
Briefly, On Brevity

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1. INTRODUCTION

Barry Smith's reputation as a scholar is, of course, indisputable.¹ But in a Festschrift such as this, aimed at exploring and celebrating the remarkable *person* behind the remarkable scholar, we should also address a lesser known (yet no less significant) dimension of Barry's life and work: his teaching and mentoring.

I had the privilege of studying philosophy and ontology with Barry for several years at Buffalo, and I completed my Ph.D. under his supervision. In many, many ways, he is a stellar teacher and mentor, inspiring the kind of learning that has in turn shaped my own life and work. Through this short paper, and by my co-editor's special request, I will recount just one of the many deep and important insights that Barry offers to his students. Briefly then, let us consider his lessons on brevity.

2. THE OPPOSITE OF BREVITY

Now, philosophers and non-philosophers alike will know of our field's long-standing reputation for whatever might be the *opposite* of brevity.² One could even argue that this is philosophy's disciplinary bias. And so rather than seeking concision, we tend to *draw out*, through extended discussion, our philosophical analyses and arguments.

This can be a great thing, certainly; for as we often tell ourselves, the rest of the world seems predisposed to dispense with philosophical questions far too quickly. But our bias to verbosity also produces unfortunate communication barriers for those outside the field. Our colleagues, our students,

even our friends and family members cannot understand why we do not simply *get to the point*. For example, here is a passage that—forgive me!—I inflicted upon my own students earlier this term, courtesy of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804).

The practical imperative will therefore be the following: Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means. (Kant, 1785/1993, p. 429)

Kant, for sure, is trying to capture complex ideas with his words here, and the situation is further complicated by the translation to English from the original German. But if this is the type of sentence that philosophers compose when given free range to express our ideas, then we can see why our colleagues, students, and others might find our work inaccessible.

3. BREVITY

But for as long as I have known him, Barry has seemed unaffected by this philosopher's bias, exhibiting instead a kind of logical elegance in his work. From our very first meeting, my admissions interview at Buffalo, I was struck by the remarkable clarity of his thinking and speaking. Cutting to the chase, he asked me almost immediately what dissertation topic I planned to pursue. Caught off guard with no clear answer yet myself, I bumbled through something about cognitive science and ethics, my principal research interests at

the time. Barry kindly helped to straighten out my response, simultaneously demonstrating both the value of brevity and the excellence of his teaching. After a few more minutes of cheerful conversation, I think that we both sensed what was inevitable: I would eventually be writing an ontology dissertation with him.

In the years that followed I took every seminar Barry offered. When that was not enough, I loaded up on a series of tutorials to which he graciously consented. By the time I was ABD, I was even auditing his undergraduate classes, looking for (and finding) ways in which I could improve my own teaching. Barry's classroom performances were brilliant, but there would be many more office-hour discussions as well, each one as warm, effective, and efficient as the first. In my heart, I worried that Barry was too busy for this, with too many other, more important projects and colleagues and students. And yet he always found time to answer my silly questions and keep me on track, and always with his characteristic brevity, clarity, and good cheer.

Barry's feedback on seminar papers also reflected and reinforced these important lessons. Looking back through the pieces I asked him to read, I can cringe at my weak arguments and dreary prose. And yet Barry ploughed through it all, providing smart suggestions that helped to turn my first drafts into my first publications. Long-winded sections would be flagged for revision: "bla bla," or "yeah yeah, get on with it." Weak arguments? "Assertion is cheap." General disorder? "Sounds confused," "sloppy," or simply "doesn't make sense." Sure, it stung a bit, but his spirit was kind and supportive, and *he was always right*. So, Barry's concise notes never failed to make my papers better, my arguments tighter and stronger. As a newcomer to philosophy, I could not have asked for a more patient and helpful reader, and to this day I still find myself recalling his wise advice.

These themes extended, in noteworthy ways, to the online world as well. During my studies at Buffalo each of Barry's seminars featured a concurrent email discussion list, which allowed students to continue our conversations between class meetings. The pace here was often frantic, and our contributions (like our paper drafts) were often rambling and confused. And yet Barry somehow kept up with everything, correcting us with one-line replies that he crafted when he probably should have been sleeping. It was, again, an impressive demonstration, and one that he continues to perform when I pester him with correspondence today.

