**A Dialogue on / in Performance Philosophy**

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This dialogue was produced by an email exchange, with each email limited to 200 words. The exchange took place between 21 January and 9 June, 2021. No edits were allowed once ‘send’ had been pressed and there was to be no other correspondence between the participants for the duration of the dialogue. The Call for Papers for this special issue of *Human Affairs* was the starting point and there was no other pre-planning.

**Call for Papers: How Philosophy is Presented**

*Philosophy has been presented in many ways throughout its history, via poetry, oral traditions, dialogues, fiction, science fiction, films, online articles and encyclopaedia entries, podcasts, videos, social media and emails, cartoons. There is now a Performance Philosophy movement that explores specifically artistic presentations, such as through music and dance. Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Heidegger all presented their views in very distinctive ways. Sartre denied having stylistic ambitions for philosophy, saying the aim is only that each word ‘signify a concept and that one only’. Some might agree that clarity and precision are the only requirements of good philosophical presentation, with the medium employed all but irrelevant so long it allows these objectives to be fulfilled. Others might point to the need for interaction - dialogue, objection, clarification, debate - as essential to how philosophical ideas are conveyed. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, many professional philosophers have been presenting philosophy to their students online - is the physical presence and interaction that the students will miss an irrelevance to the ideas they will be taught? Does presentation matter in philosophy? Does it matter in a distinctive way? Does presentation reflect the individual philosopher's conception of what philosophy is, and what it is good for? Is there anything distinctive and universal to be said about how and why presentation matters in philosophy, as opposed to other academic disciplines? Should philosophers care more about presentation than they currently do? Should they care less? Are certain media more apt for the presentation of philosophy than others? Can the medium undermine the message (e.g. a critique of internet technology on a YouTube video)? Should literary or otherwise artistic merit ever sway us in philosophy? Can it ever be a valid objection to a philosopher that they are boring?*

**Laura**:

For me, the use of the term 'presentation' in this context seems to suggest that the ideas of philosophy are already formed by some other, prior process and are only then, later, 'presented' to others. All of the formats, modes or contexts which are then mentioned - from books to online teaching - therefore seem to be framed as instances of communication, where the form is conceded to colour or shape the content, but according to a model where 'content' and 'form' are still considered separable. For me, the idea of 'performance' and specifically of performance philosophy includes a focus on the performativity of form itself. Ideas are always enacted and performed in specific contexts, forms, bodies, relations and so forth; the book or the lecture is itself a thinking, an event of philosophizing, not (only) a representation of a thinking that has happened elsewhere. From this perspective, it is less a matter of choosing the right 'medium' in order to convey readymade philosophical ideas effectively. It is more a question of experimenting with how different media (forms, processes, events and so on) enable particular modes of thought, including - crucially - collective or collaborative thinking, with others and across difference.

**James**:

Yes, it does suggest that the content and the presentation of that content are separable. That’s what I’d naturally suppose, but I’m really not sure, I haven’t made my mind up on this issue - but I’m hoping to over the course of this dialogue.  To see why I’m inclined to suppose this, take a well-known example of some philosophical content: no amount of knowledge of the physical world can tell you what’s it’s like to be a bat. There’s an idea there, the philosophical content, which is conveyed from lecturers to students year after year, all around the world; there are plenty of online videos to pick it up from and it’s probably been explained in cartoons too. The idea can be presented many ways, then, but it is readymade for us, simply because Thomas Nagel ‘made’ it in the 1970s (let’s just say … the provenance of the idea is disputed). The original ‘performance’ would be pretty boring to observers, I’d imagine – Nagel at his desk, reading and re-reading, making some notes, sitting back to think, etc. Much of it would have been a private performance in his mind.

**Laura**:

I suppose I would want to question what you mean when you say that “there’s an idea *there*”. I would question that sense of “an idea” (singular) as a self-identical, readymade object that is then “conveyed” or “(re)presented” in multiple ways. For me, it is not “the same” idea (‘propositional content’) that just circulates; ideas are inherently relational (even if that relation is one of self to self… who knows if that essay is what Nagel meant to say?). That is, I would say that the idea differs from itself and is irreducible to some static or essential form. The idea is performed anew in the event of Nagel’s embodied thinking, in his own speech and writing, in its encounters with readers, in the reduced explanatory form you have given it here cut out from its context and so on. The question of provenance is very interesting in that respect. This may sound like a bit of a Derridean kind of linguistic relativism, but as you know, I’m coming more from a Deleuzian perspective which locates difference at all levels within the physical world.

