What is Philosophy?

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Comments and criticism very welcome

Abstract

Philosophy divides into metaphysics, ethics and epistemology. What distinguishes philosophy from other sciences are its questions and the standards their answers must satisfy. Philosophical questions are questions not fully answered by any other science. This includes traditional "what is x?" and "how is x possible?" questions, as well as foundational questions of other sciences the answers to which depend on 'extra-scientific' considerations. Answers to philosophical questions must satisfy purely alethic standards. Ethical, practical and 'pragmatic' considerations are non-philosophical.
The history of philosophy is no greater importance to philosophy than is the history of chemistry to chemistry. "History of ideas", insofar as it has a determinate meaning, is very different from philosophy. Conceptual analysis is of no particular importance to philosophy. Intuitions do not play any special rôle in philosophical arguments.
It is an interesting and often neglected question what attitude we should have towards kinds of philosophy different from ours. A form of tolerance is argued for.

What is philosophy, we may ask, and want to stay for an answer. But we should not. The question, once disambiguated, is not interesting: it is *not* itself philosophical and nothing of philosophical interest can be gained by answering it.[1] Philosophy simply is what philosophers do – or rather, what some philosophers, and perhaps also some other scientists, do some of the time. It is a theoretical activity aiming, like all theoretical activities, at discovering the truth. It has a subject-matter, and discipline-specific methods, though it is unclear what exactly they are. But this is true of other disciplines as well.

Rather than trying to answer the question top-down, searching to unearth the hidden 'nature' of philosophy or the specifically philosophical in philosophical inquiries, we should characterise our discipline bottom-up, by its parts. Philosophy asks questions about the world, our knowledge of it and what we should do about it. So it divides into metaphysics, epistemology and ethics, all somehow broadly construed. Metaphysics includes parts of the philosophies of mind, language and science, in so far as these too study language, the mind and the objects of scientific theories as natural phenomena and parts of the world. Other branches of these philosophies belong rather to epistemology, which examines our cognitive contact with the world. Ethics here subsumes the other normative branches of philosophy, as philosophy of law, social philosophy, aesthetics and the theory of rationality.

In this way broadly construed metaphysics, epistemology and ethics cover all philosophical questions. Philosophical questions are questions studied by philosophers as philosophers. We may perhaps

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[1] While this claim is certainly controversial, I do not think it is tendentious. Even if Rorty may have been right about the sociology of our discipline twenty years ago – "Analytic philosophers are not much interested in either defining or defending the presuppositions of their work. Indeed the gap between "analytic" and "non-analytic" philosophy nowadays coincides pretty closely with the division between philosophers who are not interested in historico-metaphilosophical reflections on their own activity and philosophers who are." (Rorty 1991: 21) –, this has changed much in the recent past.

characterise them as being general, abstract, 'conceptual', open-ended etc., but this is true – if true at all – only for the most part and also true of some questions outside philosophy. I do not think there is any interesting and not list-like characterisation of philosophical questions. Perhaps one characteristic of good philosophical questions is that they are very difficult to find, but this is hardly an identifying feature. Philosophy as a discipline is also rather unconstrained from the outside – this is why philosophical questions and answers often come together, and have to be evaluated as a package-deal. This interdependence between philosophical questions and philosophical answers may perhaps also explain why there is little progress in philosophy and why some philosophers' questions may be some other philosophers' answers. But I think the putative lack of progess of philosophy is often exaggerated: we undoubtedly know much more about meanings and knowledge than Plato, more about logic than Aristotle, more about justice than Hobbes and much more about space and time than Kant. That progress on philosophical question often comes from outside philosophy is rather a good sign. If blame has to be attributed, it is not to the discipline itself, but rather to the people practicing it.

Perceived lack of progress in philosophy has prompted some of its best protagonists to some comments that sound rather desperate:

> "The fact that philosophers disagree in such a thoroughgoing way, disagreeing even after a lifetime's difficult, painstaking and certainly intelligent reflection, can be explained plausibly only on the assumption that every one of them lacks *knowledge* in the sphere of philosophy." (Armstrong 1997: 9)

Such pessimism is premature, however, as Armstrong's own example shows, he's being famous for having spotted, diagnosed, conceded and corrected errors to which he formerly subscribed. Lack of progress does not show that progress is impossible, but only that it is difficult. It shows that we must do better:

> "How can we do better? We can make a useful start by getting the simple things right. Much even of analytic philosophy moves too fast in its haste to reach the sexy bits. Details are not given the care they deserve: crucial claims are vaguely stated, significantly different formulations are treated as though they were equivalent, examples are underdescribed, arguments are gestured at rather than properly made, their form is left unexplained, and so on. A few resultant errors easily multiply to send inquiry in completely the wrong direction. Shoddy work is sometimes masked by pretentiousness, allusiveness, gnomic concision or winning informality. But often there is no special disguise: producers and consumers have simply not taken enough trouble to check the details. We need the unglamorous virtue of patience to read and write philosophy that is as perspicuously structured as the difficulty of the subject requires, and the austerity to be dissatisfied with appealing prose that does not meet those standards. The fear of boring oneself or one's readers is a great enemy of truth. Pedantry is a fault on the right side." (Williamson 2006)

