

Evaluation of Fernando E. Vásquez Barba's Phd thesis: *How philosophy should be done: A research on the practice of philosophy and its method*

Fernando Vásquez's thesis deals with a very traditional topic: what is philosophy and how it should be done. However, its ambition is to offer a novel answer to the titular question, relying on inputs from other disciplines than philosophy as well, such as cognitive linguistics.

Its merits and limitations are closely connected to its optimistic embracement of the assumption that there is such a thing as *the* nature of philosophy and that its existence substantiates the possibility, or rather desirability of issuing normative recommendations for philosophy. This assumption is presented, from the beginning, as a case to be yet made, but this framing is partly just rhetorical. Somewhat in the spirit of the criticisms issued by Vásquez himself against philosophers such as Husserl (that their philosophy exemplifies in fact a different kind of approach than their overtly proposed methods), the endeavour of searching for that which is shared by philosophy in general is motivated a phenomenon which some may consider separate from the studied topic, if not irrelevant: the existence of established university curricula, limited in time and supposed to be compatible or equivalent across universities. More about this in the Questions section below.

One "historical" point to begin with, though: Vásquez's implicitly assumed explanation for the fact that there are institutions called "universities" teaching a subject called "philosophy" all over the world relies on the existence of the shared nature of philosophy, hypothesised by him as argumentative and persuasive practice. This seems less than self-evident to me: various cultures and countries have each their own university traditions, partly discontinuous. And much as the influence of the contemporary Anglo-Saxon way of doing philosophy (in a roughly analytical style) exerts a levelling influence over philosophy everywhere, discontinuities and misunderstandings remain. Partly they are caused by the differences in the views about how much of "philosophy", *in what sense* and *to what extent* can be traded to students within the few years of university study. (Also, the mere fact that most of the things that we read about in the "history of philosophy" books were connected to certain institutional backgrounds of teaching and training, and that we even refer to these institutional frameworks as to forms of universities, does not necessarily make Plato's Academy, medieval scholastic universities, monastic schools of Tibetan Buddhism, contemporary American colleges, or Aztec *calmecac* examples of the same "thing".)

Overview of contents

Vásquez's work consists of four main chapters (excluding the intro and conclusion). The first chapter delineates the topic of method in/of philosophy and its status as a specific philosophical problem. The chapter draws a link (somewhat unclear to me) between the deplored problem of the "hyper-specialisation" of philosophy and its clear lack of "disciplinary boundaries". As Vásquez argues, because each philosopher is working, in an increasingly self-enclosed manner, only on his or her own "thing", a sense of a shared method is lacking. Yet, he says, having a clearly designed, in advance known and applicable method is a *sine qua non* for the endeavour of philosophy – otherwise philosophy could not be performed, taught and learnt with the same standards that we expect of any *science*. (This ambition is something that hard-core analytical

philosophers share with Husserl, for instance.) Vásquez mentions attempts to propose anti-essentialist and heterogeneous notions of philosophy, but considers them as generally counterproductive for the “business” of philosophy; and an empirical cognitive-linguistic investigation of the practice of philosophy will reveal common patterns.

Chapter two provides a summary and overview of the historical and contemporary debate about the problem of philosophical method. Vásquez suggests that while the topic of method was present in philosophy already in the Antiquity, it is the modern emphasis on efficiency and reliability that shifted a direct focus on method. It is in the Modern era that “method” emerges as a reliable and easily adoptable set of tools and approaches, necessary for generating reliable results – in terms of knowledge – efficiently. As Vásquez shows, philosophical proposals of a method usually distinguish themselves against the background of science. Vásquez summarises first the scientific methodological proposals of Neo-Kantians, Husserl, the Vienna Circle members, Russell and Popper; turning then to critical voices such as Collingwood’s. Vásquez also maps Wittgenstein’s influence on the later forms of anti-method approach and anti-foundationalism (Kuhn, Rorty, Fish), as well as the recent entry of experimental philosophy. Vásquez’s critical discussion of the voices points out that most of them fall prey to various pre-conceptions (such as that of the unity and ideality of science). While he praises Rorty’s attention to the heterogeneity of philosophical practice, he nevertheless concludes that philosophy (roughly) shares the nature of an argumentative practice, despite its own self-conceptions that mostly see its core elsewhere.