**James:**

One person’s idea of Pegasus might be that he was the flying horse of Greek mythology that sprang from the blood of Medusa, whereas another’s might end at the fact that he’s a flying horse. If someone thinks he’s a unicorn, they’re wrong but in the right area, while someone who thinks he’s a sea monster hasn’t grasped the idea of Pegasus. If there were no core to ideas then I can’t see how successful communication would be possible, or why we’d feel frustrated when others don’t ‘get’ what we’re trying to say. But grasping an idea is a process which will be different in different people; that’s something we can agree upon without getting into wider issues about meaning. Perhaps the idea of Performance Philosophy can be understood as the initiation of this process in an audience through performance; possibly in the performers too.  But I feel you may have a more liberal sense of ‘performance’ in mind than me, one not restricted to familiar performance arts, like music. My concern is that all philosophical events will then count as Performance Philosophy, such as my lectures to my students this week – I don’t think they should.

**Laura:**

Here we are on stage: acting out this rehearsed drama. You play the part of John Searle. Your line is: “Given that there is successful communication, there must be a core to ideas”. Then I play Jacques Derrida. My line is: “Given that every communication can be deconstructed, there cannot be anything self-identical (a ‘core’) to ideas”. But since we know how that drama ends, I’m grateful you seek common ground in the question of process. For me, performance is less a matter of you ‘grasping’ my idea, and more about the co-creation of ideas. And yes, I work with an expanding (non-self-identical) sense of performance from Performance Studies, rather than exclusively on performing arts. There are a number of reasons for this: including the capacity to register the fluidity between performance in arts contexts and the performativity of identities in social contexts, but also to include performance beyond Eurocentric arts conventions. I don’t really have concerns about lack of definition: the objection that anything and everything can be a performance in its expanded sense. This objection has been raised about PS since the 70s. I’m more interested in the plural, localised instances where what counts as performance gets renegotiated.

**James:**

I’m glad we’re not doing the Searle / Derrida play. A contemporary version could hardly ignore Derrida no longer being behind his text, or that picture on the internet of Searle posing with a gun. I think the significance of your preference for the co-creation of ideas, and my preference for co-created mental processes occurring when ready-made philosophical ideas are presented and grasped, is that I’m sceptical of new philosophy occurring in a performance setting and you are not; and that, I suspect, is because we’re operating with different conceptions of ‘philosophy’ and ‘performance’. But we’re not just talking about Performance Philosophy in this email exchange, right? We’re also supposed to be doing some, aren’t we? That makes me want to do something surprising, arresting, add some artistic flair – *perform*! It’s all about timing, maybe I’ll get there. This format has an advantage and a disadvantage, for me. It has the advantage for philosophy, because I can spend as long as I like thinking things through and editing before I press ‘send’, and a disadvantage for performance, because I’m not a poet and I’ve only got text.

**> INTERVAL <**

1.Exercise adapted from *Meters* (1972) by Allan Kaprow

carrying a cube of ice in the mouth

carrying a cube of ice in the hand

walking on

swallowing the melting ice till it’s gone

calling out: now!

walking on

waiting for the hand to hold no ice

calling out: now!

walking on

waiting for the hand to dry

calling out: now!

walking on

Write 100 words: “What happened?”

2. Exercise adapted from *Creative Evolution* (1907) by Henri Bergson

If I want to mix a glass of sugar and water, I must, willy-nilly, wait until the sugar melts. This little fact is big with meaning. For here the time I have to wait is not that mathematical time which would apply equally well to the entire history of the material world, even if that history were spread out instantaneously in space. It coincides with my impatience, that is to say, with a certain portion of my own duration, which I cannot protract or contract as I like. It is no longer something *thought*, it is something *lived*. It is no longer a relation, it is an absolute

(Bergson 1911: 10).

Write 100 words: “What happened?”

**> END <**

**James:**

Kaprow was alone. With his left hand, he picked up two cubes of ice that had inexplicably been left on a fence post, then walked down the deserted suburban street, placing one cube in his mouth. When the cube was small enough to swallow, he did so, and spluttered out ‘now’. Nobody heard him, poor fool. When nothing solid remained in his hand, he shouted out, more clearly this time, ‘now’. He shouted ‘now’ a third time when his left hand felt dry. This made no contribution to the meaning of life, so cosmically, nothing happened. Futility gnawed his soul.

The sugar lump is not a conjunction of qualities, like white, hard, and sweet, but requires their unification. Even if we imagine underlying substance, the qualities must be relationally unified with it, so we presuppose relation. But relations presuppose qualities, and qualities relations – each can be something neither together with, nor apart from, the other. Relations are not independent realities, and cannot require their terms to have double characters, such that they are both supported and made by the relation. So there’s no sugar lump to melt, nothing happens. Time is not an absolute, for time dissolves in The Absolute.

