

What Philosophy Might be About: Some Socio-philosophical Speculations

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What is philosophy about? Has it a content all its own? A method? This paper examines a few responses to these questions. At the extremes are the Proper Content and the No Content views. The former identifies philosophy with a delimited set of core issues. The latter, abandoning any proper subject-matter for philosophy, identifies it with a core *modus operandi*. Neither of these is especially compelling. More dynamically conceived is the Vanishing Content view which sees philosophy as continually and inevitably abandoning its business to newly emerging sciences, acting largely as an exploratory initiator of inquiry which is ultimately eliminable. Though promising, this view underrates the resilience and adaptability of philosophy, especially its current drive to forge alliances with and ultimately amalgamate itself into newer areas of study. This tendency is explored via the Partners-for-Progress view, which foresees philosophy becoming dependently indistinguishable from the theoretical wings of various autonomous disciplines. Finally, I examine the Family Inheritance view, which suggests that philosophy cannot merely vanish into the sciences because of idiosyncrasies in its very institutions which are self-sustaining and, more than most, deeply beholden to its own past which it keeps ever present.

I

Much philosophical work is devoted to answering questions variously expressed as:

- What is *X*?
- What is the fundamental nature or essence of *X*?
- How is *X* to be understood or conceived?
- What makes for something's being an *X*?

What are philosophers doing when proposing answers to such questions? What is philosophy about? Two questions arise: one about method and one about content. We may not get very far along with either query. The questions are probably self-referring, and any proposed answers possibly circular and self-defeating. Does one need a philosophical method to examine what philosophical method might be? If not, how could we determine what other method might be fitting for the job? But if one needs a philosophical approach

to determine such fittingness itself, one is sucked right back into the vortex. Is the method of philosophy itself part of its content? Perhaps one can do no better than to join Wittgenstein on his ladder, or grasp some other philosophical skyhook from which to get another view. More hopefully, we can tackle the issue via a few stories – descriptive, prescriptive, and explanatory. Some promise signs of light.

II

Any method must appropriately match its content. You don't shovel coal with a teaspoon. So we are advised to sort out questions about philosophical content. This paper is about just that. Socrates and Plato provide helpful clues through their identifying philosophy as a member of the domain of typical goal-directed enterprises, including medicine, sculpture, or cabinet-making, each of which is distinguished by its special content, methods, skills, and ends. The methods of music-making must be appropriate for music-making, as must the methods be for the proper content of ornithology or dentistry. Baldly put, the end of philosophy is to achieve insight, understanding, and clarity about a certain range of issues. This end can putatively be reached by means of certain techniques. What are these issues? Upon what does philosophy exercise its methods? The *Proper Content* view asserts that philosophy is that enterprise exercised over a number of items proper to itself, the *Xs* above. What then does 'X' range over? A purely extensional approach provides a start, but not a finish. History indicates that 'X' can stand for any number of things, and yet philosophy has had its traditional favourites, some drawn from long-standing pre-occupations and others of a more recent origin. Among the *Xs* reliably included are the following: truth, beauty, goodness, justice, existence, reality, rationality, value, mind, matter, consciousness, knowledge, belief, causation, time, space, substance, properties, necessity, reference, meaning, inference, perception, desire, intention, emotion, persons, action, agency, will, freedom, rights, obligations, virtue, art, science, nature, and culture. But there's more. What more? Can we complete the list, close it off? Is there some ingredient each qualifying *X* has or must have?¹

III

Ryle was once asked how one could tell whether a problem was philosophical. With playful evasiveness, he replied: 'You can smell 'em!' For the olfactorily-challenged, how does one tell when we're onto something the nature of which falls properly to philosophers? Catching Ryle's beat, John Wisdom puckishly wrote that one can philosophize about anything whatever

– about lozenges, Tuesday, the Pound Sterling, and Philosophy itself. His view, favoured among Wittgensteinians and contrary to the Socratic credo, was that there was no subject-matter especially proper to philosophy. More radically, philosophy proper had no subject-matter whatever, but was instead a purely methodological enterprise which happened to focus upon certain topics to no one of which was it critically bound. Let's call this the *No Content* view.

IV

Wittgensteinian affiliations aside, survey the territory and one might be convinced that philosophy is at least open-endedly receptive to that to which it is drawn. The list above is easily expanded once one gets down to details. Each member of the list spins off its own blood lines. A few examples should suffice. In exploring the nature of science, say, philosophers want then to know what explanation is, or scientific law, or confirmation, evidence, theory, observation, or prediction. Moral philosophers look beyond goodness and justice, and examine moral agency, rules, principles, sentiments, and motivation. Interest in Virtue revives ancient curiosities about the variousness of the virtues and vices, about prudence, practical wisdom, courage, malice, and so on. Aesthetics runs riot with 'what is' questions which emerge in inquiries about individual art forms; questions about representation, expression, metaphor, symbolism, interpretation, imagination, not to mention what sorts of thing artworks are themselves.