Eventually, I came to see how fundamental these logic and communication lessons could be, and how widely we could apply them. Barry's most powerful papers and presentations,

for instance, are remarkable examples of clarity and brevity. Indeed, his unique brand of ontology would probably be impossible for the more typical philosopher who is challenged to connect with those outside the field. For Barry, brevity provides a clear link to others, and to other academic disciplines. And thus, the principles of ontology, like the principles of logic and good writing, become very useful in a very wide range of applications. Barry himself has used them to make significant contributions to biology, computer science, geography, legal studies, and medicine (among other fields). But we can also use them (as I have) to study ethics, human communication, and urban design and planning, and we can apply them to curriculum development projects, grant proposals, job applications, and so on. An appreciation for brevity is, then, a remarkable gift that Barry's teaching helps to inspire for his students.

4. BREVITY AND THE DIGITAL MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Finally, we should recognize that Barry's lessons are especially useful in the digital world, a space that can pose particular challenges to philosophers. Nearly all of us now live and work in a digital media environment that encourages—and in some cases requires—brief messages in a wide variety of forms. Brevity may in fact be a key feature of electronic media, demonstrated first by the terse text typical of the electrical telegraph. (Postman, 1985, pp. 64–71; Wills, 1992, pp. 169–175) But in the digital age, we place an especially high value on brevity in all kinds of content.

Thus, the language of social media (for instance) is often restricted in length, whether for technical reasons or simply through user expectation and convention. Some social platforms dispense with language entirely, focusing instead on visual imagery, even imagery that is by its very design temporary and ephemeral. These forces now shape our non-digital exchanges as well; at a recent conference I found myself giving a talk in the Japanese pecha kucha format, where 20 slides automatically advance every 20 seconds for a total runtime of just 6 minutes, 40 seconds. American communication theorist Neil Postman (1931–2003), describing television's electronic media environment, calls such a space "a peek-a-boo world, where now this event, now that, pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again." (Postman, 1985, pp. 77) The "peek-a-boo" character that Postman sees in television is even clearer today in cases of (say) SMS text messaging or Twitter.

Philosophers, with our bias to verbosity, may be especially ill suited for such a media environment. If we tend to *extend* discussion with careful, thoughtful language, our analyses and arguments can lose their impact in the world of digital peek-a-boo. But Barry’s lessons about clarity and brevity can help to solve this problem. Indeed, from his papers and presentations to his editorial notes to his late-night email messages, he provides models of clarity and brevity that philosophers everywhere can use to reach and reason with colleagues, students, and yes, even friends and family members. As a graduate student, I remember finding this dimension of Barry’s work striking, even if I lacked the language to articulate it. But looking back now, I see that Barry’s brevity reflected his prescient mastery of our new media environment. At a time when many philosophers approached email messages as if they were postal letters from the 19th century, Barry’s email read like a text message from the future. That he could do this without sacrificing the sound reasoning essential to our academic work makes his lessons about philosophizing in the digital media environment even more important; brevity *can* be compatible with logical argument.

5. CONCLUSION

I will close with one last anecdote here. After the whirlwind that was my dissertation defence, I sent Barry an anxious late-night email message asking for additional feedback. His response was characteristically brief, making it all the more memorable.

You did excellently.

I am duly proud.

Naturally, this stands as my favourite bit of feedback, and so it is a special pleasure to return the sentiment here: Barry, you have done excellently. We are duly proud of all that you have accomplished, and we are most grateful for all of your help and support, as a friend, colleague, mentor, and teacher. Cheers!

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, “Social Orders: A Foreword from the Editors of this Volume,” “Biography of Barry Smith,” and the Appendix in this issue.
- 2 Even the terms that describe brevity’s opposite feel awkward and unwieldy: “verbosity,” “prolixity,” “wordiness,” “long-windedness,” etc.

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