The Philosopher, The Teacher, and the Quest for Clarity

Daniel R. DeNicola
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/philfac

Part of the Philosophy Commons

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.


This is the publisher’s version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/philfac/22

This open access book chapter is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.
The Philosopher, The Teacher, and the Quest for Clarity

Abstract
As the weeks have come and gone, my inflated expectations for this address have been punctured. I once hoped to take the presidential torch into some unexplored recess of the philosophical cave, there to illuminate an unsuspected cavern that would sparkle with truth. Cut and polished crystals of new truth would be the yield from my address. But then I remembered Whitehead's dictum that "It is more important that a proposition be interesting than that it be true." Thinking this to be particularly sound advice for one whose role is to close a long day of philosophizing, I decided to set truth aside and work for interest. My address would be a spellbinder; it would fairly crackle with intriguing ideas, ideas that beckon and pique. But then I remembered Wittgenstein's sentiment that when a philosopher says something interesting, he should know that something has gone wrong. In desperation, I resolved that if my thoughts would not be true or interesting, they would at least be clear. Surely Wittgenstein could not haunt me, for it was he who said: "Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly." Clarity, limpidity, lucidity-- I would settle for that, and perhaps it is precious enough. [excerpt]

Keywords
philosophy, clarity, writing skills

Disciplines
Philosophy
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Philosopher, The Teacher, and the Quest for Clarity*

As the weeks have come and gone, my inflated expectations for this address have been punctured. I once hoped of the philosophical torch into some unexplored recessed cavern that would sparkle with truth. Cut and address. But then I remembered Whitehead’s dictum that “It is more important that a proposition be interesting than that it be true.” Thinking this to be particularly sound advice for one whose role is to close a long day of philosophizing, I decided to set truth aside and work for fairly crackle with intriguing ideas, ideas that beckon and when a philosopher says something interesting, he should solve that if my thoughts would not be true or interesting, haunt me, for it was he who said: “Everything that can be lucidity—I would settle for that, and perhaps it is

A new doubt began to plague me: Did I really know how to write clearly? What steps could I take to assure that my I knew how to detect its absence, for I had scrawled the word “unclear” on so many of my students’ papers. But what was it when it was present? Because of this doubt, I made yet another—the last—humiliating adjustment: if I could not be sure of writing with clarity, I could at least write about clarity.

(Once, a student came to see me about a very low mark I had given his paper. He pointed out that my major criticism was that the paper was vague, and then he asserted that, since the topic of the paper was “vagueness,” it was


3. Some were suggested in a session at a recent meeting, "Career Education: A Panel Discussion," American Federation of Teachers, QuEST Consortium, Washington, D.C., April 24, 1976.


7. Ibid.


12. Sessions, "Misdirecting Career Education: A Union View".
to be expected that the paper be vague. Using that kind of Looking-glass Logic, I can not fail to write clearly as long as I write about clarity. I am all too aware, however, that despite its topic, my paper may be not only untrue and uninteresting, but unclear as well.)

With appropriately lowered sights and diminished hopes, let us begin:

Clarity has long been a criterion of excellence for the products of rational activity. As philosophers, we prize clarity of thought and expression not as a stylistic ornament, but as a prerequisite of all informed philosophic labors. As teachers, we strive to communicate our ideas with clarity, and we work to enable our students to formulate and express their own thoughts with a similar virtuosity. The philosopher, the teacher, and the student have each embarked on a quest for clarity.

Unfortunately, and scandalously for philosophers, our notion of clarity is itself somewhat unclear. This paper begins, therefore, within that curious tradition of self-referential inquiries in philosophy—the attempts to understand understanding, to elucidate the meaning of meaning, to challenge the relevance of relevance. The focus here is to clarify the relevance of clarity. To be specific: I shall first discuss the meaning of clarity and some related conceptions in a section of conceptual quasi-analysis which manages to be brief enough for inadquacy yet long enough for tedium; the second portion of the paper offers some simple observations about the use and abuse, the rewards and penalties, of clarity in philosophy and in teaching. The paper begins with the roots and ends with the fruits.

I.

Consider the following definitions of the word "clear" presented in the order in which they appear in the American College Dictionary: 1. (1) free from darkness, obscurity, or cloudiness; light; (2) bright, shining; (3) transparent, or cloudless; (4) of a pure, even color, as, "a clear complexion"; (5) distinctly perceptible to the eye, ear, or mind; easily seen, heard, or understood; (6) distinct; plain; (7) free from confusion, uncertainty, or doubt; (8) perceiving or discerning distinctly, as, "a clear head"; (9) convinced, certain. I quote these at length for a purpose: I hope you have noticed a smooth semantic movement in these definitions. In its primary meanings, "clear" refers to sensory, particularly visual, phenomena; gradually, it comes to apply to intentional objects like ideas, propositions, meanings, and relations. This movement, which reflects etymology and not simply lexicography, is generated by two assumptions, assumptions which are now hopelessly entangled. The first assumption is that things seen or heard faithfully pass their qualities into the experience of the one who sees and hears. To put it simply, a clear idea is caused by a clear image which represents a clear object. The second assumption is the metaphorical similarity of the mind and the eye. It is an ancient and venerable belief that knowing is like seeing, and that elements associated with the sense of sight have their analogues in the operation of the mind. Such words as "enlightenment," "insight," and "viewpoint," and such phrases as "I can't see," "a bright student," "being in the dark on some matter," "it dawned on me," "a brilliant mind," "a dazzling intellect," and so on—these have long ago lost their metaphorical intellect and become literal. This domination of epistemological models by the sense of sight has been termed "the optimization of epistemology": it merely postulates an analogy, though an obviously powerful analogy, and need not carry with it the first assumption, which postulates a causal connection. Of course, both assumptions are open to challenge; neither is likely to be acceptable in its naive form. Nonetheless, we do well to understand the assumptions by means of which the concept of clarity has evolved and the ancestry from which it has descended.

