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Ad Hominem Address


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Ad hominem address

In principle, Jesuit schools show *cura personalis*: “care of the person”. Teachers are supposed to care about you. You aren’t reducible to an enrollment number, an accounting major, a varsity letter, or to being a headache. You exceed your grade-point average. Above all, you’re a person and should be encouraged in your personal growth. The question is: how does philosophy contribute to *cura personalis*?

One way to answer the question is to explore where philosophy promotes personal growth –looking at philosophy’s effects. We could see where philosophy fails us, too – those places where philosophy seems to be worse than impersonal (and there are, sadly, many). Seeing where philosophy promotes personal growth and where it doesn’t, we’d end up giving a critique of philosophy based on the idea of personal growth. Philosophy’s effects would be both clarified and limited by that idea.

Yet it isn’t enough to explore philosophy’s effects. We should explore what philosophy is. I wonder whether care of the person is essential to philosophy. Must it be a part? If philosophy implies care of the person, *cura personalis* is not some Jesuit add on. It is a necessary part of philosophy, and the idea of personal growth won’t merely adjoin philosophy’s effects. It will be part of philosophy’s being.

Today, I want to explore the idea of philosophy. I think that a kind of *ad hominem*

address is essential to doing philosophy. In an interesting way, you are essential to my philosophy. I think that by explaining what I mean about *ad hominem* address, I can explain the essential role of care of the person in the love of wisdom.

Here is my main idea. I want to claim that *ad hominem* address, far from leading to an informal fallacy, is an essential form of philosophy. It is bound up with care of the person. That realization, far from being illogical, allows us to see philosophy's conceptual logic in sharper focus.

Please note that I distinguish the expression "*ad hominem* address" from the expression "*ad hominem* argument". Seeing how *ad hominem* address plays a key role in philosophy opens up the way philosophy today may, in some forms, obstruct care of the person by ignoring it (if philosophy must be, in some sense, personal, then ignoring you is worse than being impersonal: it is inadvertently degrading you, eroding your personhood). The reason for the obstruction may not be willfulness. It may be illogic. If we do not organize our work around the conceptual structure of philosophy, we will almost surely leave out central dimensions of it, and perhaps we have lost touch with what philosophy fully is.

Philosophy, today, is mostly theory, and sometimes a little practice. But what if philosophy requires relating, too? What if, in addition to exercising our theoretical and practical reason, philosophy must exercise our relational reason? Then acting as if relating does not matter in philosophy would create confusions and obstruct personal growth in a classroom. My hunch is that the failure to see the essential role of *ad hominem* address in philosophy is one example of a philosophical blindness obstructing

personal growth. When we think the *ad hominem* is merely a matter of bad logic, we

have already internalized today's disciplinary blindness. Relegating the *ad hominem* to informal fallacy is a vice, born of illogic.

These big claims mark my critique of philosophy by way of care of the person. The agenda is dialectical. Rather than confronting philosophy with care of the person as a concern external to philosophy, I conceptualize philosophy in order to then show a place for *ad hominem* address. The essential place of *ad hominem* address then leads us to how care of the person is intrinsic to loving wisdom. From that point on, we can revise philosophy according to a clearer sense of its being.

With that said, let me turn to my idea of philosophy.

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What is philosophy? I accept the common definition, which is that "philosophy" is the love of wisdom. However, I include within that common definition a technical one: "philosophy" is the search to be fully. I borrow the expression "to be fully" from Irad Kimhi's "full being", although I do not want to claim I mean what he does by it.¹ Only the idea is roughly the same.

