Is Philosophy Fight Club?

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Once an esteemed philosopher was mean to me. He began by dismissing the value of the question I was asking, then disparaged the distinctions I drew as ill-conceived, then scorned my evident lack of technical competence, then brushed aside a number of my central claims as non-sequiturs and ended—by this point, his anger was apparent—by saying he couldn't see how there was anything of value in my talk. There was no missing the insinuation it had been a mistake for his department to invite me. Afterwards, at dinner, his colleagues fell over themselves apologizing for his behavior, praising both the talk and how well I had handled the abuse.

I didn't have the guts to tell them the truth, which was that while they had loved my talk, the Mean Philosopher was the one who had understood it. That goes for the manifest content of my talk—his complaints were, in fact, well-founded—and, much more importantly, its animating spirit: provocation. For some reason, he was the only one in the room who heard the invitation to *fight me on this one*. He didn't just understand my talk, he understood *me*. The best part was that his insight didn't rise to the level of consciousness—he was *irritated* by my pugnacious tone and *reacted* angrily. And I responded with equal sincerity.

This was years ago, but the five minutes of heated back and forth that followed are burned into my memory. Time seemed to slow down; the rest of the room faded from view; the sentences flew between us, each one carrying the weight of the world on it. What could be better than a good old-fashioned philosophy battle?

I understand that at most times and places one should endeavor to give constructive rather than destructive criticism; to play nicely with others; to be accommodating and generous and understanding; to help people overcome their faults and problems rather than use those weaknesses as an opening for attack. Instead of "no, but," try "yes, and." Smile. We're all in this together. No fighting, no biting. Let's build something. I accept that these are the rules of "regular life." I smile plenty. But I want philosophy to be an escape ticket from kindergarten morality.

Most philosophers don't think philosophy needs more fighting and more biting. They think we should be moving in the opposite, less "gladiatorial" direction: more charity, more supportiveness, more philanthropy, kindness and empathy. Sometimes when I argue with such people, they make the following point: being pugnacious produces bad philosophy. If you are out to trip up your interlocutor, you will misconstrue her arguments and produce flimsy counterarguments. Charitable interpretations are what lead to deep engagement. I think there is some truth to this: careful, generous critique is how we avoid the cheap victory of a superficial scar. If you're talking a Trojan Horse of philanthropy, kindness and empathy for the sake of *ultimate* violence, destruction and meaningful victory, I can get on board with that.

Some philosophers do not dismiss fighting out of hand, but hold refutation and disputation to exist for the sake of ultimate and more meaningful accord and agreement. How do we decide whether we should be nice in order to be mean, or vice versa? We might compare the two approaches with respect to the goal of philosophical activity: securing answers to philosophical questions. I think fighting wins that fight, so to

speak. But I am not going to make that case here. I am interested in offering you a different kind of argument, one that foregrounds the distinctiveness of the activity of philosophy, considered as a form of human interaction. In fact, in order to make my case at the proper level of generality, let me even set aside philosophy for a minute, and just consider what fighting is, and why we do it.

Is violence generally a good way to solve problems? I'll admit that some signs point towards no. Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831) described war as politics continued by another means, but that is a little like saying crawling is running continued by another means. Yes: a worse one. Take a simplified, schematic case: if you and I are both after the same quantum of value—ideally I'd like all of it, and so would you—we might come to blows. But this is a mistake: it would be better to negotiate. Fighting itself has a cost, which subtracts from the total. Think of it this way: assume the total is one hundred dollars, and the cost of fighting is ten dollars. Wouldn't you take a 100 percent chance of fifty dollars over a 50 percent chance of ninety dollars? Admittedly, if one of us was antecedently likelier to win, she would not accept a fifty-fifty split. But in that case we should use that information, including the degree of likelihood, to keep negotiating until we come up on a split that both of us can rationally agree to.[1] No reason to lose the ten dollars.

Fighting is a non-ideal way to allocate an independently valuable resource—something we *resort* to when negotiations break down. This is a good critique of fighting. But it doesn't extend to the case where the resource lacks independent value and is sought after precisely because it provides an occasion for fighting. Sometimes I want what you want, *because* you want it, indeed *because* that means I can fight you for it. And the reason I want to fight you is to know which one of us is stronger. In this sort of case I would reject a fifty-fifty division not because I believe I know I can get a better one, but precisely because I don't believe I know, and finding out whether I can is my true goal.

In such cases, the battle prize is knowledge of one's own mettle. We want to come to terms with the potential we have in us, a potential that will be left forever unknown until it's tested in the most extreme terms against the best opponent possible. That is a problem to which fighting is quite an efficient and rational solution. The only real way to know how hard I can fight is to fight as hard as I can. As Aristotle says, actuality is conceptually prior to potentiality.

Whether fighting is rational or not depends on the status of the precise, certain knowledge of relative strength that only the actual fight can provide: Is it desired merely instrumentally, or for its own sake? Fighting, done right, is a form of inquiry. And that brings us back to philosophy.

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[1] If circumstances prevent parties either from coming to a shared understanding as to who will win the fight, or trusting each other to abide by any agreement they form, war may in fact be the most rational solution. But these will be, in different ways, non-ideal cases. See J. D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," International Organization, 1995.

Do you want to know the outcome of the battle between me and the Mean Philosopher? Sorry to disappoint you, but he won. I lost. Again. I usually lose. This is not me being humble; it is an objective fact that I am a loser. I have been debating since high school, where I was the first person to become team captain having lost more rounds than she won. And my team was one of the strongest in the area: the team captains before (and, I suspect, after) me won state and national competitions for which my losing record prevented me from even qualifying.

So how did I get elected captain? I was competing against debaters who were good at winning, which I was not. But I was *great* at losing. And greatness shines forth. (It was a landslide.) In the intervening quarter century, I've only become greater. Losing is where it's at. You never know just how strong an idea is, just how much scrutiny it will withstand, until the moment when it gives way. Don't get me wrong, it also hurts. Every time. The animating force behind the idea is your own mind—your cognitive essence. When you lose, you experience just how far your capacity to think takes you, which is to say, you experience it giving out. That's when it washes over you: the feeling of not knowing what you are talking about, the empty nothingness of your own mind.

When you die, you don't experience that nothingness—I guess you sidle right up to the promised land, but then, before you know it, you're dead. The tragedy of physical violence is that by the time you kill 'em, they're gone. If you defeat your opponent in a duel of knives or pistols, the death you give her is one she can't receive. Words are more powerful, because the loser feels her loss, all the way through, from beginning to end.

Socrates undersold philosophy when he described it as a preparation for death. Philosophy done right *is* death. The other kind of death is a simulacrum, a mere half death. If you want to know what it's like to be nothing, nonexistent, don't sit around waiting for the inevitable. Instead, lose. The upside of winning is pleasure and glory, but the cost of always winning is never getting to know how much more was in you. The only way to find the limit is to cross it. But you can't lose unless you fight your heart out. Which is why I say, more fighting, more biting.

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