

Final Thoughts: Rejoinder to Phillip Hansen

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As I use the term, philosophy is critical thinking about fundamental matters, where “critical” includes identifying and evaluating justifications for beliefs about fundamental matters or proposing and defending such justifications. Like the notion of philosophy itself, what counts as fundamental is also contestable, but Phillip Hansen’s characterization of its being “about how humans ought to live, about what is good for them” is an apt example. Macpherson certainly does attend to this and similar topics and he castigates his contemporary political scientists for neglecting them.

At one limit, critical thinking involves justification by reference to metaphysical or ethical first principles. At another limit, it challenges the existence or knowability of first principles or foundations. And there are a variety of intermediate positions. The only place I find in Macpherson’s writings where he explicitly expresses a view at a philosophical level is the endorsement cited above of a thesis in the field of metaethics about value judgments being neither true nor false. I speculate that the reason Macpherson does not pursue the problematic consequences of this thesis is that he was not concerned with questions of philosophical grounding. The general point is that one can take positions on fundamental questions without attempting critically to ground them. This is what I understand Macpherson to be doing in his historical explications and his evaluations of possessive-individualist and developmental-democratic values.

Some commentators regard what I see as Macpherson’s philosophical agnosticism as a disadvantage and, for those who demand basic grounds for a theoretical or political opinion, it no doubt is. However, there are advantages to philosophical abstinence. By not tying political theories to putative philosophical grounds Macpherson avoids getting embroiled in intra-philosophical controversies. It also allows those with differing philosophical views to agree with him politically in spite of their differences. One need not subscribe to utilitarianism, deontology, natural law or some other

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ethical theory to be in accord with Macpherson's appraisals of the potentials he designates truly human. Philosophical abstinence has also facilitated support for Macpherson by members of diverse philosophical schools: Frankfurt philosophers (as Hansen notes), Existentialists, neo-Aristotelians, post-structuralists, neo-Hegelians, Marxists, and indeed, Analytic philosophers (and, Phillip, despite your categorization, I do not consider myself either an Analyst or an anti-Analyst, though I'm hard pressed to say what kind of a philosopher, if any, I should regard myself).

I confess to being confused about just how, on Hansen's account, Macpherson's theories are supposed to involve philosophical views or about what the suppression of the views by him is. Perhaps the stands Macpherson takes on fundamental questions regarding a fully democratic society, human potentials, needs and wants, and the like are taken as themselves philosophical stances; though on my understanding of philosophy, they are not such until they are conjoined with attempts at basic-level justification. Macpherson certainly does think that a critique of possessive individualism and endorsement of a developmental-democratic alternative are implied in streams of liberal thought, and Hansen suggests that what in the book he calls an "immanent critique" of the history of liberal thought to expose such implication is itself a philosophical exercise. But, on the face of it, a student of the history of ideas should be able identify tensions and contradictions within a body of thought without employing some philosophical theory.

It might be thought that philosophical explanation is called for about how it is possible for apparently self-contained political traditions to admit of conflicting potentials. This, to reiterate an admittedly opaque comment in my review, is one way Macpherson's theories might lend themselves to philosophical interrogation. Noting that "everything actual is possible" (Kant, 2003: 250), Immanuel Kant undertook in his transcendental deductions to uncover the grounds of possibility for what is actual in morality, science and the appreciation of beauty. An interesting job for philosophers would be to try discovering analogous grounds for some of Macpherson's political theories. But one need not pursue such an endeavour to understand and make use of the theories. For this purpose, why not stick to the realm of the actual?

Let me conclude by softening an assertion made in my review that Phillip Hansen's effort to make Macpherson into a Frankfurt (or any other kind of) philosopher is misguided. While I continue to worry that if this is a main focus of interpretation, it detracts from the specifically political usefulness of his work, the endeavour is nonetheless thought-provoking, and it contributes to imaginative thought about Macpherson. Let a hundred flowers bloom.

Reference

Immanuel Kant. 2003 [1788]. *The Critique of Pure Reason*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.