Here is the idea. First, hear the expression "our being" as a noun form of a verb. We aren't talking about an inert thing when we talk about our being, but about an active kind of life. To be is to be active, and our being is a dynamic process. With that in mind, think, next, about wisdom. Wisdom, whatever it may be, is our being under its orienting

¹ Irad Kimhi, "Desire in Plato's *Symposium* and Lacan", a talk at Le Moyne College, March 2009. See Kimhi's forthcoming book *Active Thought* (Harvard 2010) for a fuller expression of his philosophy.

values –the values by which we are (again, “by which we are” should evoke a sense of activity, not inertness). When we are by our orienting values, we are as wise as we can say, given human ignorance (our values could be mistaken, but wisdom, for us, will still be bound up with what we think they really are; we just have to accept, given human limitation, that we may always be mistaken about wisdom by being mistaken about our values). Third, being according to our orienting values is our being fully, as far as we can tell. This third claim allows us to see that being fully and being wise coincide. Finally, I understand the love in the love of wisdom to imply the active pursuit of wisdom, not simply a deep inner feeling wanting wisdom. I thereby translate “love” as “search” in this one context, with the caveat that the search is born out of a deep, inner want. Thus, I claim that philosophy is the search to be fully.

My technical definition will be important for my later argument about the *ad hominem*, which is why I bring it in now. However, I want to note that, in its essence, it has an old tradition preceding it. To my mind, we can return to the classical understanding of the sage and its role in philosophy to see my point. As Pierre Hadot has explained so well,² in ancient Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman philosophy, the figure of the sage functioned as a regulative ideal on philosophy. Philosophy sought the idea of wisdom under the ideal of the sage. The sage embodied wisdom, even though he or she was no more than an impossibly perfect ideal leading us onward.

My question is: what did the sage express, and how did she express it? The answer is that she expressed our values and she expressed them in a manner consistent with what they mean. I am speaking of true values, or values that stand our best tests of

² Pierre Hadot (2002). *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* Michael Chase (Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard.

justification. She was, for instance, benevolent in a benevolent way, truthful in a truthful way, and beautiful in a soulful way. For human beings such as we are, she expressed our being fully. That was her sign of being wise, of standing in for wisdom. The tradition of the classical sage and its relation to the ancient conception of philosophy shows how the love of wisdom is the search to be fully, that is, the search to become sage-like, nearing a little bit closer to that ideal, even if it is unattainable for real human beings like ourselves.

There is, of course, so much more to say about what philosophy is. However, for my purposes here, grasping the rough idea of how philosophy is the search to be fully sets up my argument to follow. My next step is to explain three parts of being fully, one of which will take us eventually to *ad hominem* address. In explaining these three parts and exploring one of them, I will indirectly clarify my idea of what philosophy is, giving us an increasingly real sense of what “the search to be fully” could mean. So hold on if my exposition so far has been too abstract and too brief. I hope to make it clearer as we go.

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If philosophy is the search to be fully, what is being fully? What goes into it? I have drawn on an unexplained connection between being fully and expressing our values, by which I mean our true values or our values after they have passed our best tests of justification. I want to say some more about that connection. I will argue that being fully implies acting in light of the good, thinking in light of the true, and loving in light of the beautiful. The three values here are goodness, truth, and beauty. I will not explain being fully comprehensively. Rather, I will argue for three necessary conditions on being fully,

each one under the authority of one of the three values. Establishing these necessary conditions will be enough to let us later see the role of *ad hominem* address in philosophy.

How could we be fully if we did not act? Acting is part of being. That much seems undeniable. By “acting”, I don’t mean anything that is metaphysically loaded. We could be Buddhist and accept my claim. That we do things is evident from the way explaining our intentions is part of living, even for Buddhism. When learning to meditate, we are still asked to explain what we were trying to do, so that the teacher can correct us. To have an intention is to be in the realm of action.

What do we know about ourselves as active beings? As becomes clear when we are in a bind, deliberating, we know that we use practical reason to act. Issues demanding deliberation bring to the surface how practical reason guides us habitually in our intentions. Our intentions, in turn, are intentions to act, so that when we reason practically, the point of our reasoning is an action. A deliberator who made up his mind and then didn’t act would have some *failure* of practical reason. Rather, practical reason comes to an end in an action, and the kind of knowledge we rely on from that point on is called “know-how”. Know-how is different than the kind of knowledge that fills most of our textbooks, and it is usually taught through physical practice, rather than through abstract cogitation. As part of practice, too, it employs means aiming at what we take to be good. In fact, we call the point of any action a “good”, a remark that goes back to the first sentence of Aristotle’s lectures on ethics as recorded by Nicomachus. Accordingly, I spoke of goodness as the value orienting this practical part of our being, even though what we take to be good may not actually be good. Still, the value category of goodness

orients us when we're being practical, leading us to debate about what really is good. So, to sum up, when we consider ourselves as active beings, we see that goodness orients us, in the mode of know-how, by reasoning whose point is to do something in the world.