There are two interpretations of the term "clear" which it is useful to distinguish: one is an objective matter residing in the known, which I shall call the "logical interpretation"; the other is a subjective matter residing in the knower, which I shall call the "psychological interpretation." The former is a matter of logical determinateness; the latter is a matter of comprehensibility, as defined by one's ability to understand. When a person says, "Your point is not clear," he may be saying that your point is not well formulated, that it is beset by semantic, logical, or other difficulties, or he may be saying that
to be expected that the paper be vague. Using that kind of Looking-glass Logic, I can not fail to write clearly as long as I write about clarity. I am all too aware, however, that despite its topic, my paper may be not only untrue and uninteresting, but unclear as well.)

With appropriately lowered sights and diminished hopes, let us begin:

Clarity has long been a criterion of excellence for the products of rational activity. As philosophers, we prize clarity of thought and expression not as a stylistic ornament, clarity of thought and expression not as a stylistic ornament, but as a prerequisite of all informed philosophic labors. As teachers, we strive to communicate our ideas with clarity, and we work to enable our students to formulate and express their own thoughts with a similar virtuosity. The philosophers, the teacher, and the student have each embarked on a quest for clarity.

Unfortunately, and scandalously for philosophers, our notion of clarity is itself somewhat unclear. This paper begins, therefore, within that curious tradition of self-referential inquiries in philosophy—the attempts to underwrite the meaning of meaning, to elucidate the meaning of meaning, to elucidate the meaning of meaning. The focus here is to challenge the relevance of relevance. The topic here is to challenge the relevance of relevance. To be specific: I shall first discuss the meaning of clarity and some related concepts in a section of conceptual quasi-analysis which manages the second portion of the paper offers some simple observations about the use and abuse, the rewards and penalties, of clarity in philosophy and in teaching. The paper begins with the roots and ends with the fruits.

I.

Consider the following definitions of the word "clear" presented in the order in which they appear in the American College Dictionary: 1. (1) free from darkness, obscurity, or cloudiness; bright, shining; (2) clear, distinct; (3) transparent; (4) a clear concept; (5) distinctly perceptible to the eye, ear, or mind; easily seen, heard, or understood; (6) distinct; (7) clearly defined by one's ability to understand. When a person says, "Your point is not clear," he may be saying that your point is not well formulated, that it is beset by semantic, logical, or other difficulties, or he may be saying that...
your point goes over his head, that he simply does not understand it. Two schemata are required:

1. X is clear (i.e., logically determinate); and
2. X is clear to A (i.e., A understands X).

It is common for a student to say of an assigned passage, "This is not clear," meaning "This is not clear to me; I don't comprehend it." Yet the assignment may be from a logic or mathematics text which has remarkable clarity in the logical sense. We regard it as arrogance for someone to say this: "Since the assignment is not clear to me, it is not clear at all." Of course, if a passage is clear in the logical sense, it must be clear to someone in the psychological sense. Teachers sometimes confront this odd case: X is not clear, but it is clear to A, or so A claims. In such a case, A, who is more often than not the author of X, needs to be shown that A is in fact unclear; this is the teacher's task.

The relevant points of these sundry cases may be exhibited in a simple analogy. If a photographer discovers a blurred negative, he knows the blur may be in his camera or in the subject photographed. Camera-induced blurring constitutes a failure, as does camera-induced clarity, if the photographer seeks an accurate representation of the visual experience.

In the remainder of this part, I shall ignore the "psychological interpretation." To analyze "X is clear to A" would quickly embroil us in an analysis of the concept "understanding," which is, happily, beyond my humble aims. Let us, however, focus on the "logical interpretation": "X is clear." All I have said by way of explication is that this means that X is logically determinate. Surely, something more is owed.

To begin, let me point out that "X" in the schema may designate a word or phrase, a sentence, a proposition, an utterance, or an inscription, or well-formed combinations of these, including descriptions, theories, arguments, and so on. The particular nature of the "logical determinateness" indicated may vary with these designations. In general, however, indeterminacy takes the forms of vagueness, ambiguity, and/or imprecision. For instance, the meaning of a proposition is clear if it is precise and not vague or ambiguous; the proposition is then semantically determinate.

I can not discuss these kinds of indeterminacy very thoroughly; the best I can do is to call to mind their salient features in preparation for Part II.

There is a considerable literature on the concept of vagueness, that affliction which eats at conceptual boundaries. A term is vague insofar as its semantic border is in doubt, a situation which produces uncertainty as to its application in borderline cases. A very familiar conclusion among those who have written on vagueness is that all terms, all concepts, are irremediably vague. One may curtail problems with vagueness to an extent by a series of decisions or stipulations about controversial borderline cases, but this does not eliminate it altogether. Max Black once proposed that since vagueness was ineradicable, we should develop a method of indexing the degree of vagueness any term possessed; such institutionalization of vagueness would to some extent permit its control—rather like some recent proposals for handling gambling and prostitution by legalization.

