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Philosophy: what is to be done?

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Abstract The isolation and professionalization of philosophy is detrimental to it. The most interesting philosophical activity is conducted at the interface of philosophy and other disciplines. Thus philosophy must continue to cross boundaries and avoid fretting about what is and is not philosophy proper.

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I am often involved in discussions with other philosophers about what is and is not philosophy. I do not find such discussions particularly enlightening, but I believe they offer a glimpse of a deep malaise afflicting our field. The main issue at stake is whether there is something like a unique philosophical method of approaching and treating problems, or instead what is truly philosophical are the questions we ask, the problems that we deem only treatable with philosophical tools. I find the first approach too defensive, as if philosophy, in order to survive, were compelled to identify and painstakingly describe the unique method it possesses, akin in this respect to any other reputable scientific enterprise. Sure, philosophers have always dabbled in conceptual difficulties and problems not open to any possible scientific inquiry (the nature of free will and normativity immediately come to mind). In so doing, philosophers have paid great attention to the words we use and the misunderstandings they could generate, trying to disambiguate, to show where we make a confusion between different concepts, to point to contradictions and paradoxes. But if some sort of linguistic analysis were all there is to philosophic inquiry, we would run the danger of empty speech. On the other hand, saying that what is essential to philosophy is a list of questions and issues such as the nature of truth, freedom, mind, intention, or knowledge runs the risk of seeing the scope of philosophy becoming more and more restricted, as more often than not what was once deemed a central philosophical topic has with time become a separate disciplinary area with its own methods and standards. Either as a discipline that merely engages on a linguistic reflection on the content of other disciplines, or as a field that does not communicate with other fields, philosophy runs a major risk of isolation.

The compartmentalization of disciplinary areas and the consequent professionalization of philosophy have been detrimental to our field. They have forced philosophers into a straightjacket of inclusionary and exclusionary definitions, led them to draw boundaries and fences, to try hard to grasp the specificity and uniqueness of our profession. As many other disciplines are loosening their boundaries out of sheer necessity (the problems they deal with are too complex, the interdisciplinary promises too enticing), philosophers seem bent on closing the borders. The dangers of this defensive policy are great, since we risk becoming irrelevant once we cross the confines of our departments.

I believe that the most interesting philosophical activity is and will continue to be at the interface of philosophy and other disciplines. Philosophy evolves, or co-evolves, hand in hand with other areas of

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knowledge. It draws life from them, and is sometimes superseded, at least in those areas in which it cannot contribute anything new. Sometimes instead it becomes part of a new field, and helps defining it. A few examples come to mind.

Many philosophers, from Aristotle on, have been interested in defining practical reason, but the modern version of what we call rational choice is to be found first in Hume and Bishop Butler, who declared that ''probability is the very guide to life.'' The thesis according to which a reasonable decision must be based on probability was almost commonsensical in the 18th century. Hume (like Hobbes before him) conceived of human beings as essentially rational in a practical sense, was concerned with human psychology and tried to derive from it general statements about social structure, government, and civil society. Human choices, and the passions and interests that shape them, were at the center of the modern political-philosophy tradition, and informed the ''moral sciences'' discourse that, in the 19th century, saw the joint development of utilitarian moral and political philosophy and neoclassical economics.

Eventually, however, philosophy became separate from economics and, later, from political science. Economists ultimately made rational choice a proprietary brand, whereas philosophers continued to dabble in the leftover issue of intentionality. Only in the second half of the 20th century, thus relatively recently, some philosophers (steeped in the Carnapian tradition) have reclaimed what goes by the name of decision theory, but for at least twenty years the field has been restricted to a few practitioners who had little influence over what was going on in many other areas of philosophy or science. Bayesian decision theory was the staple of statisticians and economists, and the few philosophers interested in it were working in areas of epistemology or philosophy of science far from the mainstream. The foundational work done by these pioneers, however, did enjoy greater recognition later on, when social scientists came to realize the limits and conceptual difficulties of their tools.