These things seem necessary for us to be fully. Do we need other things, too?

Well, how could we be fully if we did not think? Thinking is part of being. That much seems undeniable. By "thinking", I don't mean anything that is loaded metaphysically. We could be Zen Buddhists and accept my claim.³ That we think things is evident from the way arguing about causes is part of living, even for Buddhism (which argues that cause is illusory in some contexts), and even for so-called un-intellectual people, who discuss the weather, sports teams and household repairs just as much as any of us do. To argue that X, not Y, causes Z, or simply that X causes Z, is to assert a proposition and lay claim to some piece of propositional knowledge. It is to risk a truth. That *is* thinking.

What do we know about ourselves as thinking beings, then? First, we know that we aim at knowledge. The kind of knowledge is called "knowledge that" –propositional knowledge ("I know that bad defense caused the Cleveland Cavaliers to lose the game."). The kind of reason that aims at propositional knowledge –rather than, say, know-how- is theoretical reason. It is guided by what we think is true. In fact, the point of our thinking is a truth, for we end a chain of theoretical reasoning properly once we arrive at a conclusion about the truth of something, that is, once we discover a truth (even if the truth is that we don't yet have good reason to think something is true –that is a kind of

³ Some Zen Buddhists have a discourse about "non-thinking". I thank my friend Jeremy Levy, a priest at the San Francisco Zen Center's Green Gulch Farm, for introducing me

truth, a move within the space of the true). For these reasons, I spoke of truth as the value orienting a part of our being. It orients us when we're thinking. As thinking beings, truth orients us to know that such and such is true, or not ("My evidence shows that the experiment was fraudulent."). I don't see how we can be fully without such truth-orientation. I suspect we can't even *be* without it ("Why did he die that tragic death?" "Because he didn't care to know if it is safe to cross the road."). Do we need more than truth and goodness, though?

Yes. How could we be fully if we were not social? Relating to others is part of being. Again, that seems undeniable. By "being social", I don't mean anything that is loaded ethically or politically, even spatially. I don't mean anything that could be described as psychologically perfectionistic, either, as when a motivational speaker suggests we need to greet everyone we meet with "positivity". We could be anchorites in the desert, libertarians in the Rockies, curmudgeons on the bus, or grad students and accept my claim. That we relate to each other is evident from the grammar of our language (which has, for instance, the second person singular and plural); the centrality of friends, lovers and families to much of human life; and the ubiquitous presence of norms of politeness or appropriate behavior in all manner of situations involving more than one person. That the anchorite can't even *address* God without a prior social relation having been internalized –the relation of direct address to another- shows how fundamental being with others is to being human.

What do we realize about ourselves as social beings, then? First of all, knowing each other is not like propositional knowledge or know-how, although it may involve both. I

may need to formulate views about your family history and social background in

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order to understand your behavior, and I may need to know how to hang out with you at a bar –how loud to talk, and how to handle splitting the bill with you- but getting to know you involves a lot more than these kinds of things. It centers around relating to you, exercises some form of empathy; and involves body language, facial expressions, and touch as some of its truest and most common forms (whereas these come up obliquely in propositional knowledge and instrumentally in know-how). This kind of knowing is not after truths, nor is it after goods: it's after being with you.

Now which kind of reason has its point in being with another and relating as its mode of knowing? We don't have a well established term, but I propose the expression "relational reason". Relational reason is the kind of reason at work in our being social, when we try to know one another and aim at being-with each other. Relational reason is the kind of reasoning that kicks in when the demand is to be social.

