

2005

A Brief Ode to an Intellectual Otter

Clark Wolf

Iowa State University, jwcwolf@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/philrs_pubs

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), [Other Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Philosophy of Mind Commons](#)

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/philrs_pubs/19. For information on how to cite this item, please visit <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html>.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy and Religious Studies at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy and Religious Studies Publications by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

A Brief Ode to an Intellectual Otter

Abstract

Taking his cue from a brief comment by an obscure Greek poet, Isaiah Berlin made a famous taxological distinction between intellectual hedgehogs and foxes. Intellectual hedgehogs know "one big thing." They have a key insight that gives them a perspective from which to view and discuss many different problems. Intellectual foxes "know many things." "Foxes" have many different and sometimes unrelated insights, flashes of insight and understanding that come from many different sources. When you meet a hedgehog, it's a fair bet that you can make an informed prediction about what she or he will say about many different subjects. At least, you may be able to do this if you have an understanding of the Big Underlying Insight that unifies the Hedgehog's thought. But when you meet an intellectual fox, it will be difficult to predict his or her perspective or opinion in novel domains. Those who have more tools to choose from have more available options, and the reason the fox is hard to catch is that it is harder to predict.

Disciplines

Ethics and Political Philosophy | Other Philosophy | Philosophy of Mind

Comments

This is a chapter pp. 345-394 from *Knowing, Living, and Being* edited by G. Allen and M. Allshouse (2005), reproduced by permission of [Rowman & Littlefield](#).

A Brief Ode to an Intellectual Otter

Clark Wolf

Taking his cue from a brief comment by an obscure Greek poet, Isaiah Berlin made a famous taxological distinction between intellectual hedgehogs and foxes. Intellectual hedgehogs know “one big thing.” They have a key insight that gives them a perspective from which to view and discuss many different problems. Intellectual foxes “know many things.” “Foxes” have many different and sometimes unrelated insights, flashes of insight and understanding that come from many different sources. When you meet a hedgehog, it’s a fair bet that you can make an informed prediction about what she or he will say about many different subjects. At least, you may be able to do this if you have an understanding of the Big Underlying Insight that unifies the Hedgehog’s thought. But when you meet an intellectual fox, it will be difficult to predict his or her perspective or opinion in novel domains. Those who have more tools to choose from have more available options, and the reason the fox is hard to catch is that it is harder to predict.

Berlin’s taxonomy makes no claim to completeness, and the categories may not even be exclusive. Perhaps we should strive to be hedge-foxes or fox-hogs, since excellent scholars require both broad unifying ideas and intellectual flexibility. And it may be worthwhile to make distinctions along other dimensions as well. In this spirit, it seems appropriate to identify a species of scholars whose creativity is expressed in their careful and appreciative attention to the intellectual work of others from scholars who have a narrower and somewhat haughtier view. Hobbes seems to have regarded the work of most of his philosophical predecessors as meaningless nonsense—literally “insignificant” speech. This is very different from a scholar like John Rawls or Paul Ricoeur, who are careful to place their own intellectual creativity in historical context, and to acknowledge intellectual

debts where they are due. I would add to Berlin's taxonomy an additional family of scholars whom we might call "otters." Intellectual otters embed their own insights in their deep appreciation for the thoughts and minds of others. Intellectual otters may be driven to study the history of their subject, and devote a sizable piece of their own minds to an understanding of the ideas of other thinkers. Otters have the rare ability to combine critical and reflective analysis with whole-hearted clear-headed appreciative and sympathetic understanding. When you discuss your own ideas with an intellectual otter, you will find that she or he will listen carefully and attentively, and will work to be able to express your thoughts clearly and sympathetically before subjecting them to critical evaluation. My own experience suggests that intellectual otters generally like other people, and that their appreciation for others' work stems in part from natural friendliness and curiosity. To be an effective otter, one must be sure-footed and self-possessed. One must have a healthy sense of self before one is in a position fully to appreciate others. Otters seem motivated primarily by curiosity and a desire for truth, and less by an egoistic desire to assert themselves. I appreciate many different species, but I confess that otters may be a personal favorite.

I will tell a story of my first encounter with a favorite intellectual otter: When I came to the University of Georgia as a graduate student interviewing for my first academic job, I was petrified. My whole life seemed to be hanging by a thread: I knew that I wanted *this* job, that *this* was the university where I wanted to teach. At the time I was a freshly minted "ABD" from the University of Arizona, and I remember waking up on the morning of my interview with the sudden realization that I was an intellectual fraud. It occurred to me that I really didn't know what I was talking about. I suddenly realized that I was sure to fall on my face when pressed with questions, that the job talk I intended to deliver was nothing but paste and tissue paper waiting to be set ablaze by the first critical match. Before my talk, I was scheduled to speak with faculty members, and so on that morning and for the first time in my life, I found myself face to face with Frederick Ferré in his office at the University of Georgia. There are only a few people who have indelibly etched themselves into my most vivid memory at the moment of the first meeting. But I know with great certainty that the details of my first encounter with Frederick will be with me for the rest of my life.