**Laura:**

Kaprow was never alone. As he impatiently waited for the ice to melt, he found himself swept up by the feeling that his ‘Now’ was but one among others. All these other movements beating to other rhythms: the melting, the evaporating, the perspiring, the decaying, the growing, the photosynthesising… So many changes, but no things which change underneath. So many changes, but no need for some virtual support either.

How could anyone consider such a populous place ‘deserted’? Kaprow wondered. Unpeopled perhaps, but he found that there was almost a cacophony of different beats to be heard if one listened closely enough. Not to mention the whole nonhuman audience that heard him in their own ways when the time finally came to call out ‘Now!’. True enough, the blackbird did not hear Kaprow on that particular day. She was more interested in listening to the sound of a worm moving under the surface of the ground. A worm who, in turn, was earlessly listening both to the vibrations of the artist’s footsteps and to the tremors of the blackbird as she landed on the lawn above.

‘Poor fool’, thought Kaprow, as he recalled the falling tree of the philosopher’s imaginary.

**James:**

They came in through the old door, it was dark, the corridor narrow, but once they’d climbed to the platform there was an electric lightbulb. Those girls – I’ll never forget them – offering the visitors wine … one was frying banana fritters and there were bananas dangling from the ceiling. You can stick a banana to a wall and sell it as art, or ‘un-art’, as I like to say – that’s been done! I loved the ‘60s. But even now I’m not alone, not really. I thought I was for a minute when enacting my ice-cube happening, that freaked me out. But no, I’m part of a living, breathing world, full of spirits, full of rhythms. Reality pulsates with the rhythm of life! What was it those foolish philosophers said about a tree falling in a forest when nobody’s around? It makes a ‘sound’, in the sense that the air vibrates, but it doesn’t make a ‘sound’, in the sense that there’s no human experience caused by the vibrations. But who cares about vibrations? I’m alone after all, the others and their experiences have melted like ice, human experience is all I ever cared about. I can’t go on, it’s unbearable.

**Laura:**

I can’t go on, it’s unbearable. What is the purpose of *this*? What is *this* for? What is the ‘for’ behind the ‘this’ that gives *this* its meaning? Is this a double conversion mission: two evangelists each trying to win the soul of the other for the cause? If so, better give up now. I will never change your mind nor you mine. (And what of yours, dear reader?) So much is already decided in advance, before the beginning, and yet – we go on, we must go on. So if *this* is not conversion, then what? Is *this* trying to find compromise or recognition of common ground, however small? Is *this* to agree to disagree, as they say - or to value disagreement in itself as the very site of the political without any expectation of ever arriving at consensus? Disagreement as what we share, in the end. Or could it be that *this* - this to-and-fro, this exchange without resolution - is an end in itself? This is this; it is what it is: but what ‘it’ is is a movement. “I can't go on like this. / That's what you think.” It goes on and there ‘we’ are.

**James:**

‘The movement is a battle of wills’, thought Kaprow, ‘it’s like Nietzsche said: my own mind is a struggle between different wills, fighting for dominance. The will that triumphed would be me, but there’ll be no triumph, the movement never stops.’ He opened his eyes and realised he was lying flat on his back - the girls were looking down at him, concerned. ‘What’s going down, Daddy-o?’ asked the one frying the banana fritters. ‘I think I’ve had a downgoing’, he murmured. ‘Hey, that music’, he asked, ‘what’s that groovy music?’ ‘It’s Joe and Wayne playing “This is This” – here, check it out, Baba Cool!’ He sat up and started reading the album cover – *This is This!*, by Wayne Shorter and Joe Zawinul, recorded in 1986. ‘That can’t be’, he said, getting to his feet with alarm, ‘this is 1964!’ There was a scream and the dancing stopped. A sinister figure had been spotted in the shadows, holding a gun. ‘Who are you?’ demanded Kaprow, with all the bravery he could muster. ‘I’m John Searle’, snarled the man, and he really didn’t look amused. ‘What the hell made you think that worm could hear your footsteps, for pity’s sake?’

