

Eugen Fischer, *Philosophical Delusion and its Therapy: Outline of a Philosophical Revolution*, New York and London: Routledge, Hardbound: 2011/Paperback: 2013, pp. xviii + 291.

In this book the author takes up an idea that has an ancient pedigree, and that regained attention some 80 years ago—that philosophy should be a sort of therapy. In the ancient world philosophy was a therapy for unfortunate desire; more recently, for diseased understanding. Fischer makes the case: that a diseased understanding suffers from delusion in the strict sense; that three important philosophers, Locke, Berkeley, and Ayer (as well as Galileo and Boyle) exhibit clear signs of such delusionary thinking; and that Wittgenstein offered the tools for diagnosing and treating such delusions. The author considers the use of such therapy to be an important direction for contemporary philosophy.

This agenda makes for an impressive book—it offers a bold and intriguing thesis, it ranges widely over several important figures, yet goes into depth in specific cases. The breadth of coverage of the book accounts for there being two authors of this book review. However, we find the book's arguments to be flawed at crucial points.

Fischer thinks that philosophers are deluded when they hold on to and defend a thesis that they know is inconsistent with well-established common-sense beliefs, and that they have no independent grounds for holding. In the cases he considers, the delusionary thesis is connected with some philosophical picture. Examples of this include the picture of the mind as a container, and the picture of

sensations as entities. He thinks the danger of misguided philosophical pictures is widespread, asserting that (8): “Quite possibly, a significant part—not all but a significant part—of philosophy is a struggle with philosophical pictures and their consequences.” And (217): “as a brute matter of fact, theoretical philosophy as we know it is essentially a struggle with philosophical pictures.” Those are strong claims, and it is worth the reader’s time to reflect on whether they are plausible.

The chief mechanism that generates philosophical mental illness is supposed to be “non-intentional analogical inferences” (30 & passim). In such cases, the patient projects features of one model on to a “structurally similar” target, even when the target does not have those features. (Fischer thinks that empirical evidence establishes the ubiquity of such projections, but he cites only one such study (29), and all that study shows is how easy it is to confuse people when you present them with two very similar stories.)

An appealing feature of Fischer’s book is its scope. Fischer begins with historical cases and is clearly aware of some of the secondary literature. Unfortunately, the end result is unconvincing at best, misleading at worst.

For example, Fischer considers an “apparent implication” of Locke’s primary/secondary quality distinction to be that macro-level bodies—chairs, trees, dogs, and so on—do not have any size, shape, or movement.¹ (These properties are supposed to belong only to the insensible particles that make up the bodies.) Such a consequence, Fischer asserts, is, presumably quite literally, “plainly mad” (88).

¹ As Fischer states the doctrine, ‘PQ’ holds that “[t]he only qualities to ‘really exist’ (or ‘be something of real’) in a sensible body are the size, shape, and motion of the insensible particles that make it up” (88).

Perhaps. But it is not Locke's doctrine, nor is it a consequence, plain or otherwise, of that doctrine. Although Locke and his fellow travelers might have thought that the size, shape, and motion of macro-level bodies are a function of, or result from, or supervene on, the properties and relations of the micro-level bits that make them up, no one denies that macro-level bodies have size, shape, and motion. In this case, at least, Fischer's dismissive attitude appears to have led him to set up a straw man.

In other cases, Fischer simply ignores wide swaths of the literature, both primary and secondary. While it is plausible to think that some of the early moderns take the mind to be the place of ideas, i.e., non-physical representations that interpose themselves between the subject and the world, it is hardly uncontroversial. Direct realist readings of everyone from Descartes to Locke have been offered.² What is more important, Fischer does not discuss those figures who are openly opposed to representationalism. In their own very different ways, Antoine Arnauld, John Sergeant, and Nicolas Malebranche all reject the picture of the mind as having its own set of representations through which to think of the world. To read Fischer, one would think that representationalism was an unquestioned assumption in the modern period, permeating and distorting all of philosophy. It was instead a highly controversial and frequently questioned doctrine. And those who questioned it were not enlightened self-therapists but philosophers marshaling their own set of arguments.

² Such readings of Locke go back at least to the 1970s; see Charles Landesman, "Locke's Theory of Meaning," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 14, 1 (1976): 23-35. Direct realist readings of Descartes first came to prominence in the mid-1980s with the work of John Yolton; see especially his *Perceptual Acquaintance from Descartes to Reid*, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

When it comes to addressing our own delusions, Fischer recommends cognitive means—making the sufferer aware of his or her mistaken beliefs (12): “We need to liberate ourselves, first and foremost, from the urge to engage in efforts we would rightly reject as pointless if we were not under the spell of a philosophical picture.” So, Fischer often suggests that (9): “Understanding our predicament is the first, and decisive, step towards a more productive response to problems...” And (220): “We can dissolve each problem...by retracing the steps that led us to formulate the problem, and exposing the fallacies they contain.” But this won’t be simple, for (227): “the mere identification and refutation of these beliefs is not going to make us shed them...To overcome [them] we have to do more than merely refute the pertinent beliefs.”