Frederick's office contained a sizable portion of his library. Alphabetized books filled the nine or ten bookcases that occupied the space. And behind the desk was a philosopher with bright, penetrating eyes and a warm handshake. Frederick could see that I was nervous, young, and unsure. He began our conversation by discussing the university and the active interaction between philosophers and scientists in the UGA Environmental Ethics program. Our conversation turned to philosophy, and I was pleased to discover that Frederick had read all three of the papers I had sent along with

my application packet, and that he had a sincere and *appreciative* understanding of the arguments I had offered in them. As he discussed my work, I realized that the situation wasn't quite as bad as it had seemed to me that morning. When my arguments came from his mouth and in his words, they sounded pretty good. I began to relax as we discussed several critical objections to the position I had defended. Frederick disagreed with many points in my argument, but his objections were articulate and constructive. He made it clear that he had a deep understanding of the problems under consideration, and that he had an articulate appreciation for the project I had undertaken. I began to think that perhaps the paper I was planning to present wasn't such a fragile and flammable object. Maybe I wasn't an intellectual fraud: if my argument could gain the attention of a bright-eyed curious intellect like this, then maybe I had something to say after all. Frederick laughed with me as I left his office, and finally I relaxed. When, later that evening, I gave my paper to the University of Georgia department of philosophy, my confidence had returned. I felt comfortable and centered as I responded to challenging objections and questions. I am certain that my conversation with Frederick set me at ease and made it possible for me to be at my best.

One need only read his books to discover that Frederick Ferré epitomizes the ideal of an intellectual otter. Frederick generally begins with a presentation of the history of the ideas he aims to address, and his presentation of others' ideas shows much more than consummate and careful scholarship. It shows in addition an intense critical *appreciation*. Frederick's approach and his insights are deep and penetrating and original, but they have roots that stem from an *appreciative* reading of three thousand years of intellectual history and from the curious and serious attention he devotes to the work of his friends and contemporaries. After diving down into the history of ideas, Frederick will rise to the surface smiling with broad enthusiastic insight, holding an oyster all his own, pried free from the barnacle encrusted bed. And he approaches his reader with a pearl of insight in his open hand, something genuinely new, but placed in a setting that honors the work of others. He offers it as an object for mutual appreciation and enjoyment.

It is worth noting the extent to which philosophical views reflect, or fail to reflect the personality of their original proponent. And at the extreme, we might explain features of a theory by reference to the known experience of its author: in this vein, we might explain Epicurus' negative theory of pleasure by reference to his ulcers, or we might explain Epictetus's rigid self-denial by reference to the fact that he lived for a long time as a slave. As Ferré notes, "Personal quirks, contingent at first, have a way of working their way into the substance of what is shaped by persons" (2001, 192).

To end with a somewhat cheeky question, I wish to ask what one might infer about the author from the features of the theory Frederick Ferré has

developed and articulated? In Ferré's work we find a comprehensive and coherent theory of epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics. In a philosophical moment when system-building is, for now at least, somewhat out of fashion, Ferré has produced a comprehensive philosophical system in the best sense of the word. Ferré's organic theory of value provides a worldview from which to evaluate actions, judgments, and events from a complex and coherent perspective. Throughout his work, one finds that Ferré adopts a respectful and conversational philosophical tone, coaxing and urging the reader, with argument and example, toward acceptance of a new way of thinking about the world. One finds a careful and pointed use of humor, carrying the reader through tough spots. One finds at every step that Ferré understands his theory as an alternative to others, that he expresses appreciation for the views he ultimately rejects. He sees his work and his own arguments in a deep historical and conceptual context. One finds deep appreciation for the thoughts of others, acknowledged intellectual debts to Whitehead and others, alongside careful and original insights that sparkle with complex beauty and originality. One finds occasion for intrinsic enjoyment and the acquisition of a deeper and more complex appreciation for the world. In Ferré's work one finds, that is, the very qualities that are identified by the theory itself as bearers of value.

Values exist within what Frederick Ferré calls "worldviews." The choice of a worldview is not arbitrary: it is subject to reason, judgment, and rational evaluation. In this sense worldview choice is not "choice" in the broadest sense, since our discretion with respect to such a choice is constrained by the reasons that apply to us. As Ferré himself has emphasized, we cannot simply ignore the evidence and choose whatever metaphysical worldview we happen to like best, any more than we could simply choose the scientific worldview we find most aesthetically appealing. But even when all relevant reasons have been taken into account, the choice among alternative worldviews may be under-determined by the available reasons. At this level, choice is existential and expressive, and our choices say something about us personally. And it is not surprising that personalistic organicism, a worldview fundamentally tied to the appreciation of values and the promotion of evaluative moments, should at this level be the choice of Frederick Ferré. What other choice could there be for a curious and appreciative intellectual otter?

One might consider it pejorative to explain features of a philosophical work by reference to the personality and personal characteristics of the author. But I would urge that it depends on the qualities themselves. If fair-mindedness, intellectual honesty, and overwhelming appreciative curiosity shine through a philosophical work, they reflect well on author and product at the same time. These are qualities that make philosophy good, but their possession makes philosophers good as well. Interacting with an intellectual otter is a gift. I will always be grateful to have such a remarkable, deep,

and appreciative colleague and friend. And although he is presently in retirement having completed a genuine Magnum Opus, his masterly three volume set on the practical metaphysics of value, I confess that I can't wait to see what he does next.

Works Cited

- Berlin, Isaiah. 1966. *The Hedgehog and the Fox*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Ferré, Frederick. 2001. *Living and Value: Toward a Constructive Post-modern Metaphysics*. Albany: State University of New York Press.