Unlike vagueness, ambiguity is, in principle, eliminable. Ambiguity, everyone knows, means "having more than one meaning." The classic example is a word like "cape," which can refer to an item of apparel or a geographical fixture. Another celebrated instance is the sentence "Our mothers bore us," in which the word "bore" is comically ambiguous. For such ambiguities, an easy bromide is to examine the context. If, for example, we read "Our mothers bore us, for which we should be forever grateful," we are not likely to find the word "bore" ambiguous. What is not said so often is that the juxtaposition of words, the context, can enhance or even create ambiguity. The words "dwarf" and "intellectual" do not in themselves have the same sort of marked ambiguity that "cape" and "bore" do; yet, placed side by side, as in the sentence, "John is an intellectual dwarf," a kind of semantic ambiguity emerges. Philosophers since Frege have distinguished the meaning of a term from its reference. Ambiguity may be a matter of having two meanings, but it may also be a matter of having two or more possible referents. Consider the sentence, "John told Fred that he was next in line." The pronoun "he" is ambiguous, but it is not its meaning which is in doubt, it is its reference; "he" could refer to John or to Fred. Semantically, there is no problem; referentially, there
your point goes over his head, that he simply does not understand it. Two schemata are required:

1. \( X \) is clear (i.e., logically determinate); and
2. \( X \) is clear to \( A \) (i.e., \( A \) understands \( X \)).

It is common for a student to say of an assigned passage, "This is not clear," meaning "This is not clear to me; I don't comprehend it." Yet the assignment may be from a logic or mathematics text which has remarkable clarity in the logical sense. We regard it as arrogance for someone to say this: "Since the assignment is not clear to me, I can't comprehend it." Of course, if a passage is clear in the logical sense, it must be clear to someone in the psychological sense. Teachers sometimes confront this odd case: \( X \) is not clear, but it is clear to \( A \), or so \( A \) claims. In such a case, \( A \), who is more often than not the author of \( X \), needs to be shown that \( A \) is in fact unclear; this is the teacher's task.

The relevant points of these sundry cases may be exhibited in a simple analogy. If a photographer discovers a blurred negative, he knows the blur may be in his camera or in the subject photographed. Camera-induced blurring constitutes a failure, as does camera-induced clarity, if the photographer seeks an accurate representation of the visual experience.

In the remainder of this part, I shall ignore the "psychological interpretation." To analyze "\( X \) is clear to \( A \)" would quickly embroil us in an analysis of the concept "understanding," which is, happily, beyond my humble aims. Let us, however, focus on the "logical interpretation": "\( X \) is clear." All I have said by way of explication is that this means that \( X \) is logically determinate. Surely, something more is owed.

To begin, let me point out that "\( X \)" in the schema may designate a word or phrase, a sentence, a proposition, an utterance, or an inscription, or well-formed combinations of these, including descriptions, theories, arguments, and so on. The particular nature of the "logical determinateness" indicated may vary with these designations. In general, however, indeterminacy takes the forms of vagueness, ambiguity, and/or imprecision. For instance, the meaning of a proposition is clear if it is precise and not vague or ambiguous; the proposition is then semantically determinate.

I can not discuss these kinds of indeterminacy very thoroughly; the best I can do is to call to mind their salient features in preparation for Part II.

There is a considerable literature on the concept of vagueness, that affliction which eats at conceptual boundaries. A term is vague insofar as its semantic border is in doubt, a situation which produces uncertainty as to its application in borderline cases. A very familiar conclusion among those who have written on vagueness is that all terms, all concepts, are irremediably vague. One may curtail problems with vagueness to an extent by a series of decisions or stipulations about controversial borderline cases, but this does not eliminate it altogether. Max Black once proposed that since vagueness was ineradicable, we should develop a method of indexing the degree of vagueness any term possesses; such institutionalization of vagueness would to some extent permit its control—rather like some recent proposals for handling gambling and prostitution by legalization.

Unlike vagueness, ambiguity is, in principle, eliminable. Ambiguity, everyone knows, means "having more than one meaning." The classic example is a word like "cape," which can refer to an item of apparel or a geographical fixture. Another celebrated instance is the sentence "Our mothers bore us," in which the word "bore" is comically ambiguous. For such ambiguities, an easy bromide is to examine the context. If for example, we read "Our mothers bore us, for which we should be forever grateful," we are not likely to find the word "bore" ambiguous. What is not said so often is that the juxtaposition of words, the context, can enhance or even create ambiguity. The words "dwarf" and "intellectual" do not in themselves have the same sort of marked ambiguity that "cape" and "bore" do; yet, placed side by side, as in the sentence, "John is an intellectual dwarf," a kind of semantic ambiguity emerges. Philosophers since Frege have distinguished the meaning of a term from its reference. Ambiguity may be a matter of having two meanings, but it may also be a matter of having two or more possible referents. Consider the sentence, "John told Fred that he was next in line." The pronoun "he" is ambiguous, but it is not its meaning which is in doubt, it is its reference; "he" could refer to John or to Fred. Semantically, there is no problem; referentially, there
is uncertainty. All these varieties of ambiguity can be cured either by coining new terms, by stipulating directly the intended meaning or referent, or by assembling contextual clues.4