V

Though no firm principle of closure emerges, though there's no saying what philosophy cannot legitimately take as its own, philosophers haven't been quite as expansively curious as their licence to practise seems to permit. There doesn't seem to be any passion or, indeed, evidence for the *No Content* view. The philosophy of lozenges and the logic of Sterling don't enjoy any brisk philosophical debate. Further, the unity of method championed by the Wittgensteinians was never consolidated. That said, there are reasonably constant campaigns to extend the list, what with efforts at creating philosophical interest in economics, the environment, sport and leisure, biology, management, medicine, computers and technology, sex and love, business, geography, and more. Some of these catch on. Some don't – but not obviously because they are demonstrably less philosophical than the success stories.

(1) Some people, adherents of the Proper Content view after a fashion,

occasionally scoff at these expansive ambitions. They ask: ‘Why should philosophers proper bother with these areas? What can possibly be of philosophical interest outside the classic concentrations? How much more than five minutes philosophical attention can attach to these proposed new zones? Surely, open-endedness does not sanction rampant open-mindedness.’ But such dismissals seem largely to reflect a conservative inertia. At least, while presupposing notions of propriety and closure, these don’t seem to have been clearly enunciated. It’s as if some common genetic links must be present to sanction any acceptable extension. In that respect, such attitudes share much with closed-door immigration policies which would restrict admission to those who walk our walk and talk our talk, to bona fide relatives of residents. More self-consciously tolerant defenders of the Proper Content view acknowledge the newcomers but only as second-class citizens, thus creating and then entrenching a philosophical class structure which identifies certain old philosophical families as Core. On this variant, not only are these new extensions subordinate and peripheral to some fundamental philosophical enterprise, they are and remain dispensable. They can die off and yet leave Real Philosophy intact. This can get very short-sighted if one fails to see past one’s own immediate kin and ignores the skeletons in the closet.

(2) The Proper Content view, it seems, accepts that there may be philosophical drop-outs, once Core areas which just cease to have serious philosophical standing. Philosophy’s abandonment of theism is a classic case if we consider that, for centuries, at the Core of the Core were questions about the nature and properties of God. Philosophers sometimes deal with this by re-touching family photos, old Kremlin-style. Revisionism is afoot in discussions of Berkeley in which one would never suppose God to have been an ineliminable part of Berkeley’s ontology and epistemology. In a similar vein, we routinely label Descartes a dualist, as if God were either a forgettable minor irritant or just another manifestation of *res cogitans* or *res extensa*. For Descartes, it’s unclear whether God could have been either. His ontology might be irreducibly Triadic. Similarly awkward are the unmodern tones of Plato’s mystical spiritualism, Aristotle’s angelic planet-pushers, Leibniz’s worlds within worlds, Kant’s eery, other-worldly Noumenal realm, and even Wittgenstein’s speechless farewell. The impatient highly visible hand of Hume has got to be acknowledged here, not to mention the heavier hands of latter-day logical empiricists. The clean-up proceeds apace. Some modern visionaries regard our well-worn pre-occupation with Mental Stuff as deserving the oblivion that has befallen philosophical theism. Like everything else, the Core enjoys and suffers ongoing modification, however much the revisionists insist that the past must be dressed to look just like what some now declare as Core. Further, this de-contaminating spirit appears to endorse a reduction in philosophical capital, about which there is more to come.

VI

Why do certain Xs get left out? Philosophers these days would not take the question ‘What is the fundamental nature of lithium?’ to be a philosophical question, let alone a philosophically interesting question. Perhaps they steer clear of the nature of lithium because it’s just not fundamental enough a question. But this just spawns unhelpful and possibly question-begging convictions about the nature of fundamental questions. Besides, no one thinks that questions about the fundamental nature of chemical elements as such any more philosophical than those about particular elements. (Beguilingly, some do think that the fundamental nature of biological species falls squarely within philosophy’s ambit, even though there is no such interest in the nature of particular species like *Passer domesticus*.) Anyway, questions about the fundamental nature of musical works, say, or about piety are scarcely tapping any deep core of things – and yet these are questions which philosophers explore or have explored avidly. More likely, philosophers leave lithium alone because it’s best left to chemists. Once we have heard out the chemist on lithium, there is nothing unembarrassing left for any philosopher to say.²

