

What's Wrong with Contemporary Philosophy?

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I

Philosophy in the West now divides into three parts – Analytic Philosophy, Continental Philosophy and History of Philosophy.

Analytic Philosophy (AP), although it comes in many varieties, has four striking properties. First, it is cultivated with every appearance of theoretical rigour. Second, its practitioners do not, by and large, believe that philosophy is or can be a science, i.e., they do not believe that it can add to the stock of positive human knowledge. Third, the philosophers who until very recently were the most influential models in the pursuit of philosophy as a theoretical enterprise – Chisholm, Davidson, Armstrong, Putnam, Kripke, Searle... – have no obvious successors. Finally, AP has succeeded in the institutional task of turning out increasing numbers of highly trained, articulate and intelligent young philosophers. Each of these properties reflects a relatively uncontroversial empirical claim.

Continental Philosophy (CP) comes in almost as many varieties as does AP but is always decidedly anti-theoretical. This is particularly true of those varieties which sport the name "Theory", but it holds in general of all those CP philosophical traditions in which political goals are more or less pre-eminent. The heroes of CP – Heidegger, Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida – also belong to the past and they, too, have no obvious successors.

The History of Philosophy (HP) is pursued by both analytic philosophers and their Continental *consoeurs*. In Continental Europe – with the exception of Scandinavia and Poland – philosophy is, in large measure, just the history of philosophy. In the Anglosaxophone world most philosophers are not historians of philosophy. The almost total identification of philosophy with its history in Continental Europe reflects massive scepticism about any theoretical ambitions on the part of philosophy. These claims are also uncontroversial, as an examination of the publications of philosophers in Continental Europe easily shows.

How is it possible for so many analytic philosophers to pursue philosophy in a more or less rigorous and always theoretical way and yet believe neither that philosophy can be a science nor that it can add to the stock of positive human knowledge? Sometimes this combination is due to a conviction that philosophy can never be other than aporetic. Sometimes it is due to the belief that philosophy can aspire at most to negative results. Sometimes it is due to the belief that philosophy's final goal is not theoretical – however much theory may enter in along the way – but practical, for example, therapeutic. Sometimes it is due to caution; sometimes to self-deception; and sometimes to the insidious influence of Kant.

II

Perhaps the most striking illustration of these claims is provided by the fields of metaphysics and ontology which, with logic, constitute the heart of theoretical philosophy. Although metaphysics and ontology have always been part of philosophy, and are perhaps more popular within AP today than ever before, they are still, there, the object of a scepticism which does not apply to epistemology or even to practical philosophy. The source of this scepticism is not difficult to locate. If you think that philosophy is or can be a science, then metaphysics and ontology clearly deserve their traditional central place within philosophy. If you are sceptical about philosophy's scientific ambitions, your scepticism will be at its strongest in connection with metaphysics and ontology.

Suppose we say that ontology is the study of what there might be and metaphysics of what there is. Then metaphysics is clearly inseparable from empirical science. But it is thereby also inseparable from an interest in the real world. Such an interest, it might naturally be assumed, will extend for example to an interest in the metaphysics of boundaries, such as the boundaries between death and life or between health and sickness, or to the metaphysics of quantities and qualities, of powers and of functions, or indeed to the metaphysics of any one of a number of domains which are today of theoretical interest in the world outside philosophy.

But this interest in the real world is not, as it happens, a characteristic of analytic ontology and metaphysics. Consider, for example, the metaphysics of social objects and of social facts (of money and contracts, wills and corporations). The questions proper to this part of metaphysics might reasonably be thought to be of great interest for any philosophy, practical or theoretical, of political, social and cultural phenomena. But analytic metaphysics of the social world only

begins with the publication by John Searle in 1995 of *The Construction of Social Reality* and it has still gone little further than Searle.

