The history of Western philosophy can be presented in a number of ways. It can be told in terms of periods — ancient, medieval and modern. We can divide it into rival traditions (empiricism versus rationalism, analytic versus Continental), or into various core areas (metaphysics, epistemology, ethics). It can also, of course, be viewed through the critical lens of gender or racial exclusion, as a discipline almost entirely fashioned for and by white European men.

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Yet despite the richness and variety of these accounts, all of them pass over a momentous turning point: the locating of philosophy within a modern institution (the research university) in the late 19th century. This institutionalization of philosophy made it into a discipline that could be seriously pursued only in an academic setting. This fact represents one of the enduring failures of contemporary philosophy.

Take this simple detail: Before its migration to the university, philosophy had never had a central home. Philosophers could be found anywhere — serving as diplomats, living off pensions, grinding lenses, as well as within a university. Afterward, if they were “serious” thinkers, the expectation was that philosophers would inhabit the research university. Against the inclinations of Socrates, philosophers became experts like other disciplinary specialists. This occurred even as they taught their students the virtues of Socratic wisdom, which highlights the role of the philosopher as the non-expert, the questioner, the gadfly.

Philosophy, then, as the French thinker Bruno Latour would have it, was “purified” — separated from society in the process of modernization. This purification occurred in response to at least two events. The first was the development of the natural sciences, as a field of study clearly distinct from philosophy, circa 1870, and the appearance of the social sciences in the decade thereafter. Before then, scientists were comfortable thinking of themselves as “natural philosophers” — philosophers who studied nature; and the predecessors of social scientists had thought of themselves as “moral philosophers.”

The second event was the placing of philosophy as one more discipline alongside these sciences within the modern research university. A result was that philosophy, previously the queen of the disciplines, was displaced, as the natural and social sciences divided the world between them.

This is not to claim that philosophy had reigned unchallenged before the 19th century. The role of philosophy had shifted across the centuries and in different countries. But philosophy in the sense of a concern about who we are and how we should live had formed the core of the university since the church schools of the 11th century. Before the development of a scientific research culture, conflicts among philosophy, medicine, theology and law consisted of internecine battles rather than clashes across yawning cultural divides. Indeed, these older fields were widely believed to hang together in a grand unity of knowledge — a unity directed toward the goal of the good life. But this unity shattered
under the weight of increasing specialization by the turn of the 20th century.

Early 20th-century philosophers thus faced an existential quandary: With the natural and social sciences mapping out the entirety of both theoretical as well as institutional space, what role was there for philosophy? A number of possibilities were available: Philosophers could serve as 1) synthesizers of academic knowledge production; 2) formalists who provided the logical undergirding for research across the academy; 3) translators who brought the insights of the academy to the world at large; 4) disciplinary specialists who focused on distinctively philosophical problems in ethics, epistemology, aesthetics and the like; or 5) as some combination of some or all of these.

If philosophy was going to have a secure place in the academy, it needed its own discrete domain, its own arcane language, its own standards of success and its own specialized concerns.

There might have been room for all of these roles. But in terms of institutional realities, there seems to have been no real choice. Philosophers needed to embrace the structure of the modern research university, which consists of various specialties demarcated from one another. That was the only way to secure the survival of their newly demarcated, newly purified discipline. “Real” or “serious” philosophers had to be identified, trained and credentialed. Disciplinary philosophy became the reigning standard for what would count as proper philosophy.

This was the act of purification that gave birth to the concept of philosophy most of us know today. As a result, and to a degree rarely acknowledged, the institutional imperative of the university has come to drive the theoretical agenda. If philosophy was going to have a secure place in the academy, it needed its own discrete domain, its own arcane language, its own standards of success and its own specialized concerns.

Having adopted the same structural form as the sciences, it’s no wonder philosophy fell prey to physics envy and feelings of inadequacy. Philosophy adopted the scientific modus operandi of knowledge production, but failed to match the sciences in terms of making progress in describing the world. Much has been made of this inability of philosophy to match the cognitive success of the sciences. But what has passed unnoticed is philosophy’s all-too-successful aping of the institutional form of the sciences. We, too, produce research articles. We, too, are judged by the same coin of the realm: peer-reviewed products. We, too, develop sub-specializations far from the comprehension of the person on the street. In all of these ways we are so very “scientific.”

Our claim, then, can be put simply: Philosophy should never have been purified. Rather than being seen as a problem, “dirty hands” should have been understood as the native condition of philosophic thought — present everywhere, often interstitial, essentially interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary in nature. Philosophy is a mangle. The philosopher’s hands were never clean and were never meant to be.

There is another layer to this story. The act of purification accompanying the creation of the modern research university was not just about differentiating realms of knowledge. It was also about divorcing knowledge from virtue. Though it seems foreign to us now, before purification the philosopher (and natural philosopher) was assumed to be morally superior to other sorts of people. The 18th-century thinker Joseph Priestley wrote “a Philosopher ought to be something greater and better than another man.” Philosophy, understood as the love of wisdom, was seen as a vocation, like the priesthood. It required significant moral virtues (foremost among these were integrity and selflessness), and the pursuit of wisdom in turn further inculcated those virtues. The study of philosophy elevated those who pursued it. Knowing and being good were intimately linked. It was widely understood that the point of philosophy was to become good rather than simply to collect or produce knowledge.
As the historian Steven Shapin has noted, the rise of disciplines in the 19th century changed all this. The implicit democracy of the disciplines ushered in an age of “the moral equivalence of the scientist” to everyone else. The scientist’s privileged role was to provide the morally neutral knowledge needed to achieve our goals, whether good or evil. This put an end to any notion that there was something uplifting about knowledge. The purification made it no longer sensible to speak of nature, including human nature, in terms of purposes and functions. By the late 19th century, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche had proved the failure of philosophy to establish any shared standard for choosing one way of life over another. This is how Alasdair MacIntyre explained philosophy’s contemporary position of insignificance in society and marginality in the academy. There was a brief window when philosophy could have replaced religion as the glue of society; but the moment passed. People stopped listening as philosophers focused on debates among themselves.

Once knowledge and goodness were divorced, scientists could be regarded as experts, but there are no morals or lessons to be drawn from their work. Science derives its authority from impersonal structures and methods, not the superior character of the scientist. The individual scientist is no different from the average Joe; he or she has, as Shapin has written, “no special authority to pronounce on what ought to be done.” For many, science became a paycheck, and the scientist became a “de-moralized” tool enlisted in the service of power, bureaucracy and commerce.

Here, too, philosophy has aped the sciences by fostering a culture that might be called “the genius contest.” Philosophic activity devolved into a contest to prove just how clever one can be in creating or destroying arguments. Today, a hyperactive productivist churn of scholarship keeps philosophers chained to their computers. Like the sciences, philosophy has largely become a technical enterprise, the only difference being that we manipulate words rather than genes or chemicals. Lost is the once common-sense notion that philosophers are seeking the good life — that we ought to be (in spite of our failings) model citizens and human beings. Having become specialists, we have lost sight of the whole. The point of philosophy now is to be smart, not good. It has been the heart of our undoing.

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