Although deeply skeptical of—indeed, hostile to—many of the views held by philosophers, Fischer is oddly complacent about psychotherapy. Fischer suggests that philosophical therapy should mimic psychological therapy—a sort of cognitive psychotherapy. The author lists (228-9) four steps that psychotherapists take to loosen the grip of delusions in their patients. But how effective is psychotherapy? Fischer claims (229): “This approach has been found to significantly weaken delusional beliefs....” But he does not cite any source for this claim. Do we really want to take psychotherapy as a model for philosophical work?

Even supposing that psychotherapy were generally successful, the move to *philosophical* therapy remains questionable. Fischer asserts (229) that “it is reasonable to assume that...[t]hinkers can overcome their philosophical delusions by improving their self-understanding.” The author hopes that by showing how

famous figures in our discipline suffered from these delusions, we can “de-stigmatize” or “normalize” the phenomena, apparently making us more willing to see their operation in ourselves. But the process remains purely hypothetical (231): “The insight...*may* make us wary of the claims.... We *may* then suspend our trust....” (italics added). (And there is a similar series of *mays* on p. 233.)

It is generally supposed that one interested in philosophical therapy should turn to Wittgenstein for guidance. This is certainly where Fischer turns. He is fond of citing passages from the so-called “Big Typescript” (e.g., 11, note 18), such as the following: “The real discovery is the one that enables me to break off philosophizing when I want to. The one that gives philosophy peace....”³ This makes it sound as though the therapy can consist of a “discovery.” But though Wittgenstein once apparently agreed to Drury’s assertion that he [Wittgenstein] had “reached a real resting place,”⁴ Rush Rhees writes that: “Years later Wittgenstein said to me: ‘You know, I said I can stop doing philosophy when I like. That is a lie! I *can’t*.’”⁵ Fischer does not cite this retraction, but I think we have to take it seriously as expressing a concern that therapy does not necessarily work as one might hope, even on Wittgenstein himself.

One of the reasons Wittgenstein gave up teaching in 1947 was a concern that his teaching was not effective.⁶ And in April of 1947 he wrote in a notebook: “Quite

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Philosophy,” in *Philosophical Occasions: 1912-1951*, Hackett, 1993, p. 195 (p. 431 of TS 213), which eventually makes its way into PI §133.

⁴ M. Drury, “Conversations with Wittgenstein,” in *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. R. Rhees, Oxford, 1984, p. 110.

⁵ R. Rhees, “Editorial Notes,” in *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. R. Rhees, Oxford, 1984, p. 219.

⁶ See the numerous sources cited in J. Klagge, “The Wittgenstein Lectures,” in *Public and Private Occasions*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, pp. 358-9; and also see Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, Oxford, New edition, 1984, p. 53.

different artillery is needed here from anything I am in a position to muster.”⁷ He does not go on to say what might have constituted such different artillery—but I think it must mean something different from his therapy. And this suggests he did not think his therapy had been effective on others.

Wittgenstein considered a different sort of artillery around the time he was compiling the Big Typescript: “I believe I summed up where I stand in relation to philosophy when I said: really one should write philosophy only as one *writes a poem* [*dichten*]....For I was acknowledging myself, with these words, to be someone who cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do.”⁸ What would poetic writing accomplish? Perhaps it would be a sort of writing that could make alternative philosophical pictures, less damaging ones, attractive. Unfortunately, Wittgenstein does not elaborate this idea.

But the juxtaposition of philosophy and poetry reminds one of the “ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry” noted by Plato (*Republic*, 607B). In the wake of Socrates’ execution, it is plausible to see Plato as trying to approach issues in a different, less strictly intellectual, fashion than the historical Socrates had. For instance, in the *Phaedo* we get a more emotional response to the problem of the fear of death, where “Socrates” (now a mouth-piece for Plato) tells us he has recently been “writing poetry” (60d), warns that “I am in danger at this moment of not having a philosophical attitude about this” (91a), proposes to “tell and examine tales” (61e), is asked to “try to persuade [the child in us] not to fear death like a

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, Chicago, 1980, p. 62; Revised edition, Blackwell, 1998, p. 71.

⁸ *Culture and Value*, 1980, p. 24; 1998, p. 28.

bogey man” and so suggests that we should “sing a charm over him every day until you have charmed away his fears” (77e), and calls what he offers an “incantation” (114d).

Here Plato seems to offer the process of philosophical argument as a kind of therapy, but not a purely cognitive therapy. Perhaps the approach also involves replacing one picture with another. Certainly Plato seems to work with pictures, such as the cave, the after-life, recollection, the heavenly ladder. How would poetry work? Perhaps it would work by offering *different* pictures—beating delusions at their own game, rather than simply avoiding or undermining them.