Precision has received surprisingly little attention in philosophical literature. In casual usage it is often confused with accuracy. If I give my height as 3.1728 meters, I give a report that is very precise, but very inaccurate. Accuracy does not create precision, nor does precision create accuracy. The two concepts are independent, though I admit it is a moot question as to just how imprecise a measurement can be and still be accurate. The precision of a report is a matter of its fineness, exactness, or level of discrimination; the accuracy of a report is its degree of correctness, truth, or freedom from error. One might wonder how precision relates to the reduction of vagueness. Think of color terms as an example: "green" is a rather imprecise and vague term; it is coordinate with such terms as "blue," and "red," which together from a continuum with relatively few possible discriminations. If, however, we shift to the level of such terms as "Kelly green," "pea green," "lime green," and so on, we have increased precision, for a far greater number of discriminations is possible within the same spectrum. Vagueness, of course, occurs at both levels. We may be as uncertain about the application of "pea green" to a borderline case as we are of the application of "green" at its borders. (And we can be inaccurate with precise terminology and with imprecise terminology.) Precision is a pragmatic requirement; it can be increased or decreased as is appropriate for the context.5

These three qualities—vagueness, ambiguity, and imprecision—can produce unclarity. To return to our schema, "X is clear" means "X is controlled in regard to vagueness, unambiguous, and appropriately precise." This kind of "logical determinateness" gives a high degree of decidability as to cases. Depending upon one's commitments in the philosophy of language, one could construct any of several types of analysis on this model: inscriptional, pragmatic, logico-mathematical, criteriological, etc. Obviously, there are glosses over difficulties in my discussion. For instance, I have generally been concentrating on semantic units, i.e., single words; but J.L. Austin and others have shown us that a sentence is not made of words the way a wall is made of bricks. New factors enter at the sentential level.6 And it is indubitable that yet another set of factors emerges at the level of theories, arguments, and extended narratives; here, e.g., every word, every sentence may be clear, but the logical connections between the sentences may be in doubt. However, even with respect to these emergent factors, the problems of unclarity are usually caused by vagueness, ambiguity, or imprecision—if not of words, then of some other linguistic factor or element.

The conception of clarity as "logical determinateness" or "decideability as to cases" was not sufficient for C.S. Peirce, who, in his classic paper, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (one of the very few works devoted to clarity), chided logicians for taking "a clear idea" to be an idea which is so apprehended that we have lost all "hesitancy in recognizing it in ordinary cases." Peirce described a "third grade" of clarity in which one could conceive of all the conceivable practical effects of the object of conception (the redundancy is Peirce's and is deliberate); the object is then fully clear.7 I shall not utilize this analysis further since I think Peirce has gone far beyond our ordinary usage of "clear" to concoct a far too restrictive interpretation for my purpose.

There is another term besides the three mentioned that is sometimes opposed to clarity: "complexity." That which is simple is clear; that which is complex is unclear. But isn't this either a mistake or a kind of ellipsis? Most likely, it is a confusion of the "logical" and "psychological" interpretations of "clarity." When a person studies a complex work, he will probably encounter great difficulty in understanding it, or at least greater difficulty than if the work has been a simple one; hence, the work is probably unclear to him (at first). Notice that this is the psychological usage and in no way implies that the work, however complex, is unclear, where "unclear" means "vague, ambiguous, and/or imprecise." Complexity and clarity can live a peaceful coexistence.8

It is now time to move on to Part II. The semantic soup is getting thin, and the dishes that await are tastier and more substantial.
is uncertainty. All these varieties of ambiguity can be
cured either by coining new terms, by stipulating directly
the intended meaning or referent, or by assembling con-
textual clues.  

Precision has received surprisingly little attention in
philosophical literature. In casual usage it is often con-
fused with accuracy. If I give my height as 3.1728 meters,
I give a report that is very precise, but very inaccurate.
Accuracy does not create precision, nor does precision
create accuracy. The two concepts are independent, though
I admit it is a moot question as to just how imprecise a
measurement can be and still be accurate. The precision of
a report is a matter of its fineness, exactness, or level of
discrimination; the accuracy of a report is its degree of
correctness, truth, or freedom from error. One might
wonder how precision relates to the reduction of vagueness.
Think of color terms as an example: "green" is a rather
imprecise and vague term; it is coordinate with such terms
as "blue," and "red," which together from a continuum with
relatively few possible discriminations. If, however, we
shift to the level of such terms as "Kelly green," "pea
green," "lime green," and so on, we have increased precision,
for a far greater number of discriminations is possible
within the same spectrum. Vagueness, of course, occurs at
both levels. We may be as uncertain about the application
of "pea green" to a borderline case as we are of the appli-
cation of "green" at its borders. (And we can be in-
accurate with precise terminology and with imprecise ter-
minology.) Precision is a pragmatic requirement; it can be
increased or decreased as is appropriate for the context.  

These three qualities—vagueness, ambiguity, and
imprecision—can produce unclarity. To return to our
schema, "X is clear" means "X is controlled in regard to
vagueness, unambiguous, and appropriately precise." This
kind of "logical determinateness" gives a high degree of
deideability as to cases. Depending upon one's commit-
ments in the philosophy of language, one could construct
any of several types of analysis on this model:
inscriptive, pragmatic, logico-mathematical, criterio-
logical, etc. Obviously, there are glossed over dif-
ficulties in my discussion. For instance, I have generally
been concentrating on semantic units, i.e., single words;
but J.L. Austin and others have shown us that a sentence is

not made of words the way a wall is made of bricks. New
factors enter at the sentential level. And it is indubi-
table that yet another set of factors emerges at the level
of theories, arguments, and extended narratives; here, e.g.,
every word, every sentence may be clear, but the logical
connections between the sentences may be in doubt. However,
even with respect to these emergent factors, the problems
of unclarity are usually caused by vagueness, ambiguity, or
imprecision—if not of words, then of some other linguistic
factor or element.

