised and flat-footed academic philosophy. A burning and personal approach.

“If your suggestion is that some sort of *existentialism* is the alternative route, that’s not at all what I mean. The alternative is free, attentive *discussion*. Listen to arguments, evaluate arguments, form new

arguments. Listen to the argument that upon reflection seems strongest. Continue in the critical tradition of Socrates, Kant, Wittgenstein and many more. Be alive to arguments. Be self-critical. Don't bow to authorities either in or out of philosophy. No shortcuts. One must learn to think for oneself, patiently, without illusions."

This was about where our conversation ended, according to my best memory.

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As an editor, my job is to give readers the best possible chances of getting something out of the book I'm editing. I'm committed, that is, not only to the author, but also to the reader.

Now, the author of these essays has problems with making summaries or abstracts or thesis statements of the results of his philosophical labours, and I see why. There aren't really any theses to abstract or state. He isn't the kind of philosopher who claims to present *results*. He doesn't pretend to do *science*.

I don't want to interfere in Mr. Incognito's work and betray him by telling readers what his non-existent theses are. The thought-processes are the purpose of these essays, and must be completed without shortcuts to the ending point. It is the journey through the

landscape of ideas that is important, not the more or less arbitrary final station. Still, as an editor, I must make some summaries of his writing if I think it's all-in-all in most readers' interest. And I do think it is.

I turn therefore to the task of giving some short introductions to each of the essays. They are not abstracts or explanations that Mr. Incognito himself would approve of. I know that, for I have asked. He accepts my editorial judgement that they are needed, but he would want me to underline that they're fully at *my* expense. They're my *interpretations*.

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This book, as I've come to see it, is the story of a travel up to Academia, and down again to ordinary life. Hence the title.

Of course, this isn't a chronicle of a person's struggle, but a collection of philosophical essays. Even so, those essays together tell the story of a man who negotiates with Academia: From the first essay to the last we find a specific dramatic development. The initial optimism with regard to entering the Academic castle to have a say inside it fades away. In the first essay we see, as it were, a man with high hopes climbing the academic mountain to deliver a philosophical message. It is a

peculiar message from an academic point of view, since it is a sort of criticism of academic life itself. According to the author, however, just this sort of message needs to sound inside Academia.

Now, as I have already told, the attempt to deliver the message failed. The essay was rejected on formal grounds. The gatekeepers didn't, so to speak, approve of the figure appearing with the message. There was something suspiciously un-academic about him, so they refused to let him in.

As I write this, I understand better and better how Mr. Incognito could be so silly as to begin describing his work by saying that it had all been refused in review. It is, actually, pretty close to being the heart of the matter. The experience of being stopped, where so many others pass without difficulty. Where so many other messages, light and inconsequential, are carried in through the gates, Mr. Incognito was kept out as an Iraqi fortune hunter. The castle where the heaviest and most consequential matters are to be discussed remained inaccessible to him, who came up there carrying quite a heavy and troubling package of arguments.

So, the story told in this book is about Mr. Incognito's repeated knocking on the door of Academia. It is about fruitless knocking; neither his critical nor his constructive attempts convince the gatekeepers. He tries

to explain what academic philosophers should stay clear of. He tries to explain just how they can stay clear of it. He begins to quarrel openly with the gatekeepers, and tries to specify *precisely* what their error is in not letting him in. After a while he gives up, and leaves by the gates a pamphlet that maybe someone else can pick up and bring inside. Eventually he starts to descend back to the lowlands where the common folk keep to their ordinary pursuits with their ordinary wonder and their ordinary philosophising. When the book ends, Mr. Incognito is no longer hoping to have a say among the high up in the castle.

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I now turn to describe each of the essays in more detail.