**Laura:**

“Those girls” were getting bored with all the posturing, so they left them to it and went for a walk. ‘The point is,’ she said, ‘no one knows what philosophy is.’ [pause] ‘Right’. ‘And so what counts as philosophy – or better, philosophies plural – is always being produced: negotiated and re-negotiated in this crazy field of power relations’. [pause] ‘Right’. ‘So, I’m like: how do we include the jazz in that process? And like, really on its own terms? Do you know what I mean?… like: How can we listen to the philosophies that come from jazz itself, rather than just holding it up to some other idea of what philosophy is and being like ‘nope, that’s not philosophy, this is’. Or like, ‘that *could* be philosophy, but only if it's a bit more like this’. I mean, I know it sounds a bit circular, but that’s the movement, right? What can we learn about philosophy *from* jazz?’. ‘Right, or from worms! [laughs]’. ‘Right’ [laughs]. ‘No, but seriously…. Worms.’ [pause]. They continued in silence for the next couple of blocks, listening to the sound of the wind and the emerging image of a worm philosophy that was manifesting itself in-between them.

**James:**

Pressure, heat, friction, goal. Satisfaction, heat, friction, goal. Buzz, danger-goal, friction, goal satisfied. Can’t see anything – not blackness, NOTHINGNESS of visual experience nullified. Tallulah and Jen shuddered. ‘That worm philosophy is too heavy’, said Jen, ‘Not going there again!’ They’d walked far from the entrance to Kaprow’s cave, and looking back over the sunlit fields, they saw Pollyanna running to catch them up. ‘What’s going down?’ she asked, still panting. ‘We freaked ourselves out with worm philosophy.’ ‘No such thing’, said Pollyanna, ‘you need language for philosophy and that takes you out of the world of a worm.’ Jen arched her back with disdain. ‘Nobody knows what philosophy is’, she snapped indignantly. ‘Only according to new Francocentric philosophy’, replied Pollyanna, ‘throughout the rest of the European traditions, as well as the Chinese, African and Indian ones, a universalist conception of philosophy as inquiry into a related group of topics of natural interest to human beings is taken for granted. But if you buy that post-truth thing, regarding words and interpretation as reality itself, you won’t know what anything is. French philosophy used to be good, though – Beauvoir would have something to say about you frying banana fritters for Kaprow, Tallulah!’

**Laura:**

Tallulah sighed, saying nothing. There didn’t seem much point arguing about it. She thought about all the things she could say. She could ask why Pollyanna assumed that philosophy required language. Didn’t that go against the idea of philosophy as inquiry - including into itself and language? She could point to the exclusionary nature of that definition and how measuring philosophies according to that standard was not just anthropocentric but excluding of non-verbal human philosophies too. She could note all the forms of non-verbal inquiry that could be considered part of philosophy. She could show how the French philosophy Pollyanna derided wasn’t simply ‘post-truth’. And that even Pollyanna’s attempt to provide a universal definition of philosophy was both so open that it could not differentiate philosophy from the arts, and more restricted that it appeared: as soon as one started asking questions about what counts as “inquiry”, or who gets to decide if something is of “natural interest”. She changed her mind. She would speak. You never know, she thought. She might surprise me. “So, Pollyanna when you say ‘language’, I guess you mean human language? And do you mean words or things like gestures, body language and images too?”

**James:**

‘Gosh, Tallulah’, said Pollyanna, ‘that was a long pause! You spent that time deciding whether to bother answering my question, I’ll bet – your sigh and body language gave it away. Deciding will have consisted in words floating around your inner space, and they’ll have been English, not Russian, because you don’t speak Russian. Any images involved – very unlikely there were any – could only have entered that decision because of the significance you gave them, with words.’ Tallulah sighed again. ‘Look, this won’t be a productive negotiation’, said Pollyanna with a big grin, ‘let’s go see what those boys are doing back at the cave!’ Tallulah and Jen thought this was a marvellous idea. When their eyes accustomed to the gloom, the first thing they saw was Searle looking very animated. ‘I’m loving this performance philosophy, Allan’, he said, ‘let’s do another one!’ ‘OK’, said Kaprow, ‘the next word is: truth.’

Allan: Whatever increases my power.

John: Accurate representation.

Jen: Whatever’s considered a justified belief in an ideal community of inquirers.

Tallulah: The real is the true.

Pollyanna: A male construct.

‘More, more!’ said Searle, clapping his hands. ‘OK’, said Kaprow, ‘the next one is: philosophy’.

**Laura:**

Consider philosophy an expanding circle.

centre (n.) – from the Latin *centrum*: “the fixed point of the two points of a drafting compass”, and from the Greek *kentron*: "sharp point, goad, sting of a wasp".

The centre is a middle point of a circle: the point around which something revolves.

The centre is also pointed and sharp – goading moving bodies in a particular direction.

The goad is a traditional farming implement: a spiked stick used to spur livestock.

The Greeks used the proverb “kicking against the goad” to teach the foolishness of resistance against a powerful authority.