If we accept a conceptual space for relational reason, the final question is what orients our attempt to be with each other. I propose that it is beauty. Beauty is the value orienting our social being. Here's how I came to this view. The point of theoretical reason is a truth, and the point of practical reason is a deed, whereas the value of the former is truth and the value of the latter is goodness. If the point of relational reason is being with another, what value oversees that process? Think of the three kinds of knowing expressing the three kinds of reason: theoretical reason seeks knowledge that such and such is true, whereas practical reason uses know-how. Relational reason, by contrast, appears in knowing another. The ideal form of knowing another is love. The value orienting love, though, is the lovable. And the lovable simply is beauty, if we

follow the idea, found in Plato's *Symposium* that the lovable is beauty. In other words, beauty is the value behind being social.

To conclude this section, I have now argued that being fully implies acting in light of the good, thinking in light of the true, and loving in light of the beautiful. The three values here are goodness, truth, and beauty. I have not explained our being comprehensively, but have instead argued for three necessary conditions on our being fully. As you can probably tell, the third necessary condition –being social, whose ideal form is loving others in light of the beautiful- will be the focus for the rest of my talk, for its conceptual logic includes *ad hominem* address.

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At this point, I want to disambiguate *ad hominem* address from *ad hominem* argument. Once I have done that, I will explore how *ad hominem* address is part of relational reason, and so is part of our being fully, and so is part of philosophy, such that philosophy must be oriented in part by beauty in the mode of *ad hominem* address.

As we well know, *ad hominem* argument commits an informal logical fallacy. Rather than address the truth of claims or the validity of the argument the claims form, *ad hominem* argument attempts to show the unsoundness of an argument by showing that the person making the argument is somehow flawed. Perhaps he is stupid or deceitful, corrupt or hypocritical. An *ad hominem* argument might go: “You agree with that dork? He’s a hypocrite, did bad things, and took bribes on the side!” The idea is that a person’s argument is supposed to be bad, because the person is bad. And of course, this is fallacious. The badness of an argument is a property that depends on the logical form of

the argument or the truth of its premises. Bad people can make good arguments, and good people can make bad arguments.

I don't dispute that *ad hominem* arguments are bad news. *Ad hominem* address, however, is good news, at least when oriented properly by relational reason. *Ad hominem* address is not a form of argument, but a form of relation. It is the mode by which beauty can appear in a relationship. We may discover beauty in being with each other only because we address each other *ad hominem*. You might say *ad hominem* address is the mode through which the beauty of a person appears to you. When we address each other *ad hominem*, we relate person to person. Martin Buber called this relation the "I-You" relationship. Émmanuel Levinas called it the "face to face" relationship. In everyday terms, it is a personal relationship, which need not be intimate, but is anything but impersonal. When someone addresses you *ad hominem*, you see her person, and she sees you as a person.

So it should be clear that there is no need to conflate *ad hominem* address with *ad hominem* argument, although, interestingly, when someone makes an *ad hominem* argument, he does draw on *ad hominem* address. That is, he draws on seeing the other as a person, but then abstracts from the other person qualities or historical accidents that become misplaced as evidence for an argument's badness, when they have nothing to do with the argument as such. He conflates relational with theoretical reasoning.

Once we see *ad hominem* address as distinct from *ad hominem* argument, we can look more sympathetically at its role in our being. My claim is that *ad hominem* address is an essential mode of relational reason. It is the mode by which beauty can appear in a relationship, and even more basically, it is the mode without which relationship cannot

happen or form. As such, it is necessary for our being-with each other and so is necessary for our being fully. That in turn implies that it is necessary for philosophy, since philosophy is the search to be fully. In more simple terms, my idea is that *ad hominem* address marks one of the fundamental modes by which the search to be fully moves. It is a dynamic mode of philosophy, and philosophy without it is partially dead.

All of these inferences depend on establishing *ad hominem* address as an essential mode of relational reason, but that is not hard to do. The point of relational reason is being-with each other. Just as practical reason concludes in an action and theoretical reason concludes with a claim about the truth, so relational reason concludes with some form of being with each other. This form could be a thought, as when I draw close to you in my mind. Or it could be an action, as when I cup your shoulder with my hand for a second in a gesture of camaraderie. Or it could be a feeling, as when I feel amazed inside myself at who you are. In reasoning relationally, I reach out to be with you in some way and complete my reasoning by being with you in some way.