Fischer insists that Wittgenstein is concerned with curing his own diseases (195-6). But there is (also) evidence that it is the problems of others that Wittgenstein addresses, having escaped from them himself (at least somewhat).

Probably there is evidence on both sides, and it is not a clear matter. Jane Heal has undertaken a study of the dialogical character of the *Philosophical Investigations*.⁹ She notes that Wittgenstein uses “I,” “we,” and “you” in his dialogical remarks. Fischer is aware of these various pronouns, but dismisses their significance. On p. 257 Fischer takes Wittgenstein’s “we” to mean “I”, thereby explaining away the possibility that he is talking about others (too). And on p. 262 he takes “you” to be Wittgenstein addressing himself. While Fischer takes Wittgenstein to be applying therapy to himself in the *Investigations*, Heal draws a different conclusion, that Wittgenstein “represents himself there as no longer impelled to say those things but rather as recognising sympathetically the impulse

⁹ Jane Heal, “Wittgenstein and Dialogue,” in *Philosophical Dialogues*, ed. T. Smiley, Oxford, 1995, especially pp. 64-71.

which another is there represented as experiencing.” She continues: “[Wittgenstein] presents himself, pretty much throughout the *Investigations*, as having, to some extent at least, succeeded in escaping from the grip of the false pictures...from which he hopes also to release his reader.”¹⁰

This contrast between Wittgenstein’s own state of mind, and the state of others still under some delusion, is already present at the time of the Big Typescript. The chapter on “Philosophy” opens: “*As I have often said*, philosophy does not lead me to any renunciation, since I do not abstain from saying something, but rather abandon a certain combination of words as senseless. In another sense, however, philosophy requires a resignation, but one of feeling and not of intellect. And maybe that is what makes it *so difficult for many*”¹¹ (italics added). This apparently designates many others as having difficulty benefiting from the therapy. (It is hard to avoid the implication that he is referring to the difficulties of the “many” students in his classes accepting what he has “often said” to them in class.)

It is not surprising that others might have trouble accepting the therapy that is offered. In standard philosophical arguments we are accustomed to being called wrong, and being offered reasons that we are wrong. In Fischer’s view we are to be called “deluded,” and offered explanations as to why we are deluded. But this is a dismissive response that does not take the other seriously as a rational and intentional being. In fact, the author almost obsessively (somewhere between 38 and 88 times) describes our problem as making “non-intentional analogical inferences.” This is an alienating response, not one likely to engage others in a

¹⁰ Heal, p. 69 and then p. 71.

¹¹ *Philosophical Occasions*, p. 161 (p. 406 of TS 213).

discussion, rather like arguing with your spouse by saying: “Have you skipped your Prozac?” Or: “Are you having your period?” Like trying to argue with someone who continually tries to diagnose *why* you are taking the position you are, or questioning your motives. And this is, indeed, what the author is doing.

Fischer tries to counter this impression (11, repeated word for word and then extended at 223-4), but his comments serve only to reinforce it. Therapy is one thing when it is sought for oneself, quite another when it is suggested for another. That is why Fischer is concerned to emphasize that Wittgenstein’s therapy is *for himself* (254). But in fact it is not, or not just. And even if it were, the fact that the author holds it up as exemplary *for us* indicates that its purpose is not simply self-therapy.

If philosophers are, for the most part, deluded, what does Fischer’s version of clear-headedness look like? The only answer seems to be common sense, and Fischer accepts it just as uncritically as he does psychotherapy. A philosophical paradox, for Fischer, is “an argument from—often apparently trivial—premises the opponents initially accept, via steps they find compelling, to a conclusion apparently at odds with common sense” (68). This is very close to the way in which Bertrand Russell defines philosophy itself: “the point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it.”¹² That philosophy often reaches counter-intuitive results cannot automatically be used to invalidate it. From where does common sense get its supreme authority? Here we might imagine several lines of argument.

¹² Bertrand Russell, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, ed. D. Pears, Open Court, 1984, Lecture II, p. 53.

One might begin with an optimistic assessment of the epistemic powers of human beings and argue that common sense embodies the collective wisdom of the ages or some such thing. Such an argument is not *prima facie* compelling, but the point is that it *is* a philosophical argument. Even a dismissal of philosophy must proceed by argument and so participate in the very activity it purports to undermine.

Despite our significant disagreement with some of the book's arguments, we found others of the book's diagnoses to be plausible. Fischer convincingly argues (175) that Ayer's defense of the Verification Principle illicitly slides between thinking of sense data as whatever we perceive and thinking of them as whatever is *directly* perceived. And even where not plausible, we found Fischer's investigation of the issues to be well worthwhile.

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