Like every other science, philosophy aims at the truth and sometimes achieves it. It then delivers knowledge, albeit often of a uninteresting or negative kind. But even uninteresting or negative knowledge is worth having and we gained some of it through recent philosophical research, on knowledge, essence, skepticism, duties, modality and values for example.[2]

[2] Another partial list is given by Williamson, who did a lot to bring serious philosophy back to Continental Europe: "Although fundamental disagreement is conspicuous in most areas of philosophy, the best theories in a given area are in most cases far better developed in 2004 than the best theories in that area were in 1964, and so on. [...] For example, we know far more about possibility and necessity than was known before the development of modern modal logic and associated work in philosophy. It is widely known in 2004 and was not widely known in 1964 that contingency is not equivalent to *a posteriority*, and that claims of contingent or temporary identity involve the rejection of standard logical laws. The principle that every truth is possibly necessary can now be shown to entail that every truth is necessary by a chain of elementary inferences in a perspicuous notation unavailable to Hegel. We know much about the costs and benefits of analysing possibility and necessity in terms of possible worlds, even if we do not yet know whether such an analysis is correct." (Williamson 2006).

Aside from doing better philosophy, we should also adopt a clearer view of how to improve the methodological and institutional framework for our discipline. In particular, we should stop asking spurious questions and making spurious distinctions. One of the questions we should stop asking is what philosophy is. I do not mean to say by this that methodology is unimportant,[3] but with philosophical methodology, as with philosophy in general, the devil is in the details – rather than asking what philosophy is, we should ask about how best finding out about knowledge, essence or duties. "What is Philosophy?" is also a spurious question because we all know what it is – what we do, or at least, what we are supposed to do.[4] Philosophy is what Aristotle, Aquinas, Hume, Kant, Frege, Carnap, Russell, Quine, Armstrong and Lewis did. It is what serious philosophy journals such as *Mind*, *Philosophical Review* and the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* publish and what the highly-ranked departments in the *Philosophical Gourmet Report* do better than their Anglo-Saxon competitors.

More important than the question what philosophy is is the question what it is not. Philosophy is neither cultural criticism nor political activism. I do not deny that culture or politics prompt philosophical questions, nor that philosophers may, or even should, play an active public role. But to the extent that they should, they just satisfy a broader obligation, applying to publicly funded intellectuals more generally. Philosophy is not cognitive science either. The study of the brain, like the one of language by linguistics, is an important area of scientific research to which philosophy can contribute. But this should not motivate us to cannibalise ourselves by allocating resources that are in short supply elsewhere to research which is not primarily philosophical. While both interaction with the sciences and with the more general culture are important and can provide useful inputs for philosophy itself, philosophers should concentrate on the core of their discipline, i.e. the most central, general, and therefore difficult questions of metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. In particular, they should focus on their problems, rather than on themselves.

Philosophers of all stripes love dichotomies, if only because they like claiming to 'overcome' them. One of the most prominent oppositions is the one between so-called 'analytic' and so-called 'continental' philosophy. To the extent the very distinction itself is clear,[5] it is neither exclusive nor exhaustive and is not helpful to understand the situation of philosophy in Continental Europe nor, I guess, anywhere else.[6] Part of the reason is that the two labels 'analytic' and 'continental' coexist with two very different ones, the 'history of philosophy' and the 'history of ideas'.

With respect to the history of philosophy, two different endeavours must be distinguished: one is the typical task of the historian, editing historical works, placing them in their time and tracking influences; another task, more typical of the histories of different sciences, belongs to the tradition of the commentary, looking in older texts for insights relevant to contemporary discussions.[7] While the historical work of historians of philosophy of the first kind is not itself philosophy, it may of course

[3] I agree with Grice (1986: 66) that "[b]y and large the greatest philosophers have been the greatest, and the most self-conscious, methodologists; indeed, I am tempted to regard this fact as primarily accounting for their greatness as philosophers."

[4] The only difference between "what is philosophy?" and "what is nuclear physics?" I can think of is that the former is closer to "what is good philosophy?". Philosophers are perhaps more willing to treat their departmental colleagues as non-philosophers – but this, I think, is just a sign of the institutional immaturity of our discipline.

