Does philosophy have a future?

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Anyone who claims that the writings of philosophers are pointless or unnecessary is immediately accused of philosophical naïveté. And so in order to avoid or counter the charge one has to do a bit of philosophy. Likewise, it’s difficult to articulate an anti-metaphysical stance without getting bogged down in something that looks a lot like metaphysics. In a sense, you’ve lost the battle before you’ve even begun.

However, what I wish to do here is not to prove or demonstrate anything but merely to articulate — tentatively and reflectively — some doubts and reservations I have about the nature and role of academic philosophy today.

Just to be clear: I accept that some of the questions which are seen as basic to philosophy and metaphysics are real and possibly important questions which can and should be thought about in serious ways. But I don’t know that this conviction necessarily entails a commitment to the institutional philosophical status quo.

There are, of course, different views regarding the scope and nature of philosophy and metaphysics and the relationship between the two. (The closeness of the relationship between metaphysics and physics is also a subject of dispute.) But traditionally metaphysics was seen, and is still seen by some, as a — or even the — core philosophical sub-discipline. I used to see it like this, in fact, but these remarks are not predicated on that assumption.

One of problems with philosophy is that — unlike in science — virtually nothing within the discipline is ever definitively resolved. Old approaches are routinely exposed as logically flawed or inadequate. But the usual pattern is that someone then comes along and finds that the original view can be salvaged with some small modifications and/or that the critique is also flawed.

Even something approaching Cartesian dualism has been resurrected from time to time. Karl Popper endorsed such a view, and he was not the last. As David Berlinski (whose PhD was in philosophy) put it in a discussion of consciousness: “Philosophers are confounded — by their irrelevance if nothing else. A few have been seen administering a number of discreet kicks to what appears to be the corpse of dualism: Get up, you fat fool, I need you.” [1]

The general belief within philosophy is that the process of collegial debate, discussion and review leads to a refinement or clarification of views and so to a progress of sorts. Refinement, yes. Clarification, I’m not so sure.

Often this process can all too plausibly be interpreted in one of two ways (or both — the ideas are not mutually exclusive): it can be seen as a cover for what is essentially an ideological battle; or merely as a competitive game, self-perpetuating and futile.
With respect to the former point, it is at one level extremely difficult to demonstrate that a particular philosopher’s arguments are influenced by his or her ideological or religious convictions; but on another level it is blindingly obvious that, say, Christians or hardline physicalists are motivated to find and defend arguments which accord with their beliefs. Likewise with social and political beliefs. But playing the philosophical game involves ignoring these issues (and so potential sources of bias) and any mention of them is considered irrelevant — just not philosophy. Such an approach reflects, I think, an outdated view of cognition and one that puts far too much faith in discursive reason.

The view that much philosophy is self-perpetuating and futile, a game of sorts which ends not when some kind of “truth” or resolution is finally arrived at but when people just get tired of that particular game and move on to another, has often been more or less acknowledged by philosophers.

Here is A.C. Grayling introducing a book comprised of some of his old papers on metaphysical themes. He writes:

“All the papers are of their time. Looking back at some of the earlier of them I am struck by how far the literature on each topic has accumulated, in some cases leaving the issues quite behind though they are by no means satisfactorily resolved. There are fashions and trends in philosophical interest, changes in which are frequently induced not by solutions and resolutions to problem areas, but by exhaustion of the resources and language for dealing with them.” [2]

Somewhat amusingly, he admits that his work on the realism-anti-realism question “will seem at first to strike this note” but that, as he didn’t agree with “the terms of the debate as it was then and still is commonly discussed” his contributions, at least, remain “direct and fresh.” (The thought occurs to me that his erstwhile antagonists may well see their own contributions in similar terms.)

More radical critiques of philosophical practice have, of course, been made. By Nietzsche, for example. Or Wittgenstein. Or Heidegger. Or Richard Rorty.

Rorty, for example, agreed with Pascal Engel’s characterization of the history of 20th-century analytic philosophy as “a sort of battlefield opposing various ‘realist’ and ‘anti-realist’ conceptions of truth,” but clearly tended to the view that “the battlefield has been trampled to a quagmire.” [3]

Another major 20th-century thinker who began his career in the analytic tradition and moved on into other areas was Isaiah Berlin. Others gave up philosophy for science.