‘Non-philosophy’ is not an anti-philosophy nor a call for the negation of philosophy. Rather, the ‘non’ in non-philosophy is intended to signal the radical extension of philosophy – though not according to some rampant imperialism. Instead, non-philosophy entails a mutation of philosophy by other knowledges – including the arts. Standard philosophy starts with a concept of what counts as proper philosophy and proceed by means of application. Non-philosophy is an experimental practice of thought that seeks to be transformed by its objects. Non-standard aesthetics is a qualitative extension of art to philosophy: ‘the moment when thought in its turn becomes a form of art’ (Laruelle 2012).

**James:**

4/4, medium-up, Bar One: quaver rest, then 7 quavers ascending from D# below the stave to G above the stave, so: Chord Amaj7#11, Melody D#, G#, C# (‘expanding’), Chord Bb7, Melody D, F, G, F (‘circle of phi-’), Bar Two: Melody descends from Ab above stave, so: Chord G7, Melody crotchet Ab, quaver G (‘-los-o-‘), Chord C7, Melody E for the rest of the bar (‘-phy’).

Why, hello again, Laura!!! Who would have thought so much time would pass? It’s been 15 months since you were telling me about non-philosophy. I’ve been trekking in the Andes and you’ll be delighted to know that I stuck to my plan. When I arrived at Machu Picchu, I never once looked at the Incan citadel – but it was there, always behind my back, while I absorbed the atmosphere.

Tallulah turned up the volume.

Philosophy was a way of life for the Greeks. Dialogue was training for a life of rational discourse with yourself and others. To initiate philosophy required performance aimed at disrupting closed-mindedness. These days I fear philosophy’s becoming more like professional sport – competitors face-off against each other, already sure of their views, trying to defeat the opposition.

**Laura:**

I want to attend, not to how philosophy is presented, but how it is performed: how unequal power relations produce and are produced by the formation of concepts of philosophy. *For whom* was Philosophy a way of life in ancient Greece? Who and what was excluded in advance by the notion of philosophy as rational dialogue? I think of the inscription that is said to have been written above the entrance to Plato’s Academy: ‘Let none enter here who is not a geometer’. The entrance marks the boundary between proper thinking and its others, and the philosopher is the author of the inscription that dictates the terms for crossing the threshold. I am less interested in the internal squabbles within Philosophy – these face-offs on the pitch – than I am in the less visible struggles on the sidelines. Who or what decides who gets to join the game in the first place and on what terms? Despite the seeming openness of dialogue to difference, all too often you can only join in to the extent that you are “like us”, that you play the game according to “our” rules. But who, James, is this “us”: the standard human / human standard?

**James:**

To cross the threshold these days, which, unless you are independently wealthy, is the only route to spending your working life thinking philosophically and improving as you do, you publish essays, of six to eight thousand words, in journals. PhD students must do this to hope to get an interview for an insecure fixed-term teaching position. If your paper demonstrates sufficient knowledge of relevant literature, then makes a point which the reviewers the editors happened to select happen to like, they might publish it. It’s incredibly unlikely to be read by anyone who isn’t either a professional or someone wanting to become one. For everyone else, there are philosophy books and magazines for the public, which rarely present new ideas, plus discussions and videos online, where there is rarely any quality control and popularity is the measure of success. If, like me, you think philosophy is very important for our contemporary world, and you want to expand its circle, then I think it’s natural to be concerned about the presentation of philosophy, as all the contributors to this issue are.  I think we’ve presented our philosophical disagreements, largely, in a new, unorthodox manner … and thereby performed in harmony!

**Laura:**

There is much more to philosophy than professional academic Philosophy as it currently manifests itself in the Anglophone context. You can spend your life working on/in philosophy without holding an academic position in this discipline. Questions of quality and creativity are – I would suggest – as much of an issue inside academic Philosophy as they are outside of it, and indeed the conventions surround how academically legitimized philosophy is performed (and presented, if you will) is part of the problem, in my view. I want to expand the circle of philosophy in a qualitative sense; but it is also already expanded and expansive in different cultural contexts and within its own plural histories. Philosophies are thought, written, performed, read by and otherwise shared by much wider communities of thinkers operating across disciplinary and institutional thresholds. Academic philosophy in the dominant mode may only be reading itself, circularly – in which case I fear for its survival. But there are worlds of transformative possibility already available to it, if it is willing to suspend its own exclusive power to determine what counts as philosophy per se. For me, this is not just about dialogue but what conditions it and how it is performed.

**References:**

Laruelle, F. (2012) Lecture on ‘The Orientation of Non-Standard Aesthetics’, Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota, November 17, 2012, filmed by Cory Strand. Available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31X-MdY5pAQ