VII

Perhaps there is some tacit principle of closure, but not necessarily one which lives in harmony with even a restricted, however liberal, sense of prospective new frontiers. Philosophy’s domain is closed not only because it is delimited but more importantly because it is shrinking. This shrinkage, further, is a fully fitting, because inevitable, historical process which will play itself out until nothing whatever is left for philosophy to do. Call this the *Vanishing Content* view. J. L. Austin was said to have speculated that philosophical prey was what was left over once one had eliminated the domains captured by science.³ As I recall, he portrayed the domain left to philosophy as a ragged headland subject to the battering waves of science which incessantly erode away and thus diminish what is left. The implication was that philosophy had increasingly less to concern itself with, and would eventually disappear after having been relieved of its stopgap role once the special sciences assumed responsibility for telling us about the present remainder – such as the mental, the ontological, the moral, the aesthetic. Chemical elements get left out because they are already well spoken for; and so for a host of topics now competently overseen by physicists, biologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and experts in other special domains. Thus conceived, philosophy becomes a form of proto-science, or, better, a form of anticipation of or temporary placeholder for science; one which, having clumsily and speculatively revealed problems and notions ultimately worthy of proper

scientific expropriation, moves aside once a science is mature enough to take over. Philosophers are akin to the first explorers of an uncharted terrain who map it only roughly and send back reports of opportunities-in-waiting, only to be superseded, displaced and largely forgotten by subsequent waves of land developers, farmers, and other more focused entrepreneurs who settle, subdue, and utterly re-shape the land for permanent purposeful occupancy.

(1) There is much appeal in the Vanishing Content view. Professional philosophers so-called seem to have less to do these days if only to judge by the current quaintness of the phrase 'natural philosophy'. More currently, we can see in the growing maturity of linguistics, information theory, and cognitive science the staking of claims about language and mind once thought to fall exclusively within the philosopher's province. It is, further, hard to believe that any philosopher, still drawn to the prospect of universal theory, can remain forever immune to the disclosures of anthropologists, psychologists, and others in the social sciences. Quite possibly, the very ambitious advance of these areas has made some philosophers far more receptive to them and to the need to come to terms and comply with, and finally amalgamate the empirical within their theories. Such has been the party platform from Peirce to Quine, who sought to cure some of philosophy of its self-proclaimed aprioristic isolationism. Taking Austin's perspective, and asking what remains for philosophers to do, we might reasonably conclude that philosophy's beach-head has taken quite a few hits in our time, ones easily as dramatic as those which saw philosophy give up its claim on what became modern astronomy, chemistry, physics, and biology in the period from 1600 to 1900. The study of mind, Descartes' privileged dominion, is beholden and succumbing to the neurophysiological and computational sciences. Epistemology is making room for and giving way to psychology and information theory; the study of meaning and reference to linguistics and communication theory; the examination of goodness and justice to social science, social history as well as decision- and game-theory. What few self-subsistent and stubborn outcrops remain appear to represent bits of metaphysics, but even these have been rounded and softened by ontological pressures from outside. No latter-day Leibniz can seriously speculate about monads at the bottom of it all, and doctrines of ultimate substance are answerable to the purview of physics.

(2) All said and however self-deluded this sounds, Austin's erosion-displacement picture seems to have been unprepared for the peculiar resilience philosophy has shown. Increasingly many philosophers have hitched their star to the winners, as the explosive growth in the *philosophy of* phenomenon suggests. Further, the campaign to 'naturalize' various aspects of philosophy bespeaks an accommodating move to 'scientize' them. Like the cetaceans, philosophy has in part rescinded its land-based stronghold and gone back to sea, not so much in retreat as in adaptive advantage-seeking.

And like any parasite, philosophy has acknowledged and exploited its dependence upon a series of newcomer hosts for its nutrients. If science proper is for scientists, philosophy of science cannot be their proper business – and so similarly for the philosophy of physics, biology, social science, psychology. Even more afield, if law is best left to lawyers, philosophers still have philosophy of law. As for the normative sphere, philosophy is currently invading the bloodstream of medicine, business, environmental policy, and other practical domains. Call this resourceful entrepreneurial opportunism the *Partners for Progress* view. One consequence of this crafty attachment to robust self-sufficient hosts is that philosophers have increasingly learned to be better informed and more mindful than in the past about where their meals come from. Another consequence involves a variation on Wisdom's theme. Just as for Wisdom, anything whatever is fair game for philosophy, so for philosophical host-seeking, anyone, especially those central to the hosts themselves, can count as doing philosophy. It's not, for instance, that some biologists may have something of philosophical interest to say, as if, in that capacity, they were drifting into non-biological territory and happening almost inadvertently to attract the attention of philosophers proper. Quite the contrary, as *biologists proper* they are, at times, also doing *philosophy proper*, and, as such, deserve full voting rights in the philosophical community along with those officially designated as philosophers. Witness the widely mixed company in discussions about the nature of biological species or genetic engineering or information. One prognosis is that, in tracking their hosts and becoming more dependent upon them, many philosophers will simply meld permanently and indiscernibly into their hosts and be re-christened as 'theorists' proper within their hosts' environment, e.g., as evolutionary theorists, theorists of information science, cognitive science, linguistics, and so on. (This melding will also occur in the so-called 'policy' fields, those going under the template 'X-Management' – where 'X' ranges over 'business', 'wildlife', 'resource', 'personnel', 'hospital', and more. Such fields tend to be given over to what they view as operational rigour. The theoretical wing of the so-called 'policy sciences' is beholden to any of the social, biological, and information sciences from which they can derive their models. Nor should we ignore the outburst of fields under the 'X-Studies' banner which are scientific emulations under the regime of social science.) Note, this community relationship is not symbiotic as with the lichen where the algae and fungi set up house together. It tends more towards the way it's speculated that eukaryotic cells got going with the current intra-cellular bodies having invaded or otherwise been absorbed into the bio-polity by their prokaryote hosts. This is not so much a loss of territory and the displacement of philosophy as it is a form of permanent emigration and the assumption of new citizenship. Security and everlasting life are bought by trading off autonomy and self-identity. In some ways, this has the feel of Aristotle's