The conception of clarity as "logical determinateness"
or "decideability as to cases" was not sufficient for
C.S. Peirce, who, in his classic paper, "How to Make Our
Ideas Clear" (one of the very few works devoted to clarity),
chided logicians for taking "a clear idea" to be an idea
which is so apprehended that we have lost all "hesitancy
in recognizing it in ordinary cases." Peirce described a
"third grade" of clarity in which one could conceive of all
the conceivable practical effects of the object of con-
ception (the redundancy is Peirce's and is deliberate); the
object is then fully clear.  
I shall not utilize this
analysis further since I think Peirce has gone far beyond
our ordinary usage of "clear" to concoct a far too re-
strictive interpretation for my purpose.

There is another term besides the three mentioned that
is sometimes opposed to clarity: "complexity." That which
is simple is clear; that which is complex is unclear. But
isn't this either a mistake or a kind of ellipsis? Most
likely, it is a confusion of the "logical" and "psycho-
logical" interpretations of "clarity." When a person
studies a complex work, he will probably encounter great
difficulty in understanding it, or at least greater dif-
ficulty than if the work has been a simple one; hence, the
work is probably unclear to him (at first). Notice that
this is the psychological usage and in no way implies that
the work, however complex, is unclear, where "unclear"
means "vague, ambiguous, and/or imprecise." Complexity
and clarity can live a peaceful coexistence.

It is now time to move on to Part II. The semantic
soup is getting thin, and the dishes that await are tastier
and more substantial.
II.

Philosophers spend a considerable portion of their thinking time in the process of clarification. Wittgenstein once thought it was the only thing they should be doing. Teachers also engage in a remarkable amount of clarification. An examination of the dynamics of the process of clarification will, I suggest, help us better to understand our jobs as philosophers and as teachers.

There are two steps to the clarification of something, say of one's thoughts or one's position on an issue: (1) the recognition of multiple possibilities in their specifics, and (2) the choice of one of these possibilities as the intended one. This twofold process occurs whether the clarification involves the reduction of vagueness, the removal of ambiguity, or the increase of precision. The first step amounts to the recognition of the exact way in which one's thoughts or one's position is unclear, the awareness of a particular set of possible meanings, where perhaps there once seemed to be only one meaning. The second step is the declaration of one's intentions in light of this new awareness.

A rhythmic interplay between the psychological and the logical interpretations of "clarity" is revealed in this process. That which seemed clear (psychologically) is shown to be unclear (logically); then that which is unclear is made clear (logically). This dialectic is the rhythm of no less a figure than Socrates himself, in whom pedagogy and philosophy were indistinguishable. The first step is difficult. To see that one's thoughts are unclear is not enough; one must see how it is that they are unclear. This requires imagination. To show someone else that his thoughts are unclear is to introduce him to an array of unsuspected possibilities. A teacher needs experience and empathy to anticipate content that will require clarification, to know just where the intended possibility will be by-passed or mistaken. The second step is sometimes frightening. The choice of an available possibility requires personal commitment. Marcel Proust says, "Anything we have not had to decipher and to clarify by our own effort, anything that was clear before we came, does not belong to us." In clarifying something, we have made it our own by exploring its possibilities and selecting one of them for ourselves. In the process, of course, we come to understand ourselves better as we declare our intentions; we come "to know our minds" on the matter.

The process I have been describing is at the heart of the traditional conception of a liberal arts education. The antithesis of a liberally-educated person is a person who does what he does, believes as he does, because he knows no other way. The liberal arts curriculum introduces that person to alternative possibilities for thought and action (alternative modes of being, if you prefer the existentialist phrasing). Without such alternatives, his life prospects have little scope; with them, he is liberated, free to choose among the possibilities and thereby define himself and his way of life. The pattern here is the same as that above: the envisioning of alternatives and the choice from among them. Of course, a liberal arts education should go beyond the mere introduction to alternative modes of thought and action—today, one can achieve this through the careful use of the television and other media. It should also supply one with the wherewithal to evaluate these different modes. Too often, modes of thought and action are slickly packaged, advertised, and ready for quick consumption—from Buddhism-in-a-box to the Playboy Philosophy. We are dazzled by spectacle of a vast number of glittering possibilities. The liberal arts curriculum strives to help us evaluate these possibilities.

There is, I suppose, nothing very newsworthy about an apology for clarity, especially at a conference of philosophers. But in what follows I shall sound some dissonant notes about clarity, for it may be abused and it sometimes carries with it certain penalties.

Clarification is often mistaken for justification. Absolutely nothing in my analysis supports this, to clarify one's position is not to justify it. Nor is it to explain it.

Clarity has many times been mistaken for truth. Joseph Joubert said, "Clarity is so clearly one of the attributes of truth that very often it passes for truth." Rene Descartes employed only "clear and distinct ideas" in the reconstruction of his knowledge, taking such ideas to be true. For Spinoza, an adequate idea (Spinoza's term for truth) is defined in terms of its clarity to the understanding. One wonders if even so linguistically adept a
II.

Philosophers spend a considerable portion of their thinking time in the process of clarification. Wittgenstein once thought it was the only thing they should be doing. Teachers also engage in a remarkable amount of clarification. An examination of the dynamics of the process of clarification will, I suggest, help us better to understand our jobs as philosophers and as teachers.

There are two steps to the clarification of something, say of one's thoughts or one's position on an issue: (1) the recognition of multiple possibilities in their specifics, and (2) the choice of one of these possibilities as the intended one. This twofold process occurs whether the clarification involves the reduction of vagueness, the removal of ambiguity, or the increase of precision. The first step amounts to the recognition of the exact way in which one's thoughts or one's position is unclear, the awareness of a particular set of possible meanings, where perhaps there once seemed to be only one meaning. The second step is the declaration of one's intentions in light of this new awareness.