[5] I doubt very much that it is. The attributes attributed to analytic philosophy by Mulligan et al. (2006) – appearance of theoretical rigour, lack of belief that philosophy is a science, no influential role models, good training for young philosophers – are hardly identifying. While it may be true that continental philosophy is characterised by an anti-theoretical orientation and melodrama (Mulligan 1993) (which makes it include Wittgensteinianism, I suppose), lack of arguments may also plausibly held to be a feature of analytic philosophy: "According to crude stereotypes, analytic philosophers use arguments while 'continental' philosophers do not. But within the analytic tradition many philosophers use arguments only to the extent that most 'continental' philosophers do: some kind of inferential movement is observable, but it lacks the clear articulation into premises and conclusion and the explicitness about the form of inference that much good philosophy achieves. Again according to the stereotypes, analytic philosophers write clearly while 'continental' philosophers do not. But much work within the analytic tradition is obscure even when it is written in everyday words, short sentences and a relaxed, open-air spirit, because the structure of its claims is fudged where it really matters." (Williamson 2006).

[6] We may, even we want, retain them as labels for a literary 'genre' or scientific 'communities' (Engel 1997: 213) or as somewhat sociological terms, as labels for groups of philosophers who err in different ways. It is in this sense that Mulligan et al. (2006) deplore analytic philosophy's "lack of interest in the real world" and continental philosophy's anti-theoretical view of philosophy.

[7] I include within the 'genre' of the commentary not just the annotation works of the Middle Ages, but also such books as "Descartes' Philosophy of Science", "Kant's Transcendental Idealism" and "Theories of the Proposition in the Late Middle Ages".

be of very great importance to philosophy and help accomplishing the second historical task, which is the 'updating' of older texts to make them bear on contemporary discussions. The philosophical commentary, by contrast, is itself a *philosophical* genre and can advance philosophical inquiry, in the same sense in which works in the history of chemistry may advance chemistry, uncovering unchallenged presuppositions, forgotten theoretical forks, hidden premisses and neglected distinctions. It's importance, however, is ofter overrated and its nature often misinterpreted. Philosophical commentary is important only to the extent that it helps philosophy achieve truth – not historical truth, the one aimed for by the non-philosophical purely historical work of historians of philosophy –, but the truth about genuine, live and important philosophical problems.

Both edition and commentary should be sharply distinguished from the simple reading of older texts. Reading texts written by non-contemporaries is a characteristic and essential part of any science that is neither progressing very fast nor, or at least not largely, textbook-based. That philosophers find it profitable to read Descartes' *Meditations* should not be taken as evidence that history matters to philosophy – it is simply a result of the fact that few philosophers have managed to produce clearer and more compelling accounts of skepticism, foundationalist epistemology and dualism. The importance of historical figures in philosophy tells us as much about our present weaknesses than about their past strengths. The fact that the teaching of philosophy is often organised along historical lines, i.e. a course on Descartes providing an introduction to epistemology, a course on Mill an introduction to ethics etc., should not be taken as evidence for the importance of the study of the history of philosophy in any of the above two senses. In particular, it does not provide justification for the very deplorable tendency that departments of philosophy should 'cover' the whole history of philosophy, not only in their teaching, but also in their research. Philosophers should be selective about their history – much of what is past is better forgotten.

Both forms of the history of philosophy, edition and commentary, are very different from what I think is the main philosophical current on the Continent, which I call the 'history of ideas'. The history of ideas is the tracking and comparing of 'notions' or 'concepts' throughout history, as e.g. "the concept of the Good from Platon to Mill" or "the notion of Justice during the Middle Ages". History of ideas is not properly historical, because it neither uses historical methodology nor historical evidence: claims of 'interconnection' or 'similiarity' between the ideas of x and y are not backed up by proof of a real influence of x by y or of a common influence of some third person on both of them; it is assumed instead (but not argued for) that both x and y are somehow articulating 'their time', 'their epoch' or some underlying 'Weltgeist'. The history of ideas is not philosophy either, because it is not aiming at producing knowledge about philosophical problems. Philosophical problems, notions or labels only provide the organising principle for an unhistorical, and often quite unsystematic associative chain. The question "but where they right?" not even is left unasked and unanswered, it is even tacitly implied to be inappropriate, and this only because it itself would be asked in some particular historical situation.

The research done in philosophy departments therefore falls into three categories: philosophy, characterised by its attempt to find the true answer to philosophical questions, itself divided between good and bad philosophy, and non-philosophy on the other hand, including the purely historical branch of 'history of philosophy' and what I called the 'history of ideas'. To characterise philosophy as aiming at the truth does certainly exclude some activities the protagonists of which call themselves 'philosophers',[8] but I think that it still includes a large part of so-called 'continental philosophy', at least of its non-therapeutic kind. Philosophers of this latter variety often cite other aims for philosophy, as e.g. to 'help people to live better' or to 'think the present' – this is covered in so far they are helped by telling them the truth and as thinking the present means finding out the truth about it.