Now there is no way for me to be with you if I do not see you as a person and if I do not relate personally to you. If I hold myself back impersonally, I do not relate to you. And if I refuse to see you as a person, I will never see you. But this personal mode of relating is *ad hominem* address. It is address “to the man”. And I have simply brought out that no true address “to the man” is possible if I do not address “the man” *as* a man myself. I can’t speak to you, the man, if I don’t address you man to man. Climbing out of this old gender trap in language (which, ironically, blocked *ad hominem* address!), I translate the point as follows: I can’t speak to you, the person, if I don’t address you person to person.

That is *ad hominem* address. The point is: relational reason needs it.

Once we see *ad hominem* address's place in relational reason, we realize that it is an essential part of the process of being with each other. We can then also see how it is the mode in which beauty appears. Beauty is the value guiding relational reason, as truth guides theoretical reason and goodness guides practical reason. For truth to appear, it must appear in a proposition. For goodness to appear, it must appear in an action. And for beauty to appear, it must appear in being with each other. But the precise thing that opens up being with each other is *ad hominem* address –the person to person. And so, most precisely, addressing each other *ad hominem* is the mode by which beauty can appear in relationship. That means *ad hominem* address is not only essential to relational reason –it is the *locus* of beauty. Thus love moves around and through the *ad hominem*.

At this point, I have to watch time. My brief presentation must come to a close. I hope it is now clearer what addressing each other *ad hominem* is and why I think that it is essential to philosophy. We cannot search to be fully if we leave out person-to-person relationship, because being social is a key part of our being, and no wisdom will be complete without beauty.

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I started my talk with the Jesuit idea of *cura personalis* –care of the person. The object of *cura personalis* is personal growth. So I wondered whether we might critique philosophy using the idea of personal growth. Yet I realized almost immediately that such a critique would be external to philosophy, and I wondered whether *cura personalis* might be internal to philosophy. How could one argue that, if at all? My solution was to

examine the interpersonal dimension of philosophy, which I believe becomes perspicuous once we understand the role of relational reason in any account of our being fully. The interpersonal dimension of our being fully led to *ad hominem* address. The question now is: does *ad hominem* address and the relational reason surrounding it imply care of the person? If it does, *cura personalis* is internal to philosophy, and no classroom or conference pursuit can be fully philosophical without care of the person in it. So does *ad hominem* address and the relational reason surrounding it imply care of the person? I believe it does, although for my argument to work, personal growth must be the object of care of the person. Now, in the abstract, care of the person would seem to imply more than personal growth. For instance, I care for you when I worry about your health. At times, your health might come *before* your personal growth, as when cutting a trip short to Mount Everest is in the interest of your health, but not of your development as a person. Thus, it might seem that claiming personal growth as the object of *cura personalis* is too narrow.

What is really underneath this point is the link between care and the good. The object of care is the good, and we commonly think of our good as encompassing things like health as well as things like personal growth. So, because care seeks the good, we assume that care of the *person* seeks the person's good. Doesn't that include more than personal growth?

Yet what is the good of the person, strictly speaking? To answer this, we need to understand the kind "person". Thus, whether care of the person aims at personal growth depends on what the good is for the kind "person". What is the good for the kind "person"?

I believe it is to be a person. The *eudaimonia* of the kind “person” is the person’s being, the being of the person, which is to be a person. The question then is whether growing personally is to be a person.

And it seems clear that it is not. After all, growing personally is becoming more of a person, not being a person. Being a person involves more than growing personally, although I could not be the person I am without becoming who I am. Being who I am sometimes takes sticking to my beliefs, for instance, which is not the same as –and need not imply- growing personally. For even though we often do grow personally when our beliefs are tested, we could on some occasions simply need to stick to them without much thought in order to be who we are. I am thinking of matters of integrity here, as when a professional situation forces us to stick to our beliefs almost unconsciously. We don’t grow personally in doing so, but maintain an even keel. Yet we are being who we are.