Another example of the lack of interest in the real world in analytic ontology and metaphysics is provided by the sad story of current work in such fields as bioinformatics, artificial intelligence, and the so-called ‘Semantic Web’. Ontology and metaphysics ought surely to be acknowledged as of great importance in fields such as these.¹ In fact, however, philosophical confusion is the order of the day, because AP-philosophers with some knowledge of ontology, manifesting their *horror mundi*, have shown little interest in grappling with the problems thrown up by these fields, leaving it instead to philosophically naïve exponents of other disciplines to wreak ontological havoc. Philosophers, for their part, occupy themselves with in-house puzzles, ignorant of the damage their neglect is wreaking in the wider world.

And what is true of ontology and metaphysics is true of other parts of AP, too. In the recent history of analytic philosophy a series of puzzles have been mooted, flared up as trends, attracted a significant portion of graduate students, then died down again with no obvious solution having established itself and the world not much the wiser. These problems include: paradigms, rules, family resemblance, criteria, ‘gavagai’, Gettier, rigid designation, natural kinds, functionalism, eliminativism, truth-minimalism, narrow vs wide content, possible worlds, externalism vs internalism, vagueness, four-dimensionalism, and, just now, presentism.

Although all the issues mentioned are genuinely philosophical ones, they are pursued, still on the basis of the attitude of *horror mundi*, among practitioners of philosophy whose horizon extends little further than the latest issue of *Mind* or *The Journal of Philosophy*. The AP system of professional philosophy encourages introspection and relative isolation because philosophy is not seen as directly relevant to the scientific concerns which prevail in the wider world. As a result, once the main options have been explored, which takes between two and ten years, it becomes hard to base a new career on contributing to the debate, and so interest shifts elsewhere, on to the next trend. The result is a trail of unresolved problems. The problems are not unsolvable, nor are they unimportant, but the attempts to solve them are insufficiently constrained by matters outside philosophy conceived in a narrow and incestuous way. They are insufficiently constrained, too, by any attempt to build a synoptic system

¹ ‘Gene Ontology’ already receives two million google hits.

through sustained, collaborative efforts, in which philosophical theses about substance, matter, qualities, science, meaning, value, etc. would hang together in a coherent way.

In positive science results are expected. In analytic philosophy everyone waits for the next new puzzle. Like the braintwisters holidaymakers take onto the beach, philosophical puzzles divert from life’s hardships. They doubtless have their place in a flourishing theoretical culture. But AP is at its core a culture driven by puzzles, rather than by large-scale, systematic theoretical goals. Russell recommended stocking up on puzzles from as early as 1905;² *Analysis* was founded as a puzzle-solving journal. The quickest way to a career in the competitive world of modern AP is to pick a puzzle in a trendy area – be it vagueness, modal counterparts, rigid designation, “the hard problem” or the elimination of truth – and come up with a hitherto unsuspected twist in the dialectic, earning a few more citations in one or another of the on-going games of fashionable philosophical ping-pong. F(a)ntological philosophy triumphs, because elegantly structured possible worlds are so much more pleasant places to explore than the flesh and blood reality which surrounds us here on Earth.

There is little doubt that individual philosophers who have no interest in the real world can occasionally make important contributions to philosophy. But a philosophical tradition which suffers from the vice of *horror mundi* in an endemic way is condemned to futility. It may be, too, that in empirical science entire research communities can briefly flourish without an interest in the real world. But that is because, whatever the interests and claims of scientists, the real world will soon put them to rights if they diverge too far from reality. Philosophers, on the other hand, cannot confront their ideas with reality in this same direct way. That is why philosophical traditions can thrive which are indifferent to the way the real world is.

III

And so in CP, too, metaphysics thrives. Claims about the nature of reality and being, about possibility and necessity, and about particularity and universality are flourished *ad nauseam* by its practitioners. Moreover, CP metaphysics is inseparable from a genuine interest in the real world. But this interest is not theoretical.