In the end, I think a suitably perspectival view is called for: individuals decide for themselves which intellectual activities (if any) they wish to pursue and which they deem — from their own point of view at least — to be futile.

This kind of relativism — as distinct from the sort of relativism which puts mythical thinking on the same level as scientific and logical thinking, for example — is benign. It harms no one and also tends to discourage proselytizing.
My general position is that I look to the sciences for knowledge of how the world works and don’t really feel that professional philosophers can tell me anything I want to know. I know a bit of philosophy myself, and it’s possible I’m taking this knowledge for granted and undervaluing it. But I just don’t have the sense that it amounts to a coherent discipline.

Philosophy I have doubts about, but not (certain forms of) philosophizing. Philosophizing I see simply as a form of meta-thinking. Meta-thinking about mathematics and the scientific disciplines (and other disciplines, such as history) is done as a matter of course by practitioners of those disciplines when they reflect, for example, on their particular discipline’s scope and nature, or the meaning of its key concepts, or its relationship to cognate areas. And the value of this kind of thinking is self-evident.

But areas like metaphysics (when detached from the study of physics) or epistemology (when detached from relevant sciences) are in my view more problematic.

It’s clear also that areas relating to human values such as ethics pose problems. And though I see value in applying reason to ethical questions and dilemmas and even in seeing them within the context of various theoretical ethical frameworks, I resist the idea that normative ethics can operate as a rigorous intellectual discipline, if only because questions about the rightness or wrongness of certain actions or the relative importance of particular virtues or character traits are not purely intellectual questions.

Though there is educational value in the sorts of courses traditionally taught under the banner of philosophy, other subjects — like mathematics and the sciences and mastering one’s native language — are clearly (in my opinion) more important. Which leaves philosophy to compete with the likes of literature, foreign languages, music and history.

Part of the problem is that philosophy today lacks, as I suggested previously, coherence as a discipline. Arguably it had more coherence when it was perceived — as it was until the fall of German idealism about a century ago — to have a metaphysical core. Metaphysics thus conceived was important not only in itself but also as a source of and justification for ethical and political and aesthetic doctrines. And the metaphysics, as Whitehead famously asserted, often harked back to Plato.

I realize that this is just one strand (albeit a major one) of the Western philosophical tradition. But it was perhaps the only major strand that was never going to morph into a science or (like logic) a formal or technical discipline.

For so much of what was considered philosophy in past eras has become science, leaving the old discipline looking to many eyes rather sad and depleted. Psychology and related disciplines were seen as philosophical as recently as the early 20th century but of course no longer are. Even logic is claimed by mathematics. And argument and reasoning and debate — which are often put forward as essentially philosophical — have been taught at high school level for centuries as a component of the English (or other primary language) curriculum.

One other area of concern relates to the complex relationship which continues to exist between religion and philosophy.
Many of philosophy’s iconic figures were religious. Plato was heavily influenced by the Pythagoreans; Plato’s Socrates, still a model for many philosophers, not only believed that concepts have some kind of essential meaning, but also clearly had supernatural beliefs. (He was guided by his daimon, for example.) Even Aristotle’s thought is strongly influenced by what are generally (and I think rightly) seen as completely discredited teleological and other metaphysical notions. Descartes was a believing Catholic. Spinoza was a mystical thinker. Leibniz was religious. Kant’s writings are deeply marked by his Pietism. Hegel was a Christian. Wittgenstein was a Christian and a supernaturalist in the manner of Pascal or Dostoevsky.

The philosophical canon includes of course many skeptical as well as religious or Platonistic thinkers. But often they were only writing to counter essentially religious doctrines.

And even the very notion of a canon is suspect, suggesting a religion-substitute (like the progressive 19th-century idea promoted by Matthew Arnold of replacing the Christian scriptures with secular literary works).

Canons are also necessarily contingent and arbitrary. What do all these people we happen to call philosophers have in common that will allow us to meaningfully distinguish them from scientists or other kinds of intellectual?

Philosophy can be seen not only to have arisen from religion in a historical sense but also to be — as a modern, independent discipline — still strangely dependent on it. There are funding issues involved here and little doubt that academic philosophy is cleverly exploited by churches (and other ideological groupings for that matter) [4], but perhaps even more important than this is the extent to which the agenda of philosophy has been determined, directly or indirectly, by religious ideas.