universal learning about it in that the business of philosophers draws upon and eventually becomes one with the business of anyone in business for themselves.

(3) Though the Partners for Progress view shares much with the Vanishing Content view, there is this twist: while the latter has philosophers en route to redundancy and the null club of alchemists and village smithies (rather in the same boat as contemporary mail-sorters and piano-tuners), the former bespeaks professional re-tooling and administrative re-structuring, the loss being the designation 'philosopher' but not its designees. The job nominally disappears, but its content survives hugely transfigured as an integral part of a wide corporate venture be it called 'Theoretical X' or 'Y Studies' where 'X' and 'Y' now range over the reigning spheres of newly legitimated enterprise in the worlds of learning, commerce, and public service.

VIII

So far, I've dabbled with three different outlooks concerning the proper zone and direction of philosophical attention, viz., the *Proper Content*, the *No Content*, and the *Vanishing Content* views. The first two seem unhelpful because they misrepresent the philosophical enterprise. That should come as no surprise. Each derives from its own preferred conception of philosophical practice and is effectively prescriptive (if not exhortative) rather than representative. To suppose that philosophy is constituted by its proper enshrined Core Questions or that philosophy primarily constitutes an enshrined *modus operandi* is to take philosophical sides from the start. The reality is much messier than either suggests. The Vanishing Content view at least has the virtue of standing outside the fray and trying to capture the domain of philosophy dynamically as part of an historical intellectual development in relation to other concurrent developments. In view of the historically unlikely outcome of the Vanishing Content account, I modified the dynamic in the *Partners for Progress* view, which offers a different ending to the story. What may happen to philosophers once philosophy ceases to exist as an autonomous, self-sufficient practice, once the demand for philosophy can do without philosophers officially so-called? In contrast to Austin's picture of the doomed heroic defence of an ever-crumbling cliff, I saw philosophers diving off into the waters in a self-protective and even self-satisfied mood of 'If you can't fight 'em, join 'em'. This captures, in part, certain recent trends which accommodate 'in-house' philosophers in formerly foreign enclaves, and in the increasing tendency of philosophers to market their wares as putatively crucial to the self-interests of higher-flying outsiders in, say, commerce, healthcare, and environmental management. Many of these phenomena reflect changes of emphasis within academic institutions

which, until very recently, were alone in providing status and standing to philosophers proper.

These vocational exigencies do not completely explain the tendency of philosophy to melt into the broader picture. Part of the ease with which these mergers can take place has, I surmise, much to do with upsets within philosophical methodology itself. At one time, philosophers counted on some allegedly obvious distinction between conceptual and empirical questions. The former made up their home turf. The latter was the province of empirical disciplines. But such reliance upon the conceptual/empirical divide isn't very secure. It doesn't demarcate an obvious zone of attention and a proper form of inquiry. 'Cobalt' or 'recessive gene' is no less a concept than is 'mind' or 'meaning'. For Aristotle, as for Boyle or Bacon, 'cobalt' would have been as fair game as was 'birth', 'justice', 'force', or 'knowledge' when it came to tracking philosophical game. Further, some contemporary philosophers (like Chomsky, Fodor, or Dennett) offer putative philosophical theories which are, by design, empirically testable. Such presumably sits well with the pragmatists for whom the divide between the empirical and the conceptual, the a priori and the a posteriori, the analytic and the synthetic, matters of fact and relations of ideas merely signals stages along a continuum of confidence, entrenchment, and commitment. If philosophy has no privileged role in articulating foundations for anything (let alone everything), if there is no First Philosophy, if philosophy is no more the Queen of the Sciences, philosophers seem to have no interestingly distinctive role to play at all – whether at the first-, second-, or *n*th order. Such an eventuality may explain why those of a philosophical bent need scarcely go extinct defending their dwindling cache of privileged a priori investigations. The very dwindling of the conceptual-empirical or a priori–a posteriori divide removes the last excuse anyone needs to bother safeguarding anything intrinsically philosophical. More directly, if these divides are abandoned, no one has any longer to suppose or, worse, pretend that philosophers are engaged in doing something no one else in the sciences or policy fields does or can do. (And, fortuitously, one may add, it cuts both ways.)