First, CP metaphysics are invariably tailor-made for particular political and ethical conclusions. Heidegger’s 1927 ontology is made for his lugubrious, supernatural Protestant

² Though he never intended that puzzle-solving should become the whole of philosophy.

naturalism. The multiplicities of Deleuze and Guattari, in which difference is neither numerical nor qualitative, are made for their corresponding peculiar brand of *soixanthuitard* infantile leftism. Habermas' accounts of truth and of value are made for a vision of politics in which all citizens would be obliged to sit in on the equivalent of a never-ending *Oberseminar* on Kant, talking their way to emancipation.

Second, as with all other parts of CP, its metaphysics is never pursued in any properly theoretical way. Just as, in a good poem, content and form are inextricably entwined, so too in CP the metaphysics is inseparable from its idiosyncratic expression ("différance", ~~Sein~~). Finally, CP's interest in the real world is an interest in the social and political world, never in the physical or biological world. Only occasionally, when a scientific theory or, more often, a piece of scientific jargon, resonates with the CP metaphysician's view of things does he turn his attention to science (to catastrophe theory, complexity theory, quantum gravity, Gödel's limitation theorems) in order to play with a handful of ill-understood expressions.

IV

Consider two very different ways in which the history of philosophy might be carried out, and in which canons may become established and studied. At one extreme there is history of philosophy as the history of philosophy in particular regions, cultures, etc., where the philosophy whose history is being studied is determined by the nation, language-group, or culture to which the philosopher in question belongs. At the other extreme there is history of philosophy as the history of the best of what has been thought, said and argued, where the philosophy whose history is being studied, and the way in which it is studied, is determined by the conviction that philosophy can progress because it has progressed.

How does the way history of philosophy is now done relate to these two possibilities? Unsurprisingly, the nationalist (regionalist, ...) option is the rule: the British above all study Locke and Hume, US philosophers study Peirce and Dewey, the French have their Malebranche and Bergson, the Germans Fichte and Schelling. Of course, all analytic philosophers study Frege, Russell and Moore – and it sometimes seems as though Wittgenstein has everywhere in the West been elevated into the pantheon of great philosophers. A small canon of modern philosophers, too, enjoys attention almost everywhere – Hobbes, Descartes, Leibniz, Kant. More importantly, interest in ancient and medieval philosophy knows no geographical limitations.

Consider the second option. It is now a curiosity, not a live option. Perhaps the last card-carrying believers in this option were Brentano and some of his pupils. It is now often felt that to take seriously the second option is to be unfaithful to the proper task of the historian. Some historians of philosophy in the analytic tradition have been suspected of following this option, but they now earn strong disapproval from those historians who insist on raw textual exegesis and disinterested tracking of influences.

We can summarize this opposition between two kinds of history of philosophy as an opposition between the study of the philosophy of the past independently of whether it is good, bad or embarrassing, and the study of past philosophical *discoveries*. The latter, especially, requires an awareness of the distinction between philosophical achievements and blind-alleys. And this in turn requires a view of philosophy as a theoretical enterprise that can lead to positive knowledge.

Why does the former (in its various regional guises) prevail? This is a large and difficult question. But one prime reason why it prevails in Continental Europe is that philosophy is not there taken seriously as a theoretical enterprise. Indeed the near total identification of philosophy with its history leaves no breathing space for theoretical philosophy and thus no fulcrum on which to base a non-purely regionalist conception of the history of the discipline. Instead we have a situation in which widespread familiarity with Fichte's egology, or with the details of Reinhold's *Auseinandersetzen* with Kant, or with ontological difference à la Heidegger, co-exist with almost complete ignorance of, say, Bolzano's account of the difference between logical consequence and explanation.

In the AP world, in contrast, the history of philosophy is an uneasy *mélange* of the two main options. AP's history of philosophy is, to be sure, focused always on topics of the familiar and reassuring logic, mind and language sort. But it is at the same time strikingly indifferent to the history of just those ideas which have there proved most fertile. Thus the enormous commentary literature on Wittgenstein pays almost no attention to the Austro-German context of his main ideas. Anton Marty's anticipations of Grice's account of meaning are unknown. So too are the anticipations by Adolf Reinach of the theories of speech acts developed by Austin and Searle.