Is there anything distinctive about the pursuit of truth of philosophy, as opposed to some other science? Lately, two characteristics have been proposed: the use of conceptual analysis on the one hand, the reliance on 'intuitions' on the other. "Conceptual analysis" is a notoriously vague notion.

[8] It might, for example, exclude Badiou (1989: 18) who writes that philosophy "n'établit aucune vérité, mais [...] dispose un lieu des vérités".

For one of its main proponents, it is the analysis of words-as-we-understand-them:

> "Our subject is really the elucidation of the possible situations covered by the *words* we use to ask our questions – concerning free action, knowledge, and the relation between the physical and the psychological, or whatever. I use the word 'concept' partly in deference to the traditional terminology which talks of *conceptual* analysis, and partly to emphasize that though our subject is the elucidations of the various situations covered by bits of language according to one or another language user, or by the folk in general, it is divorced from considerations local to any particular language." (Jackson 1998: 33)

Jackson takes the elucidations of the various possible situations (what he calls 'cases') to consist in our implicit theories about kinds of things. If the consideration of possible scenario is a matter of "extracting a person's theory of what counts as a K from intuitions about how to describe possible cases, and taking it to reveal their concept of K-hood" (Jackson 1998: 32), then we may ask whose theory is taking center-stage. Jackson (1998: 32)'s refreshingly simple answer: his own. This raises a problem, however: even if consideration of possible cases reveals how we use words, it does not answer the more important question how they are *correctly* described. Jackson (1998: 35–36) tries to accommodate this by allowing some person's theory of Ks to be discounted if he, for example, "backs off under questioning" or if it does not provide for an interesting and theoretically useful distinctions. This means, however, that to characterise the philosophers' business as conceptual analysis is not saying very much: if the method of possible cases is just "an exercise in hypthetico-deduction" (Jackson 1998: 36), then we can as well alternatively describe it as the construction of explanatory models or the search for hidden ambiguities.

If the modal force of philosophical arguments is not sufficiently explained by their being elucidations, explications or analyses of concepts, then where does it come from? Many people here look to intuition or intuition*s*, sometimes to be taken paradigmatic philosophical evidence, sometimes taken to be "the source of all noninferential a priori knowledge" (Bealer 2004: 12). Such intuitions are supposed to track modal reality because having them is a necessary condition for understanding our concepts (Bealer 1996). The problem here is that it is not clear what is involved in understanding a concept – concepts rather seem to be *defined* as whatever it is that we understand and grounds our competence with words. We may, of course, misunderstand words, i.e. take them to mean something they do not mean. But then we associate them with *different* concepts than the ones they express, and are not somehow incompletely grasping the latter. What was supposed to be a matter of stating necessary and sufficient conditions for the possession, understanding, mastery or grasp of some concept then becomes a question of what the concept is about.

It is an interesting question what rational attitude philosophers should take towards their own philosophical opinions. David Lewis, in a paper entitled "Academic appointments: Why Ignore the Advantage of Being Right?" (Lewis 1989a), has tried to justify a certain amount of tolerance with respect to divergent philosophical views. Drawing on his more general account (Lewis 1989b), Lewis claims that a general implicit treaty of tolerance can be given an utilitarian justification if "each side prefers toleration to defeat more than it prefers victory to toleration" (Lewis 1989b: 178). Applying it to the philosophy case, Lewis (1989a: 197, fn. 1) replaces 'utility in the largest sense' (Lewis 1989b: 161) by the advancement of knowledge. He is thereby able to argue that we should tolerate bad philosophy, even if we should try our best not to do it. We should do it, not only we may profit ourselves more from toleration than from war in the long run, but also because philosophical theory-choice is often a holistic affair:

> "There are numerous ways to trade off ideological and ontological economy and to balance these theoretical benefits against the preservation of common-sense belief. It is futile to hope that one such theory will be uniquely coherent. One can only hope to draw up a cost and benefit scoresheet, it being a very real possibility that there will be ties for first place." (Oliver 1996: 5)

If there are ties for the first place, then tolerance is obviously the only rational option. Tolerance, however, is not defeatism:

> "...when debate over a philosophical question – say, the question whether I have hands – ends in deadlock, it does *not* follow that there is no truth of the matter; or that we don't know the truth of the matter; or that we ought to suspend judgement; or that we have no reason for thinking one thing rather than the other." (Lewis 1993: 102)

With the proponents of non-philosophy, however, no such tacit toleration contract is possible. Those who deny that the aim of philosophy is the advancement of knowledge will not enter a contract that will help them maximise chances for our discipline of getting at knowledge. If they are to be tolerated too, they must be tolerated for other, perhaps aesthetic or social reasons. Or we may estimate them for prompting us to answer the uninteresting, but also quite important question "What is philosophy".

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