(1) Old attachments die hard. Surely there is something left to philosophy proper which just cannot sink noiselessly into the swamp of human business. What of scepticism, for instance, of philosophy's own home-grown anti-philosophy? On this, a few words. (i) Honest, full-strength, universal scepticism leads inexorably to the forced silence that comes with the suspension of belief and the flight from assertion. In one mighty suicidal blow, scepticism undoes more philosophy at a stroke than centuries of gradual loss to the sciences, for, once embraced, scepticism defeats further philosophical discourse. Philosophers have been ever uneasy about this menace, and the history of philosophy is replete with an in-house campaign to smite the foe. (ii) Though modern scepticism and empiricism came tightly

bundled via Hume, the ascendancy, tenacity, practicality, and raw success of the latter have made the former seem increasingly quaint, as quaint as anxieties about whether we inhabit a benign universe. It's hard to take serious scepticism seriously given that we're vastly less unnerved by our native fallibility than some philosophers once were. Hitched to Peircean pragmatism, empiricism looks to what we have assuredly achieved and dismisses thereby any fixation upon 'paper doubts' as merely pathological. (iii) Locally practised, scepticism counsels epistemic caution and emerges as a sensible operational antidote to credulity and sloppy inference. No one sincerely interested in getting to any interesting truth worth believing will ignore such counsel. Science preaches this message incessantly without supposing itself to be championing any particularly philosophical wisdom. It's good scientific business to keep up your sceptical guard, but you also learn when to drop it once danger is past. To keep up your guard permanently smacks of paranoia. To keep up your guard permanently *on principle* is just eccentric.

(2) If blueblood scepticism allows too few things to be true, the sovereignty of philosophy is no better served by its nemesis anti-anti-philosophy, a.k.a. universal relativism, which lets too many things be true. On this, a few more words. (i) Full-strength relativism leads inexorably not to silence but to a universal racket in which the voice of philosophy is lost in the din. Once articulated, such a stance defeats any sense of a philosophical stronghold by allowing anything to count as philosophy proper. Herein lies an ironic twist on the philosophy of lozenges. (ii) Although not nearly as antiquated as scepticism, universal relativism can tend to parade itself, particularly in its epistemic guise, as an invitation to wilful ignorance. Why? Because, those espousing such relativism thereby systematically excuse themselves from having to inquire whether any approach to the world might, just might, have an edge, and not just a perceived edge, over any otherwise preferred alternative. If the 'can't-say-anything' sceptic verges on severe doxastic disorder, the card-carrying 'must-listen-to-everything' relativist flirts constantly with the nihilism of indiscriminate tolerance. This carries operationally the same risks as scepticism. For, if the sincere sceptic might just as well walk off a cliff as not, thinking it unresolvable as to whether one will die, so too might the sincere relativist. (iii) Though indiscriminate tolerance does not logically follow from relativism, the principal motive for and attractiveness of relativism has been to stimulate the expansion of tolerance. Were this prospect not to flow thematically from relativism at all, the position would likely never have been sympathetically entertained simply because no one, in the face of any substantive disagreement, is ever forced or so overwhelmed as to conclude that all parties must somehow be right in their own way. Nor does coming to that conclusion forcibly constitute any insight about truth of any sort. Rather, taking disputants to be right in their own way is more a

functional ploy, a localized pragmatic strategy to kick-start the process of resolution and reconciliation in the face of obstructive, intractable, and uncooperative deadlocks. Local relativism is the *modus operandi* of diplomacy and conflict resolution. It gives (because it is so meant to give) those who are at odds to believe they're equally noteworthy. Having placated the combatants with the concession of equal respectful regard, the strategic relativist can get down to the real business at hand; namely, the signing of a treaty or the distribution of an estate. The alternative is war or the courts – which no one needs. Philosophers certainly weren't there first in this pacifier's game, nor have they any privileged wisdom to add to why it's sometimes good sense to let everyone think they're right.

IX

Someone is bound to object: 'Look, all you've done so far is flagrantly take for granted a palpably philosophical position; namely, a ramshackle brew of pragmatism and empiricism heavily dosed with naïve scientific realism. You've simply used these *ex cathedra* to snuff out the opposition, and then to conclude that philosophy as philosophy has nothing left to do.' Allow me a few rejoinders. First and most wimpishly, I warned at the outset that my inquiry could well be self-defeating. That's cold comfort, I admit, but it leaves the puzzle as to why questions about what philosophy is about should founder so. More pertinently, I have not so much used the position described above and thereby counted on its truth as I have tried to show what the *Partners for Progress* account requires of any surviving philosophical content so-called in the amalgamation ventures which swallow philosophy up. The speculation dovetails with the historical dynamic, i.e., if philosophy endures transfigured as dependent upon typical scientific (or neo-scientific) ventures, it will have no other survival option but to take on the scientific guise of its hosts. Whereas, from the vantage-point of an autonomous philosophy, that guise would seem to express but one epistemological option among others, from the inside of the protective host that guise is none other than the very surrounding environment, the amniotic fluid, outside of which there exists no credible philosophical point of view. Less colourfully put, philosophical content itself necessarily becomes an expression of such an empiricist pragmatism because that is precisely what makes the sciences what they are. In a way, the *Partners for Progress* view is just an historical scenario for the dissipation of an autonomous philosophy along lines that may have been applauded by the likes of Peirce or Carnap, however otherwise distant their convictions. Unlike the dissolution predicted by the late Wittgenstein and the Ordinary Language School which sought to expose Philosophy as a misbegotten confusion grounded on linguistic rigmarole, *Partners for*