CP's lack of interest in philosophy as a theoretical enterprise emerges most clearly in its relations to the phenomenological movement. Heidegger, Sartre, Derrida, ... and many other prominent CP thinkers grew out of phenomenology. At the same time, CP rejects the vision of philosophy as a theoretical enterprise that was embraced by Husserl and the other great founders of phenomenology – yet without making any attempt to justify this rejection. Phenomenology has, in fact, served CP well as a hydra-headed pretext – Marxist phenomenology, feminist phenomenology, hermeneutics, Derrida's foaming defilements of what he calls 'phallogocentrism' – but in all these cases the aspirations of the founders of phenomenology to uncover truth have been made subservient to a non-theoretical agenda, whether political or socio-cultural, and in Derrida's case to an agenda that is shamelessly anti-theoretical.

Moreover, in spite of the dominance of phenomenology in CP philosophizing, CP's own history of philosophy is strikingly ignorant of the history of phenomenology itself. The loving attention lavished on manuscripts by Heidegger or Fink coexists with complete ignorance of the writings of truly important phenomenologists such as Reinach, Ingarden or Scheler.

V

In Europe, CP has triumphed institutionally and culturally even though, and indeed in part because, it has never won any theoretical battles, flourishing best in the *feuilleton*. In certain philosophy departments in North America, too, CP is slowly moving towards hegemony, aping the successes of CP-related anti-theoretical movements in US departments of sociology, literature, cultural studies, geography, anthropology, archaeology, and so forth. In the leading philosophy departments in the Anglosaxon world however, AP still holds its place, though it has something of the flavour of a self-perpetuating academic business, frequently proud of its lack of relevance to real-world concerns. HP on the other hand has almost everywhere collapsed into nationalist or regionalist hagiography.

The major parts of twentieth century philosophy thus end in defeat. The tried and tested traditional reaction to defeat is to rally round the flag. What Russell said almost a hundred years ago is, as ever, timely:

There have been far too many heroic solutions in philosophy; detailed work has too often been neglected; there has been too little patience. As was once the case in physics, a hypothesis is invented, and on top of this hypothesis a bizarre world is constructed, *there is no effort to compare this world with the real world*. The true method, in philosophy as in science, will be inductive, meticulous, and will not believe that it is the duty of every philosopher to solve every problem by himself. This is the method that inspires *analytic realism* and it is *the only method, if I am not mistaken, by which philosophy will succeed in obtaining results which are as solid as those of science* (Russell 1911 61, our emphases)

The honest pioneering spirit of the early and constructive phase of AP had its close parallels also in the early phenomenologists, so much so that a century ago there existed no gulf between them. And it is precisely this spirit that must be rekindled. Philosophers should learn and practise their analytical skills. They should prize the theoretical virtues of consistency, analytic clarity, explanatory adequacy, and constrained simplicity, be aware of the historical depth and pitfalls of the ideas they are manipulating; and be wary of the assumption that everything new is better. They should trust to common sense, avoid bullshit, and beware celebrity. But above all they should lift their heads above philosophy: study and respect good science and good practice, and try to understand its implications. Like scientists, they should cooperate with one another and with other disciplines, and seek funding for cooperative research, aiming at theoretical comprehensiveness, using topic-neutral skills and knowledge to bridge compartments in knowledge. They should learn how to present ideas clearly to all kinds of audiences, and not just to fellow aficionados of the fake barn. Above all, philosophers should be humble, in the face of the manifest complexity of the world, the acumen of their philosophical predecessors and non-philosophical contemporaries, and their own fallibility. But with this humility they should be unwaveringly resolved to discover, however complex, frustrating and unlovely it may be, the truth.

Reference

Russell, B. 1911. "Le réalisme analytique", *Bulletin de la société française de philosophie*, **11**, 53-61