A rhythmic interplay between the psychological and the logical interpretations of "clarity" is revealed in this process. That which seemed clear (psychologically) is shown to be unclear (logically); then that which is unclear is made clear (logically). This dialectic is the rhythm of no less a figure than Socrates himself, in whom pedagogy and philosophy were indistinguishable. The first step is difficult. To see that one's thoughts are unclear is not enough; one must see how it is they are unclear. This requires imagination. To show someone else that his thoughts are unclear is to introduce him to an array of unsuspected possibilities. This step requires experience and empathy to anticipate content that will require clarification, to know just where the intended possibility will be by-passed or mistaken. The second step is sometimes frightening. The choice of an available possibility requires personal commitment. Marcel Proust says, "Anything we have not had to decipher and to clarify by our own effort, anything that was clear before we came, does not belong to us."

In clarifying something, we have made it our own by exploring its possibilities and selecting one of them for ourselves. In the process, of course, we come to understand ourselves better as we declare our intentions; we come "to know our minds" on the matter.

The process I have been describing is at the heart of the traditional conception of a liberal arts education. The antithesis of a liberally-educated person is a person who does what he does, believes as he does, because he knows no other way. The liberal arts curriculum introduces that person to alternative possibilities for thought and action (alternative modes of being, if you prefer the existentialist phrasing). Without such alternatives, his life prospects have little scope; with them, he is liberated, free to choose among the possibilities and thereby define himself and his way of life. The pattern here is the same as that above: the envisioning of alternatives and the choice from among them. Of course, a liberal arts education should go beyond the mere introduction to alternative modes of thought and action--today, one can achieve this through the careful use of the television and other media. It should supply one with both the wherewithal to evaluate these different modes. Too often, modes of thought and action are slickly packaged, advertised, and ready for quick consumption--from Buddhism-in-a-box to the Playboy Philosophy. We are dazzled by spectacle of a vast number of glittering possibilities. The liberal arts curriculum strives to help us evaluate these possibilities.

There is, I suppose, nothing very newsworthy about an apology for clarity, especially at a conference of philosophers. But in what follows I shall sound some dissonant notes about clarity, for it may be abused and it sometimes carries with it certain penalties.

Clarity is often mistaken for justification. Absolutely nothing in my analysis supports this, to clarify one's position is not to justify it. Nor is it to explain it.

Clarity has many times been mistaken for truth. Joseph Joubert said, "Clarity is so clearly one of the attributes of truth that very often it passes for truth." Rene Descartes employed only "clear and distinct ideas" in the reconstruction of his knowledge, taking such ideas to be true. For Spinoza, an adequate idea (Spinoza's term for truth) is defined in terms of its clarity to the understanding. One wonders if even so linguistically adept a
figure as Heidegger has not succumbed to this confusion with his notion of "truth" as aletheia or "unhiddenness." What is called for is the distinction between "clarity" as the meaning of "truth," and "clarity" as a criterion for "truth." But even this may be too strong. For clarity may be required to be able to determine truth or falsehood. As Bacon said, "Truth comes more easily out of error than of confusion."

There are circumstances in which a stress on clarity can be disfunctional: vagueness, ambiguity, and imprecision, all have their moments. Willard V. O. Quine, a philosopher unlikely to support semantic slushiness, once argued in favor of vagueness. He said:

Good purposes are often served by not tampering with vagueness...Vagueness is an aid in coping with the linearity of discourse. An expositor finds that an understanding of some matter A is necessary preparation for an understanding of B, and yet that A cannot itself be expounded in correct detail without, conversely, noting certain exceptions and distinctions which require prior understanding of B. Vagueness, then, to the rescue.9

Quine's solution is for the expositor to state A vaguely, proceed to B, then return to clarify A. This method, relying as it does upon vagueness, is routine for teachers and philosophers. In his book, The Tacit Dimension, Michael Polanyi goes so far as to call clarity "destructive." He says:

An unbridled lucidity can destroy our understanding of complex matters. Scrutinize closely the particulars of a comprehensive entity and their meaning is effaced, our conception of the entity is destroyed...the damage done by the specification of particulars may be irremediable.10

Finally, from a pedagogical point of view, it is possible to do harm by laying too much stress on clarity. Students can be forced to become too clear too fast, before their genuine thoughts and intentions can be articulated. If I am correct in seeing the educational process as, in part, involving the rhythm of realizing unclarity and then clarifying, confusion, puzzlement, doubt, and unclarity play an important part in the process. To become puzzled, to realize one's lack of clearness, may be positive educational movement. Unfortunately, our techniques for evaluating students' learning usually presuppose that the cycle has closed with clarification, and they seldom are able to register puzzlement, doubt, or confusion as a sign of educational progress. To become puzzled can be an achievement; to appreciate one's own lack of clarity is a step forward. And this is not to advocate obscurantism or meseumen as an educational aim.