Progress merely asks that philosophy abandon its pretensions to sovereignty by assuming its subordinate function. Locke's picture of the philosophical underlabourer comes to mind. The idea is: Science, at least, can neither tolerate or afford to accommodate philosophical *aporia*, nor, more importantly, is it remotely warranted in doing so. The moral: Whatever works for the advancement of science is all that there is needed for anything we know to be workable to work, philosophy included; and whatever we find does so work is neither beholden nor answerable to some imaginary independent bureau of investigation once called 'Philosophy'.

X

Anyone left listening should by now have lost patience. The cynical might scoff that we're doing just fine so long as no one else notices or calls our hand. Cynicism aside, there is manifestly lots to do even if it may not promise permanent employment. Aren't many issues unmistakably philosophical? Don't they demand attention from philosophers proper, not just in-house theoreticians on hourly wages? Look at the facts; notably, the ever-growing, never-slowing mountain of literature. What is this literature about? What makes it philosophical literature?

In the remainder, I consider the *Family Inheritance* view which states that what makes for philosophical content at any time is its being heir to its own philosophical heritage.⁴ One way to approach this is to note that philosophical literature is largely if not entirely about itself; more accurately, about what other recognized philosophers proper have had to say. Though other practises live in the present by directly addressing their own past, philosophy's self-reflective self-dependence runs deeper in that it has nothing but its self-acknowledged past on which to feed. Unlike geochemistry, which addresses and derives partly from the Earth itself, philosophy at a time comes directly and utterly from philosophical tradition, from its own past. We have here an historically-grounded practice which is self-sustaining, self-acknowledging, self-satisfying, self-monitoring, self-regulating, and self-perpetuating – a kind of intellectual perpetual motion machine. It's evolved almost as if to ensure that it doesn't seem to matter very much whether anyone outside notices or, indeed, whether Nature says 'No!' Scepticism, relativism, apriorism, and the populous clan of idealisms always lie waiting in reserve to shut out external complaints.

We do not so much discover, uncover, sniff out, or invent philosophical questions or content as we inherit them. We may re-cast and re-define this content for own time, cleanse from it the tincture of the old-fashioned, just as we may follow up on new questions bred from this content, but we never have to and, indeed, cannot start anew. Something-out-of-nothing was Descartes'

splendid self-deception. The questions and the very way we take them to be questions of a philosophical stripe are passed down to us by our philosophical predecessors, who, in turn, were funded by their forebears. When Ryle smells a philosophical problem, his nose has already been trained much like those of the beagles at Auckland International. A Ryle, though, may be special in having a particularly acute sense of smell, and we're wise to follow the scent he whiffs. We always start out as philosophical beneficiaries. As with any inheritance, what we receive may be squandered and lead to various bankrupt ventures, or it may be fruitfully invested and give rise to new opportunities which we in turn pass on. Among bankrupt ventures we may now identify theistic influences, say, or faith in the ubiquity of purpose. We may now count among the good investments the formalization of logic, consequentialist ethics, and certain strands of realism. Our inherited capital may languish unspent and lose value just because of information inflation raging all around which it fails to protect itself against. Such may seem the fate of philosophical models which start to look outmoded; for example, any superannuated devotion to an Aristotelian substance-property ontology or to hard causal determinism well into a century which has undergone and accepted massive scientific revisions in the conception of matter. By parity, one day, moral and political philosophers really will have to take Darwin and physical anthropology seriously lest their work inauspiciously seem to rest on the premise that we humans just sprang up here *ex nihilo* and extempore.

(1) Have I picked on philosophy unfairly as singularly constituted and sustained by its use of its own past? Surely, any long-standing investigative practice feeds and grows upon its own past, learns from its own mistakes, regulates its own future, re-writes its own history by writing out its former dead-ends and writing off its miscreants. All this is true, but philosophy distinguishes itself in one respect. It seems, like Art in its purest forms, to operate as if unaccountable to anything but itself. It lacks anything like the nagging external pressure driving the chemist to ask just how many elements exist on Earth or the botanist to wonder why one complement of plant species supersedes another. The reply that this merely distinguishes empirical from non-empirical investigations is itself inimitably and self-servingly philosophical. It segregates the empirical as a separate species of inquiry, and so sheds its association with anything against which it need be pegged other than second-order reflections about the empirical domain itself. Of course, philosophy isn't mere anarchic make-believe. Philosophers scarcely allow each other that much freedom. But philosophy has a deep fondness for methodological idealism, for self-construction, and this binds its practitioners utterly to their own collective self-made enterprise. A scientist no one ever listened to can have been a great scientist all the same, all along, just because Nature was always there to be unveiled. A permanently unsung philosopher

just doesn't properly exist as a philosopher. One cannot, contra John Wisdom, philosophize *qua* philosopher about any more than what philosophical tradition and one's standing philosophical community counts as philosophy.