In chapter 3, Vásquez shows, on a number of case studies of metaphilosophical proposals (Plato, Descartes, Russell), the different kinds of argumentative practice that philosophy in reality amounts to. His approach is to use the tools of cognitive linguistics in order to evaluate and analyse these forms of philosophical discourse as evoking particular forms of conceptual frames. Plato’s dialectical method is shown to be using tools and procedures borrowed from geometry, in particular division and collection. Descartes is also borrowing from mathematics: the clarity and distinctness standards, the method of doubt, intuition and deduction. As with Plato, Vásquez points that Descartes never really (not even in *Meditations*) fully deploys his method. Russell’s method of logical analysis (inspired by mathematical logic, relying on atomistic intuitions and focusing on definite descriptions) is supposed to dispel the force of customs and to discern between true and false beliefs. At the same time, Russell aims to employ this method as professional and scientific (general, aprioristic). In his commentary, Vásquez stresses that all these methods, despite their differences, borrow from mathematics, understood as the paramount of rational and/or scientific inquiry. Of particular interest for Vásquez is the fact that the proposed methods did not really serve their ostensible ends, but different ones, and in a strongly rhetoric manner (such as establishing Socrates as the paradigm of morally sound philosophy in Plato’s case). All these philosophical endeavours in fact, as Vásquez argues, petrify tendencies inherent to ordinary language as well, making use of particular metaphorical fields in it, and all share the nature of being an argumentative practice.

The fourth chapter overviews the Lakoffian analyses of the conceptual fields of the different “method” notions in philosophy. Vásquez introduces the Lakoffian framework as “experientialist”: realist with a commitment to objectivity (or science), but interactionist in that it recognises various levels of the constitution of experiences (reaching from the pre-conceptual mental to the environment-embedded) and moderately relativist (acknowledging the difference of culture-specific conceptual schemes). The different notions of method exemplify different

conceptual metaphorical frameworks: that of the method as a tool or a machine, or as a road or a way (a progress). Plato appears to be a representative of the latter, Descartes of the former. Kant's notion of method does not seem to fit neatly either. Vázquez's general criticism – somewhat at odds with his own proposed agenda – is that all these notions are only partial idealisations and threaten with glossing over those (philosophical, or philosophically relevant) examples, experiences and phenomena that do not match the proposed descriptions of “the” method.

The conclusion repeats some central points. First, philosophers' proposals of *the* method have often been partial, idiosyncratic, impracticable, and so forth. Pluralism thus might seem to be a better option. Second, however, the embracement of pluralism would undermine the very intelligibility of philosophy as a teachable discipline. There thus has to be a shared core. According to Vázquez, this consists in the argumentative character of philosophy (testified also by the meta-philosophical debate). The idiosyncratic tendencies are caused by the philosophers' succumbing to particular conceptual (metaphorical) frames in a language and generalising them. Argumentation is the shared ground for disagreeing viewpoints and standpoints. Vázquez then suggests that philosophical argumentation shares some patterns: the sense of wonder (i.e. the problematisation of the evident) and proposing hypothetical solutions to encountered problems and testing them.

Possible questions/openings for a discussion

1) The opening assumption – that the very idea of philosophy presupposes a (methodological) unity, because otherwise it could not be taught at a university – seems problematic to me. It presupposes that philosophy “as such” is in a significant sense the same thing as the body of knowledge, skills and education that one absorbs after 3 or 5 or 8 years of the study of philosophy. For one thing: if even a BA programme of Philosophy represents a certain whole of philosophy, wherein lies the difference from a MA programme or PhD studies? If “philosophy” is something that has to be, somehow, available in a self-contained manner to a student entering the study, or at least at the end of the first 3 years, wherein lies the advancement? There is an assumption: philosophy is something that is first learnt, and then – when it has been safely learnt and stored in one's “toolkit” – it is done or performed. This view discounts any possibility of a *philosophical* growth or learning throughout one's life. The difference between someone who successfully graduated from philosophy but never works, professionally, in academia, and someone who is engaged in philosophy does not consist in that both have the same “toolkit” but only the latter is using it.

A metaphor not alien to the spirit of Plato's thinking, but never discussed by Vázquez, would be something like the following: the study of philosophy should *open a certain door* to the student, but how wide it is open, how well and far the student sees through it, whether and how they choose to go through the door and what they do after they have gone through it, that is an altogether different story.

Then, the possible shortcoming of Vázquez's project would be that he subjected his study of what Plato or Descartes were doing *after* they have passed through their doors to the agenda of answering the question of how this makes the propedeutical procedure of door-opening (or all the procedures of opening all the doors, no matter how different they are)

coherent and functional. But not even Plato was teaching his students how to be Platos; and though this is perhaps less obvious in the present day academia, good teachers are not just cultivating their “clones” to perform certain tasks “on their behalf” in the very same way they would perform them themselves, if only they had time.