Sure, sections of the philosophical community seek to undermine religious belief, but often the topics discussed (in popular forums and undergraduate contexts especially) relate in some way to religious ideas. Examples that come immediately to mind include Euthyphro-type arguments against a divine command view of ethics, classical arguments for the existence of God, and free will (the very term is taken from Western theology via the Late Latin liberum arbitrium). More sophisticated thinking in philosophy, of course, engages with science and advanced logic and mostly leaves the theological trappings behind, but the origins of many of the key problems still lie, I would suggest, in religious modes of thought.

Whether this means that there would be no philosophy or just a very different kind of philosophy in societies which had lost all meaningful connections with their deep cultural and religious roots I am not sure, but there are certainly many examples in Western history of philosophy thriving during periods when religion was also thriving (albeit often in a creative tension with religion). Both the Vienna Circle and the Polish logicians of the early-to-mid-20th century flourished in the context of broader cultures in which traditional religious beliefs and practices jostled with newer forms of spirituality and mysticism.

Likewise, the philosophical ferment in France in the latter part of the 19th and early 20th century was to a large extent precipitated by the rise of the so-called Modernist movement within the Catholic Church and the clash between Modernism and more traditional approaches to religious thinking. For example, Pierre Duhem — a
French conventionalist whose views influenced the Vienna Circle as well as Quine — can only be properly understood when he is seen in the context of late 19th-century France.

It takes a while to get one’s bearings when one is studying eras other than one’s own, especially where (as is very often the case) religious commitments are implicit if not deliberately hidden or disguised. Duhem’s private correspondence, for instance, clearly shows that he was driven in his philosophical work by a passionate commitment to traditional religion. He saw himself primarily as an apologist, using the secular (philosophical) language of those seeking (as he saw it) to undermine traditional religion in order to counter those threats.

You could argue that there is no necessary connection between Duhem’s philosophical ideas and his motivations and religious affiliations. But it seems very clear that the idea that convention or convenience (convenance) plays a large role in determining the shape and nature of scientific theories can be used (as it often was) explicitly or implicitly to defend religious and other non-scientific outlooks or views of the world. Seen historically, French conventionalism — whatever its intrinsic merits as a general framework for discussing scientific and mathematical ideas — was devised by religious thinkers (such as Duhem and Édouard Le Roy) as a defense of religion or religion-like ideologies. (Le Roy’s views prefigured those of his friend and associate, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, by the way. Both men’s views were pretty wild and mystical.)

Not all conventionalist thinkers or those who drew on them took this line, of course. Quine and most Vienna Circle members certainly didn’t. But many associates of the Circle did take this approach, sometimes explicitly identifying with the French tradition. [5]

The case of conventionalism illustrates some of the ideological and religious complexities which can underlie philosophical activity, but my general claims about the relationship between philosophy and religion remain tentative and speculative.

I am definitely not claiming that philosophy is necessarily religiously oriented, only that it thrives in a broader environment that is. Why this may be I cannot say, but I am increasingly inclined to the view that the presence in a society of a critical mass of people who are committed to religious or mystical ideas tends to create a space for non-scientific but rationally-informed discourse about “the nature of things.”

Many other periods of Western intellectual history could be cited in support of this general view but the late-19th and early-20th century offer a particularly rich and fertile source of illustrative examples, especially, I would say, from amongst the ranks of the Vienna Circle thinkers, their precursors and associates. And it is certainly not implausible to suggest that all that marvelous creative intellectual activity was in some sense a response to various religious or otherwise supernaturalist movements which had built up considerable momentum over the course of the 19th century.

But though the idea that philosophy may be, as it were, parasitic upon religion challenges what has become the standard view of philosophy as a discrete, self-contained and entirely secular discipline, it does not entail a belief that the discipline is doomed. If it is indeed doomed, it is doomed for other reasons, because religion is certainly not going to disappear any time soon.
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[4] This is not a well-documented area, but here is something I posted last year which includes relevant excerpts from a piece by Nathan Schneider on the broader topic of the Templeton Foundation.

[5] For example, Louis Rougier, who was the only significant French thinker to have strong links with the Vienna Circle, had deep roots in conventionalism and was more sympathetic to religious modes of thought than most of his Austrian and German associates. Also the Polish philosopher-logicians Jan Lukasiewicz and Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz were both influenced by the French tradition, and both had strong mystical or religious convictions which colored their writings on epistemology and science.

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