If philosophy has abandoned any first-order ambitions, to identify philosophy as inherently a second-order discipline detaches philosophy's accountability to the world partially revealed by science. What is left? Thoughts and their objects and relations with one another – but not just any thoughts and any objects. What remains are precisely, exhaustively and exclusively, the thoughts of others who are just like us for having made us just like them by virtue of seeding the very thoughts we have about what they have passed on to us. No science could develop exclusively on such fuel. One happy bonus is that philosophy, unlike science, cannot possibly fail as a venture. Where we can concede our most fundamental scientific enterprises as having got things mostly wrong for much of history, philosophy systematically eludes that risk. Why? Because of its absolute authority in determining what it is to be about, what form that takes, and to what it will not succumb.

XI

The tradition of inheritance is both oral and written, sustained by reading, writing, teaching, talking, and has across time, from the Academy through the Church to the tertiary education sector, been institutionally cast, maintained, and legitimized thereby. Philosophy exists and persists as a succession of Schools. Philosophical problems are those matters which those who are officially recognized within a School to be philosophers proper tend to be worried about in their capacity as philosophers proper. One gets to be a philosopher proper by being so officially anointed by philosophers proper. One stays a philosopher proper by exercising one's philosophical worries within the context of those institutions which legitimize one's activities as properly philosophical. It could have developed otherwise. It could have prevailed as cabinet-making has prevailed, or gardening, or cookery. Human practices transmit information and authority by various media. Philosophy is inherently bookish, and bookish practices have their own bookish causal nexes.

(1) How are philosophical communities constituted? How are they structured, and how do they perpetuate themselves? These are huge questions and I can here only hint at an opener. In previous work, I distinguish between strongly hierarchical virtuoso-led communities (such as those in the performing arts) and professional communities, which demand, however unsuccessfully, equal proficiency from all their practitioners (like medicine and engineering).⁵

Philosophy falls into neither camp, because philosophical training does not wilfully aim to preserve an elite corps of extraordinary practitioners, nor does it aspire to make every one of its practitioners equally accomplished, and, optimally, the best there can be. At first blush, philosophy, like music composition, relies on its standing pantheon of undying titans, but their continuing worth, unlike in composition, is as much a function of their ever-instructive captivating mistakes as it is of their eternal insights. Philosophy encourages giant-killing as much as it sanctions alliances with one titan or another. Great philosophers have to be greatly imperfect. By contrast, no living composer would seek to be labelled Mozartian nor would any self-flatteringly so label themselves. No one would praise Bach for having been instructively in error. Perhaps the most one can say is that great philosophers are those who have been institutionally sustained as greatly influential while being deemed to be worthy of continuing influence. We think Humean thoughts because we still read Hume; and we read Hume because we still think Humean thoughts. The philosophical community is buttressed by and almost suspended from its very refusal ever to break ties with its self-perpetuated lineage of magnificently errant forebears. Philosophy's special claim to ever-lasting life derives, perhaps, from its being so structured as never growing up or having to. Those bits of it that do grow up leave home and become biology or physics or psychology – and never look back too seriously.

XII

This account is socio-philosophical with a mildly Socratic seasoning. It says: Seek not for the content of philosophy outside the practice of philosophers, and, further, seek not the practice of philosophers outside the conventions and institutions which make and have made that practice and its transmission of content both possible and reliable. Unlike both Wittgensteins, who saw the fitting end of philosophy as self-annihilatory – kick away the ladder once one achieves escape velocity or dissolve all puzzles in the universal solvent of table-talk – this account takes philosophical content to be stably, because wilfully, self-perpetuating. Philosophy cannot run out of things to do because it cannot run out of or use up its own past; and the longer that past gets, the more assured we are that there will be more in it to revive and talk about. The family just keeps getting bigger. No matter that we may often speak uncharitably of our ancestors. We need them all the same. Unlike scientists, philosophers never quite bury all their dead. At least, there always appears to be just enough life left in most temporarily superseded views to ensure many of them a comeback when enough of a climate change permits it.

XIII

I have centred much of this discussion on liberal elaborations of insightful speculations of John Wisdom and John Austin; in brief, that philosophy is all method and no substance, or that philosophy is substance alright, but irreversibly diminishing substance. Wisdom's account breathes everlasting life into philosophy at the expense of its having more to say than it could possibly have to say. Austin's account foretells the inevitable demise of philosophy because it must become increasingly silent about an increasing number of substantive issues which once were under its dominion. These stories respectively overshoot and undershoot the way things seem to work. Many issues are not properly philosophical, so one cannot philosophize about anything whatsoever without seeming silly. And, some issues which were once the proper object of philosophy just aren't any more for good reason.