On the other side of the fence, the new field of game theory was languishing, too. After a brilliant start with von Neumann and Morgenstern, the field had not produced the expected results, and we have to wait until the 1970s to see a revival in its importance. Game theory takes the idea of rational choice to new heights. Now individuals, to make a choice, have to take into account a human environment made of other decision-makers who are trying to guess each other's actions. Defining rationality becomes much more complicated, since we now have to pay attention to the quantity of information possessed by agents, as well as the effects of informational asymmetries. This is an area where philosophy has come back full circle, making major contributions to a burgeoning field. Epistemology has traditionally made very clear distinctions between knowledge and belief, as well as precisely defining the meaning of common knowledge and the variety of ways in which we can revise our beliefs. All these philosophical contributions have helped to clarify equilibrium concepts, such as subgame perfection, and the conditions under which they hold. The hybrid area of epistemic game theory is as much philosophy as it is a branch of economics. In this case, the philosophical analysis of rationality has been greatly enriched by developments in game theory, but the latter has been significantly changed by the influx of epistemology.

The spillovers of these theoretical advances in areas of political philosophy and ethics have been significant. Contractarianism can be better understood, in its limits and potential, if we look at it in the framework of social interactions among rational agents. Any normative political theory must start from some principles, from which we derive conclusions about what sort of social institutions best embody the values embedded in the principles we take as primitive. Assuming the rationality of agents, per se, does not prejudge the nature of the principles we wish to take as primitive. However, it imposes constraints on the inferences we may draw from them. Here, too, philosophy has much to say about, and much to learn from, other fields. In particular, I want to emphasize that it was philosophical analysis that pointed out that rationality and maximization of material incentives do not coincide, thus opening the way for richer and more realistic interpretations of rationality.

Philosophical analysis is concerned with the *normative* aspects of ethics and political philosophy. It is about what people ought to do, not about what in fact people do or do not do. To think that naturalizing political philosophy or ethics means going from ''this is how we think'' to ''this is how we ought to think'' is a big mistake. It is akin to saying that, since most people fail simple logical tests (like recognizing that $p \rightarrow q$ is equivalent to $\sim q \rightarrow \sim p$), then logic is a hopeless, useless endeavor.

However, it must be recognized that the philosophical ought is inescapably linked with what people *can* in fact do, or what it is reasonable to assume they are able to do. Philosophy, to be relevant to society, needs to take into account (among other things) psychology. Individuals may not be perfectly rational, or they may have preferences and desires that are as mutable as the situations they experience. People may be driven by

emotions that are difficult to control, or be unaware, as is commonly the case, of the extent to which they respond to environmental stimuli. It is the philosopher's task to integrate scientific knowledge, the results of empirical lines of research, into a unitary view. We may come to conclude that moral thinking is nothing but emotional responses and their rationalizations, the former shaped by evolution, the latter by cultural forces. This recognition, however, should help us produce better normative theories. And I am not just referring here to ethics and political philosophy, but to epistemology, too. I use ''better'' in a specific sense here. On the one hand, the interaction between science and philosophy may help us *ground* normative theories. On the other hand, it helps in *evaluating* norms and principles that we take for granted, and eventually modifying them.

A similar argument can be made for the new brand of evolutionary models of the emergence of what we understand as social virtues, norms, and principles of justice. In this case, too, it would be a mistake to think that, once we show that certain moral virtues or norms emerge under specific conditions but not all possible conditions, we have destroyed their normative claims. What we have done is demonstrate that such norms are possible, describe under what conditions they are possible, and possibly we have also made very clear how good (or bad) they can be for a society. If anything, such results justify and strengthen (or sharpen and change) our normative avowals.

I realize I gave a biased account of what is being done in philosophy, since I know well what is happening in the areas I have discussed, much less what is happening in other areas. But I suspect that my evaluation may hold true of fields such as the philosophy of mind, where the give and take between science and philosophy is particularly active. I want to conclude by saying that science is and will always be tremendously relevant to philosophy, and if philosophy wants to thrive as a normative enterprise it will have to integrate those scientific results that give it a better grounding. In so doing, it may change the scientists' understanding of their practices and the implications of the concepts they use. But, once again, all this requires abandoning isolation, crossing boundaries, and stopping fretting about what is and is not philosophy proper.