2) Correspondingly: there is a tension in the practice of academic philosophy training, and Vásquez is well aware of it – it truly *is* problematic to assume that philosophy can be substantively taught within few years and in the confines of an institutionalised curriculum, but at the same time it *has* to be because it does exist within this system. However, consider the way it is taught – for one thing, the (disproportionate?) room devoted to courses in the *history* of philosophy. Does Vásquez think that learning *about* Plato, Aquinas, Spinoza, or Kierkegaard amounts to instilling a method (or *the* method) into students? To me, it seems to show that the students are – at the same time, or instead – getting a sense of what philosophy is (about) by way of acquainting with examples and by the practice and exercise of understanding these examples properly. This would shed problematising light at the idea of the philosophical method as something simple, in the same sense as mathematical rules are simple, though they are often employed in very complicated calculations. Doing philosophy is sometimes very difficult, but that is not the same way as calculations are complicated. (That is, if methods of philosophy consist in following rules, these rules and the manner of their following are not of the same kind as in mathematics (cf. Wittgenstein, *PI*, II, § 355).)

One possible objection to the claim with which Vásquez opens his thesis would thus be: no, attaining clarity as to what philosophy is at all and what it means to be doing philosophy (at least for the particular person) is in itself a genuine philosophical task for a philosophical “adult”, rather than a prerequisite of, or an assignment in, a course for students.

3) Correspondingly: Vásquez suggests that the core of philosophy consists in “argumentative practice”. Is that what students of philosophy learn during their studies, or rather: what they are supposed to learn (and all the parties of the training “contract” would know that beforehand)? Vásquez suggests that empirical surveys show that philosophy graduates excel in this skill; but Deanna Kuhn’s work, as far as I can see, does not show this to be specific for *philosophy*. The skill of reasoning and argumentation is (or should be), according to her, characteristic for any science, or at least any discipline in which one needs to employ reasoning an argument. It is worth noting that Kuhn’s research shows that philosophers are in general doing well in reasoning and argumentation, but not necessarily best of all graduates of all possible disciplines (this she did *not* research). The design of Kuhn’s experiment works with the difference between professionals in the researched contexts of occupational practice and professionals coming from outside of the contexts, but skilled in reasoning (philosophers, in this case). But social scientists, or basically any academic scientists could be used in much the same way, to draw an analogous contrast.

Consider this example: in our country, graduates of humanities and social sciences have a very low rate of unemployment. This is not because they all work in academia etc., but because the study seems to have equipped them with skills useful in many different kinds of jobs (somewhat in contrast to graduates of technical and engineering schools). Does it mean that skills like reading with good comprehension, (copy)writing, or analysing a situation in a segment of society (for instance for marketing purposes) are the true skills in which performing all those disciplines (not only philosophy, but philology, anthropology, sociology, and so forth)

consists? Would it not be more careful to say that these skills may well be characteristic for HSS graduates, yet as a secondary outcome of their education/training?

4) The place of argumentation in philosophy – could it not be rather an ancillary sub-discipline or sub-skill? Consider that argumentation in a strict sense could even better be represented among logicians or mathematicians. In fact, the nature of how the discipline of philosophy is traded and explained combines elements of logic and rhetoric. Vásquez thus wisely characterises argumentation as central to philosophy in a rather broad and vague sense of employing *persuasion* in a dialogue, or discussion. In this sense, philosophers may employ whatever methods; but the true point of philosophy would be to persuade the other that *I* am right. This seems narrowing – philosophers may, thanks to their training, be capable of persuading an opponent in debate that the causes of homelessness are different than the other thinks (for instance); but that does not mean that all debates about whichever topics where persuasion takes place are philosophical. It is of special interest for philosophy that they argue *about particular topics*.

Conversely: It is possible to be persuasive, that is, to make a case, in a far wider variety of manners than Vásquez seems to admit. As for instance Cora Diamond shows in her classical “Anything but Argument”, the very notion of argument, or philosophical argument is vague and unclear and probably much more things than are usually assumed should be considered as acting, as it were, as an argument. She makes her point in relation to literary narratives that often, in a way, argue powerfully in favour of understanding particular moral phenomena in a certain way. Does it mean that Dickens or Tolstoy do philosophy, because they are persuasive about a topic which is of interest for philosophy (and philosophers take them seriously)?

At the same time, there simply are very different kinds of philosophy, and some are not concerned with making arguments in the way in which the contemporary analytical philosophy (but also medieval Scholastics, or Aristotle) is making them. Accordingly, some simply do not share an “inclination towards science”, nor are they “prone to delimit philosophy according to scientific standards”. Philosophy can be done through forms that are literary (narrative, dramatic), rather than discursive – consider Plato, Kierkegaard, Sartre, or Derrida. (Sartre’s *Nausea* is an important work of literature and at the same time a piece of phenomenology.) Various versions of contextualist or particularist philosophy (as for instance in the tradition of Wittgenstein) distance themselves from the agenda of persuading others about a universally valid truth, and opt instead for endeavours to *understand* better (when one feels one doesn’t understand a particular problem or example or notion well). Does a philosopher’s refusal to engage in persuading others that he/she is right exclude him/her from philosophy?