In addition to being dysfunctional, the pursuit of clarity may become neurotic. Consider these comments by Abraham Maslow:

Our healthy subjects are uniformly uniformly unthreatened and unfrightened by the unknown, being therein quite different from average men...To use Frenkel-Brunswick's phrase, "they can tolerate the ambiguous."...They do not neglect the unknown, or deny it, or run away from it, or try to make believe it is really known, nor do they organize, dichotomize, or rubricize it prematurely. They do not cling to the familiar, nor is their quest for truth a catastrophic need for certainty, for safety, for definiteness, for order. The fully functioning personality can be, when the objective situation calls for it, comfortably disorderly, anarchic, vague, doubtful, uncertain, indefinite, approximate, inexact, or inaccurate.11

Aristotle himself warned us that it was a mark of intelligence not to press for a higher degree of clarity than our subject permits.12

Most unsettling of all is the possibility that success in our clarification efforts will prove hollow. Nietzsche somewhere remarked that "A matter that becomes clear ceases to concern us." Certainly, this is true for the philosopher, who can then move on to other areas of conceptual cloudiness. In the Introduction to his work, The Structure
figure as Heidegger has not succumbed to this confusion with his notion of "truth" as aletheia or "unhiddenness." What is called for is the distinction between "clarity" as the meaning of "truth," and "clarity" as a criterion for "truth." But even this may be too strong, for clarity may be required to be able to determine truth or falsehood. As Bacon said, "Truth comes more easily out of error than of confusion."

There are circumstances in which a stress on clarity can be dysfunctional: vagueness, ambiguity, and imprecision, all have their moments. Willard V. O. Quine, a philosopher unlikely to support semantic slushiness, once argued in favor of vagueness. He said:

Good purposes are often served by not tampering with vagueness...Vagueness is an aid in coping with the linearity of discourse. An expositor finds that an understanding of some matter A is necessary preparation for an understanding of B, and yet that A cannot itself be expounded in correct detail without, conversely, noting certain exceptions and distinctions which require prior understanding of B. Vagueness, then, to the rescue.9

Quine's solution is for the expositor to state A vaguely, proceed to B, then return to clarify A. This method, relying as it does upon vagueness, is routine for teachers and philosophers. In his book, *The Tacit Dimension*, Michael Polanyi goes so far as to call clarity "destructive." He says:

An unbridled lucidity can destroy our understanding of complex matters. Scrutinize closely the particulars of a comprehensive entity and their meaning is effaced, our conception of the entity is destroyed...the damage done by the specification of particulars may be irreparable.10

Finally, from a pedagogical point of view, it is possible to do harm by laying too much stress on clarity. Students can be forced to become too clear too fast, before their genuine thoughts and intentions can be articulated. If I am correct in seeing the educational process as, in part, involving the rhythm of realizing unclarity and then clarifying, confusion, puzzlement, doubt, and unclarity play an important part in the process. To become puzzled, to realize one's lack of clearness, may be positive educational movement. Unfortunately, our techniques for evaluating students' learning usually presuppose that the cycle has closed with clarification, and they seldom are able to register puzzlement, doubt, or confusion as a sign of educational progress. To become puzzled can be an achievement; to appreciate one's own lack of clarity is a step forward. And this is not to advocate obscurantism or mazerement as an educational aim.

In addition to being dysfunctional, the pursuit of clarity may become neurotic. Consider these comments by Abraham Maslow:

Our healthy subjects are uniformly uniformly unthreatened and unfrightened by the unknown, being therein quite different from average men...To use Frenkel-Brunswik's phrase, "they can tolerate the ambiguous."...They do not neglect the unknown, or deny it, or run away from it, or try to make believe it is really known, nor do they organize, dichotomize, or ridicule it prematurely. They do not cling to the familiar, nor is their quest for truth a catastrophic need for certainty, for safety, for definiteness, for order. The fully functioning personality can be, when the objective situation calls for it, comfortably disorderly, anarchic, vaguely, doubtless, uncertain, indefinite, approximate, inexact, or inaccurate.11

Aristotle himself warned us that it was a mark of intelligence not to press for a higher degree of clarity than our subject permits.12

Most unsettling of all is the possibility that success in our clarification efforts will prove hollow. Nietzsche somewhere remarked that "A matter that becomes clear ceases to concern us." Certainly, this is true for the philosopher, who can then move on to other areas of conceptual cloudiness. In the Introduction to his work, *The Structure
of Appearance, Nelson Goodman says this:

Any effort in philosophy to make the obscure obvious is likely to be unappealing, for the penalty for failure is confusion, while the reward of success is banality. An answer, once found, is dull; and the only remaining interest lies in a further effort to render equally dull what is still obscure enough to be intriguing.13

The nightmarish picture that emerges is that philosophy and education (and I suppose science as well) are through their relentless clarification procedures systematically rendering the world uninteresting, dull, and banal. I am a more sanguine soul: I have considerable faith in the failure of philosophers and the ability of the universe to fabricate new puzzles. And, of late, I have some consolation in Heidegger's notion that every disclosure hides something; that every truth conceals as it reveals. If this be the case, neither philosophy nor education can, through the process of clarification, drain away the world's interest.

Now for a closing observation: clarity per se is worth little. The merely lucid paragraph or theory has little value. Clarity, like consistency, needs to be attached to some other virtue or virtues before it gains its peculiar attraction. In particular, it needs to be related to truth, "truth" in the broad sense in which, e.g., a scientific theory may have truth. One clarifies one's thoughts so that their truth or falsity may be more easily determined, or so that the force of their truth may be focused. Clarity without this sort of truth is useless; truth without clarity is ineffective, indefinite, and--in the extreme--indistinguishable from falsehood. When the pursuit of clarity becomes detached from the value of truth, triviality is the sure result, and respect may decline for lucidity and rigor in reaction. I regret to say that such excesses have occurred in analytic philosophy in recent times. Some analytic philosophers are like the drunk in the old story who lost his keys on the dark sidewalk, but searched for them under the street lamp because the light was better there. Unfortunately, even the clear truth may not be worth much. "My telephone number is 645-0273" is a relatively clear truth: It too has not escaped triviality.