At the same time, a person with no personal growth would not be a person. Part of being a person is growing. A person who never grows is dead inside. The nature of personhood implies developing personally –not all of the time, but some of the time. Here, then, we can say that the good of the kind “person” does imply personal growth, not all of the time, but some of the time.

This conclusion, though, is all I need to establish a connection between care of the person and personal growth. To see why, think about the times when care is needed. Care comes in when its object lacks. A human’s health suffers –care is needed. A situation is dangerous –we take care. Similarly, it seems to me that care of the person arises precisely when the person is at risk. But the person is at risk when the person’s being is at risk.

Something is needed to keep the person in being. And notwithstanding

what is needed in particular, whatever is needed in general must fall under the category of what makes a person become a person, because without it the person would not be. But that means that whatever is needed implies personal growth, for if the person does lack it –if her being is at risk- then meeting that lack will constitute her becoming a person again, that is, growing personally. There is a good reason why care of the person aims at personal growth: any situation that calls for care calls for personal growth.

Now that I have established that care of the person aims at personal growth, the question is whether *ad hominem* address does, too. If it does, then it is at the least a species of care of the person. To address each other *ad hominem* would then be to express care about each other.

Most precisely, *ad hominem* address aims at being with you. The point of relational reason is being with each other, and the person-to-person is the mode in which that point is reached. We are with each other in the mode of the person-to-person.

Being so, however, our personal relationship deepens. That is to say, being with each other makes our personal relationship grow. The question then is whether we grow personally when our personal relationship grows. It seems that we do. To grow in my being with you is necessarily a part of my growing. In other words, I grow personally when I grow in my personal relationships.

So we can say that although *ad hominem* address does not aim at personal growth, it does imply personal growth as a result of its aim. If we address each other *ad hominem*, we will grow personally, at least in some small measure.

This point is brought out when we recall that the value guiding *ad hominem* address is beauty. Moreover, the person-to-person is the *locus* of beauty, the place where

beauty appears. In other words, when we address each other *ad hominem*, we should relate in light of beauty, just as we should act in light of goodness and think in light of truth. And we can relate in this manner, because the person-to-person is the place where beauty appears.

Now in the presence of beauty, we deepen as persons, grow downward so to speak, even if we don't always grow up. Beauty can drive us mad, but that madness opens up our depths. Just so, we grow downward. And growing downward opens us up to the possibility of growing up more than we would if we hadn't first grown downward, that is, tapped into our depths.

Beauty also deepens our personal relationships. Just as beauty makes us grow downward, so does it make our relationships grow downward, tapping into their depths, by tapping into ours. Once we think about beauty and the way it should appear in being with each other oriented by the guiding value of relational reason, we see clearly that growing in our personal relationships does imply growing personally, too.

So *ad hominem* address implies personal growth. My addressing you does not intend to care about you, but it has the same effect as care of the person. It is, you might say, unconsciously caring. Unintentionally, I care about you. I find this a welcome result, a way that our left hand does not know what our right hand is doing, a way that we give without focusing on the fact that we do.

Cura personalis and philosophy are intimately linked, not just historically, but in their conceptual logic. To engage in philosophy fully is to end up caring about people, and more specifically, it is to end up promoting personal growth. I repeat: this is part of the

personalis unintentionally through person-to-person connection is not worthy of the name, “philosophy”.

Syracuse, N.Y., April 12th, 2009

Appendix

Grammar of being

Form of reason	Mode of knowing	Form of knowledge	Point	Value (being as)
Relational	Knowing others	Familiarity	Being-with	The beautiful
Theoretical	Knowing that	Knowledge	Truths	The true
Practical	Knowing how	Know how	Deeds	The good

Developmentally, relational reason provides the motive to live. But all three are co primary. Being is meaningless without any one of them.

The *ad hominem* is part of the grammar of knowing others, i.e., the mode of knowing in relational reason.