5) Why should an overview of what philosophers *are actually* doing – if we buy the conclusion that there really are interesting shared features – provide a guidance as to how philosophy *should* be done? Or at least, why should the “how philosophy should be done” be exhausted by “how it is done”?

Few minor points, some of which are related to the above:

6) Isn’t the reading of Plato that Vásquez presents somewhat simplifying? He argues that the deficit in Plato’s method is that “[it] never led to definite conclusions or precise definitions, let alone arriving at knowledge of the entities postulated”. However, one might argue, and I am sure a lot of Plato interpreters would argue, that this was exactly Plato’s intention: to show

dialogues of some topics as aporetic, or to make a point about something more elusive by staging the numerous dialogical encounters with dead-ends, or by abruptly ending or interrupting them by mythological narratives.

7) A similar point can be made about Husserl: it is true that while Husserl is proposing his phenomenological reduction as the method of philosophy, he is not engaging in bracketing all the time. On the other hand, he *is* still doing it quite a lot (cf. his analyses of the inner consciousness of time). One might say that the passages in which Husserl is not bracketing are metaphilosophical: those in which he is explaining why bracketing is the right method. But the fact that argumentation may be the only aspect shared by “directly” philosophical and metaphilosophical passages does not necessarily show that philosophy is argument. It shows that it is difficult for the whole of philosophy, including metaphilosophy, to be the instance of its own method. Maybe Hegel has managed that – would it make him the only methodologically clear and unproblematic philosopher? And if so, would that make him the best or the most interesting (or the only real) philosopher?

8) What can we really learn from the Lakoffian analyses? Consider the example of Kant – the method as a strict father, exerting authority over the philosopher. Doesn't it only capitalise on and perpetuate the popular, but only partially true, opinion about Kant. Alright, reason exerts authority, but it is rather that one exerts authority over oneself thanks to reason (as Vásquez rightly mentions). The important point in Kant is that this is not disciplination (in a Foucauldian/Freudian sense) or bringing to conformity, but *liberation*. What does it matter whether a philosopher talks about the method in terms evoking tools/machines, or paths/ways? – I mean, what does it matter for the overall point that Vásquez wants to make: that philosophers are deluded about what philosophy is and that all philosophy boils down to argumentation.

9) Correspondingly, it is not always clear whether Vásquez is interested in the way in which people talk about method (the concept of method) in philosophy or elsewhere, or in the method of philosophy (be it the explicitly proposed method, or the implicit practice of the philosopher), or about philosophy in general. As in the conclusion: perhaps the real (rather than the ostentative) method of philosophy lies in argumentative persuasion, but does it mean that *philosophy* is argumentative persuasion? (Such a transition seems to be quite clearly made on p. 121-2.)

10) A small conceptual point: I am somewhat confused by the confidence with which Vásquez claims that concepts, but also metaphors, have the nature of mental representations (cf. p. 43ff, 101) that only subsequently get an external linguistic expression. I take it that this is the way in which Lakoff is describing the workings of language, but if the 20th century's analytical philosophy (Wittgenstein or Davidson) managed to do something, then it was persuading us that we cannot afford to simply take this picture for granted. The question would then be: what is this mental (pre-linguistic) representation of objects and what can we (linguistic, discursive beings) know and *tell* about it as an experiential stratum independent of language? How does this layer translate into language which is composed of many kinds of words and *uses* of words, only some – actually, very few – of which can intelligibly be taken as having to do with referring to objects?

11) The last point, regarding bibliography: It is often slightly preposterous to suggest adding further items to bibliography, because nobody can embrace all the relevant literature on a subject. Nevertheless, in a thesis about such topic, it would have seemed appropriate to me to

at least mention Paul Feyerabend. Engaging with Feyerabend in some detail would have made Vásquez's dismissal of anti-method approaches more fleshed-out.

Language

Like Fernando Vásquez, I am not a native English speaker myself, as is certainly clear from this evaluation document. However, even to my eyes Vásquez's English appears sometimes unnecessarily sloppy (typically in many cases of the missing or superfluous final "-s" marking plural nouns or third-personal singular verbs). Most of these shortcomings testify, it seems to me, not to the author's insufficient grasp of English, but rather to a certain lack of care or attention during the final editing. If there are plans to convert parts of the thesis or its whole into an academic publication, it will require further investment of the author's time or some proofreading.

Overall

In an inventive manner, the thesis sticks with a very determinate (if not obstinate) idea of the direction of its argument, which it makes it more focused and aim-oriented than is usual with philosophical dissertations. It also integrates a very wide array of often very disparate resources into the structure of the argument. These are certainly laudable qualities in a thesis.

In my opinion, the thesis meets all the criteria of a dissertation sufficiently prepared for the defence.

Pardubice, 2 June 2021

Ondřej Beran