The quest is not for clarity, it is for clear, significant truth; truth that has interest. Clarity, interest, truth—the same three values I mentioned in my introduction. Neither I nor any other philosopher or teacher can afford to set any one aside in favor of the others: the three go together. Unless these three values cluster together, they each lose their charm for us.

One last doubt: Isn't it the case that the really interesting truths can't be formulated clearly, that profundity is by its very nature opposed to clarity? This view gains a plausibility from a glance at philosophical styles: There is a Bertrand Russell who writes for clarity, though he is often forced into superficiality. There is a Heidegger or a Hegel who plunge for profundity and rarely manage clarity. But this situation only reflects the great difficulty in achieving clarity in profound matters, not the impossibility. The proper movement in both philosophy and in teaching is a stepwise descent (or ascent, if you prefer) in which a layer of significant truth is clarified in order to move on to the next, and so on. Arthur Schopenhauer made the point in his doctoral dissertation:

The true philosopher will indeed always seek after light and perspicuity, and will strive to resemble a Swiss lake—which through its calm is enabled to unite great depth with great clearness, the depth revealing itself precisely by reason of the clearness.14

Daniel R. DeNicola
Rollins College
of Appearance, Nelson Goodman says this:

Any effort in philosophy to make the obscure obvious is likely to be unappealing, for the penalty for failure is confusion, while the reward of success is banality. An answer, once found, is dull; and the only remaining interest lies in a further effort to render equally dull what is still obscure enough to be intriguing.  

The nightmarish picture that emerges is that philosophy and education (and I suppose science as well) are through their relentless clarification procedures systematically rendering the world uninteresting, dull, and banal. I am a more sanguine soul: I have considerable faith in the failure of philosophers and the ability of the universe to fabricate new puzzles. And, of late, I have some consolation in Heidegger's notion that every disclosure hides something; that every truth conceals as it reveals. If this be the case, neither philosophy nor education can, through the process of clarification, drain away the world's interest.

Now for a closing observation: clarity per se is worth little. The merely lucid paragraph or theory has little value. Clarity, like consistency, needs to be attached to some other virtue or virtues before it gains its peculiar attraction. In particular, it needs to be related to truth, "truth" in the broad sense in which, e.g., a scientific theory may have truth. One clarifies one's thoughts so that their truth or falsity may be more easily determined, or so that the force of their truth may be focused. Clarity without this sort of truth is useless; truth without clarity is ineffective, indefinite, and--in the extreme--indistinguishable from falsehood. When the pursuit of clarity becomes detached from the value of truth, triviality is the sure result, and respect may decline for lucidity and rigor in reaction. I regret to say that such excesses have occurred in analytic philosophy in recent times. Some analytic philosophers are like the drunk in the old story who lost his keys on the dark sidewalk, but searched for them under the street lamp because the light was better there. Unfortunately, even the clear truth may not be worth much. "My telephone number is 645-0273" is a relatively clear truth: it too has not escaped triviality.

The quest is not for clarity, it is for clear, significant truth; truth that has interest. Clarity, interest, truth--the same three values I mentioned in my introduction. Neither I nor any other philosopher or teacher can afford to set any one aside in favor of the others: the three go together. Unless these three values cluster together, they each lose their charm for us.

One last doubt: Isn't it the case that the really interesting truths can't be formulated clearly, that profundity is by its very nature opposed to clarity? This view gains a plausibility from a glance at philosophical styles. There is a Bertrand Russell who writes for clarity, though he is often forced into superficiality. There is a Heidegger or a Hegel who plunge for profundity and rarely manage clarity. But this situation only reflects the great difficulty in achieving clarity in profound matters, not the impossibility. The proper movement in both philosophy and in teaching is a stepwise descent (or ascent, if you prefer) in which a layer of significant truth is clarified in order to move on to the next, and so on. Arthur Schopenhauer made the point in his doctoral dissertation:

The true philosopher will indeed always seek after light and perspicuity, and will strive to resemble a Swiss lake--which through its calm is enabled to unite great depth with great clearness, the depth revealing itself precisely by reason of the clearness.

Daniel R. DeNicola
Rollins College
Notes

*This paper was presented as the Presidential Address of 1975 to the Southeast Philosophy of Education Society.

4. For example, transcribed conversation may contain ambiguities that were not present in the actual situation of discussion. A use of contextual clues kept the conversation unambiguous.
5. Within the capabilities of contemporary technology, of course.
7. "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object." This is known as the Pragmatic Maxim and is found in "How To Make Our Ideas Clear," Philosophical Writings of C. S. Peirce, edited by J. Buchler, Dover Publications, 1955, p. 31.
8. See the closing quotation.

12. Ethica Nichomachea, Book I, Ch. 3 (1094B, 11. 13 ff.).
Notes

*This paper was presented as the Presidential Address of 1975 to the Southeast Philosophy of Education Society.


4. For example, transcribed conversation may contain ambiguities that were not present in the actual situation of discussion. A use of contextual clues kept the conversation unambiguous.

5. Within the capabilities of contemporary technology, of course.


7. "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object." This is known as the Pragmatic Maxim and is found in "How To Make Our Ideas Clear," Philosophical Writings of C. S. Peirce, edited by J. Buchler, Dover Publications, 1955, p. 31.

8. See the closing quotation.


12. Ethica Nichomachea, Book I, Ch. 3 (1094B, 11. 13 ff.).