Austin helps us understand some of what has happened by seeing philosophy as losing ground to science and other organized practices, and so becoming outmoded in various of its branches. But Austin failed to anticipate how well philosophy could capitalize on its losses and re-emerge as a dependent provider of theory to these practices, thus ensuring its lifespan to coincide with that of its new hosts. By way of preserving some sense of delimited but adaptively changing content and, at the same time, acknowledging that philosophy's persistence is both autonomous and indefinitely self-sustaining, I resorted, not to any specifics about content, not to any hard Core, but to a continuous and dependably consistent historical process of transmitting pedigree, i.e., to a variant on the 'Turtles-All-the-Way-Down' syndrome with an admixture of stray mutant variation and territorial opportunism. This seems evasive because it leaves the question of determining philosophical content entirely at the mercy of the shifting winds of intellectual fortune. But not quite, since I located philosophy entirely within institutional confines. These institutions can be studied both historically and structurally. So, whatever we wind up identifying as philosophical content proper can only, at best, be historically and institutionally explained, not demonstrated or defined, by appeal to factors relating back to those institutions themselves. This hardly promises a saga of the relentless realization of Absolute Spirit, but appeals instead to yet another complex of social, political, and intellectual tendencies which make a practice the practice it has become.

Isaiah Berlin remarked that, once the dust had fallen away from our time, we would see philosophy's greatest twentieth-century achievements to have been formal logic and the history of ideas, neither of which is especially philosophical. To these one could add the attractively distracting star-hitching stratagem, surely one of the cleverest gambits befitting those who have plotted all along to keep the family going just as it's always been.

NOTES

- 1 Certain themes which seem to fit squarely in the list of favourites have largely been ignored. Among such bypassed topics, one might include Luck (or Fortune), though interest in this may have been expressed indirectly through concerns about Freedom and Fate. More oddly, no special interest has been shown in Life, not at least in the Western tradition, even though Mind has been all-absorbing. Correlatively, Death has been off the list for centuries. Similarly, though Rationality has been a mainstay at least since Plato, Sanity and Madness have enjoyed negligible attention. Nothing intrinsically non-philosophical besets such notions. Historically, however, they just seem not to have interested those of the standing patriarchy currently honoured as having set the agenda. What makes this agenda the proper one is precisely the present puzzle.
- 2 Consider this gruff dismissal of philosopher's meddling in the domain of the scientist: '[A] discussion of the philosophical significance of the discoveries of physical and mathematical science must be left to the theoretical physicists and to the mathematicians. They alone, in view of their wide knowledge of facts and their mastery of the rigorous mathematical mode of thinking, are in a position to coordinate the apparently disconnected results furnished by experience and by reason. If, then, a super-philosophy is to be attained, it would appear that the most successful results would ensue from a work of collaboration between the scientists of the various branches of knowledge' (see A. d'Abro, *The Evolution of Scientific Thought*, 2nd ed. [New York: Dover Publications, 1950], p. 354). Though d'Abro's optimism may now seem old-fashioned, the sentiments expressed about the near impertinence of philosophy as practised by philosophers have not quite abated in many circles.
- 3 Consider the following robust take on the issue: 'Some philosophers (Dewey, for example, and maybe Austin) hold that philosophy is what you do to a problem until it's clear enough to solve it by doing science. Others (Ryle, for example, and maybe Wittgenstein) hold that if a philosophical problem succumbs to empirical methods, that shows that it wasn't really philosophical to begin with. Either way, the facts seem clear enough: questions first mooted by philosophers are sometimes coopted by people who do experiments' (see Jerry A. Fodor, 'Propositional Attitudes', in *Representations* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981], p. 177).
- 4 In this, I happily acknowledge being influenced by the 'historical definition' approach to Art taken by Jerrold Levinson and James Carney. For Levinson, 'an artwork is a thing that has been seriously intended for regard-as-a-work-of-art, i.e., regard in any way pre-existing artworks are or were correctly regarded' (see Jerrold Levinson, 'Refining Art Historically', *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism* 47 [1989], pp. 21–33). For Carney, something is an artwork if and only if 'it can be linked by those suitably informed, along one or more various, specific dimensions, to a past or present general style exhibited by prior artworks' (see James Carney, 'The Style Theory of Art', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72 [1991], pp. 273–89). See also, Stephen Davies, *Definitions of Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991) and Robert Stecker, *Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997). Unlike Levinson and Carney, however, I take the continuity of philosophical heritage to *explain* rather than to *define* what makes for philosophical content proper at a time.
- 5 Stan Godlovitch, *Musical Performance: A Philosophical Study* (London/New York: Routledge, 1998), esp. ch. 2.

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