The Philosopher's Stone

Philosophical Discussion Group, Armstrong State University

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Is Philosophical Language Exclusionary or Technical?

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The literal definition of philosophy is ‘love of wisdom’. Wisdom is defined as ‘having experience, knowledge and good judgement’. How is wisdom obtained? Through the sharing of knowledge and ideas, then applying that information and gaining experience through trial and error-sensation and reflection. If philosophy is about wisdom, plumbing the deep questions in search of real answers, then why is the language of philosophical pontificators so arrogant, inaccessible and exclusionary?

Example: William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* writes:

“Such a result is of course absolutely alien to my intention, and since such a prejudice on your part would seriously obstruct the due effect of much of what I have to relate, I will devote a few more words to the point” (14).

Know what he said there? “I don’t want to be misunderstood, so I’ll clarify”. That’s it. No deep philosophy there, and yet he sounds like a pompous ass.

Caveat: Now, I will agree, to understand concepts in philosophy - or any specialty or discipline - there are terms, vocabulary and concepts that need to be defined and identified for one to attain basic comprehension of theories and schools of thought. As a (hopeful) future Nurse Practitioner, I need to know the difference between a coronary thrombosis and a myocardial infarction in order to treat my patient. But am I not going to use those terms in speaking to a patient when true comprehension of her condition is imperative to her well-being and - well, her life!? No, I’m going to tell her she had a heart attack. Plain, simple and accessible language that conveys the severity of the condition.

I’ll also concede that most philosophers are using the language, grammar and syntax reflective of the time period and geographical location. BUT, the commonality of using elitist linguistics seems counter-productive to the spirit of ‘love of wisdom’.
Kant in *What is Enlightenment?* on page one affirms “the spreading and sharing of knowledge” is the primary vehicle for “Man’s emergence from self-imposed immaturity”.

How is this goal of enlightenment best achieved? How can we foster the quest for wisdom and share knowledge to help one another along in the journey to enlightenment? By making information accessible to all who wish to discover it through rational discussion and discourse.

The ‘Ordinary Joe’ is probably not going to pick up the text of William James, (or Kant, or Descartes) and if they do, they would probably put it right back down! I have spent a lovely couple of evenings engaged in a colorful monologue of inventive expletives directed at James, Kant, Descartes and Derrida and my wonderful professors for assigning these texts. Yet, I did plow through in my quest for knowledge and enlightenment (and a grade, let’s be honest here). I did put in the effort, sometimes reading with a dictionary pulled up on my computer screen. I relentlessly asked questions, delving deeper and asking more questions than a two-year-old, and in the same tone and form (WHY?) and picked the brains of my esteemed professors in order to comprehend the ideas presented.

So, here’s another WHY question. WHY is this pomposity of arrogant, inaccessible and exclusionary language seemingly a prerequisite for elite status in the arena of philosophical academia?

Is it necessary to make the reader work for knowledge by delving through flowery rhetoric and self-important postulating to uncover the meaning?

If the aim of philosophy is wisdom and knowledge, why are most texts written in language that is exclusionary and not accessible to all?

Discussion Questions:

1. How far down should philosophers ‘dumb’ the language down to make it accessible?
2. Should attaining wisdom be easy? Or is the value of knowledge inherent in the effort?
3. Is all technical language pompous and/or exclusionary?
4. What is the relevance and application of philosophy and its language today? When we’re being bombarded with ideas, opinions and (quasi) information all the time?

How does one respond when confronted with language one does not understand?

(a) Enframing blocks the shining-forth and holding-sway of Truth.

(b) Education implements peer-based differentiated lessons through cognitive disequilibrium.

Can you tell which of these sentences above is asshattery generated by a pompous computer program and which is the thought of a pompous influential philosopher?

**JOIN THE PHILOSOPHICAL DISCUSSION**
THURS., Apr. 19 @ 4:00 PM IN GAMBLE 107
TO DISCOVER IF THINKERS CAN AVOID:
(A) LANGUAGE THAT IS POMPOUS,
(B) LANGUAGE THAT EXCLUDES,
(C) LANGUAGE THAT IS TECHNICAL,
(D) ASSHATERY