

Metaphilosophy

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A metaphilosophy is a view on the nature of philosophy. Metaphilosophical reflection arises from the difficulty of isolating a distinctive subject matter for philosophy, since unlike other well established academic disciplines, there is no obvious feature uniting traditional philosophical problems beyond tradition itself. When some feature is alighted upon, this is liable to be considered partisan, and thus an attempt to impose a hegemony by a particular philosophical faction rather than an attempt at neutral definition. So since there is no easy or uncontroversial way to say what philosophy is, introductory texts and lecture courses typically have recourse to examples - What are minds?, Is freedom possible?, etc. - within a very short space indeed. Some philosophers think this is no bad thing, seeking to make a virtue of metaphilosophical quietism on the grounds that philosophy already operates at such a high level of generality and abstractness as to render a further level of reflection practically devoid of content.¹ Nevertheless, without determining what is distinctive about a philosophical problem, and hence what would constitute a solution to such a problem, philosophers can never be sure their efforts are well directed. For this reason and others, many of the greatest philosophers and philosophical movements have adopted distinctive metaphilosophical positions; British philosophy has produced a notably high proportion of these.

Metaphilosophy takes on a particular urgency in light of the apparent lack of progress in philosophy, for philosophers still concern themselves with questions posed by the Greeks, and it is perfectly legitimate to refer to positions hundreds or even thousands of years old: the history of philosophy is a part of contemporary philosophy in a way that the history of science is not a part of contemporary science. Many philosophers have seen this as an embarrassment, and so tried to fashion a new approach to philosophy which would set it on what Kant called the 'secure path of a science'², the hope being that through the adoption of a more scientific methodology, philosophical results might be established which future generations could build upon, as scientists take for granted and build upon previous research. But other philosophers have not been so optimistic, casting doubt not on previous approaches to traditional problems, but on the

¹ E.g. T. Honderich & M. Burnyeat (eds.) *Philosophy as it is*. London: Allen Lane 1979, p. 1.

² Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason* (trans. N. Kemp Smith). London: Macmillan 1933, p. 21.

problems themselves, arguing that they are misconceived, illusory, or insoluble in principle. A third sort of response, however, has been to defend the record of philosophy, rejecting the impression of a lack of progress as based on an inappropriate comparison with science, and hence a misunderstanding of the philosophical enterprise. But this, of course, only underlines the importance of understanding what that enterprise consists in.

Much of metaphilosophy has involved placing philosophy in relation to not only science, but also theology and common-sense; philosophy has variously been conceived of as underwriting, debunking, or elucidating each of these three. That these interrelations are so important to the identity of the subject is explained to some extent by its history, since it was in the process of breaking the link Scholasticism made between science and theology, that philosophy first began to emerge as the separate discipline we recognise today. Descartes's attempt to legitimise the new mathematical science by providing a general foundation for knowledge not based on authority, was a project that amounted to neither science nor theology, and his rejection of sensory experience as a suitable basis for understanding the world was a departure not only from Aristotelian science, but also from common-sense. In this way, Cartesian philosophy carved itself out a distinctive role in relation to science, theology, and common-sense, from which it sought to adjudicate their respective claims to knowledge. British empiricism, however, was to be associated with a more modest metaphilosophical perspective, the seeds of which are to be found in the 'Epistle' to Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke followed Descartes's epistemological turn, but his empiricism led him to reject the ambitious aprioricism of Cartesian 'first philosophy', which had set out to provide firmer foundations for science than science itself could provide, and to instead describe his task as that of an 'Under-Labourer' for scientists like Newton, employing similar observational methods in order to describe the actual process of the acquisition of knowledge. The purpose of this was to determine exactly what it is possible for us to know, thereby 'removing some of the Rubbish' which stood in the way of the new science, i.e. what Locke saw as the empty disputes generated by the overambitious expectations of Aristotelianism and Cartesianism.

This division of labour between studying the boundaries of human understanding and experimental science proper was highly influential in the move away from the older, broader understanding of 'philosophy' that had encompassed science and serious learning of all kinds,

found in both Bacon and Hobbes. Tensions within Locke's system, however, led the next generation of empiricists to rethink their relationship with science, and also with common-sense. Berkeley's immaterialism was *prima facie* a direct affront to common-sense, and required a radical reinterpretation of science, its thesis of the inertness of ideas effectively stripping all causal power from the natural world, and undermining any notion of mechanically explaining interactions between material substances. According to Berkeley's conception of philosophy, however, metaphysical interpretation is able to largely swing free of ordinary talk and scientific practice, correcting some misconceptions, perhaps, but ultimately presenting views to be assessed on their own independent merits. This was the metaphilosophical import of his injunction to "think with the learned, and speak with the vulgar"³: talk of physical objects and of laws of nature governing their interactions would inevitably persist, but could be understood in a variety of different ways, depending on one's metaphysical commitments. Philosophy was not just scientific underlabouring, but had its own sphere of autonomy.

With Hume, the reins are pulled in, and suspicion of philosophical reasoning is given not only its first major expression, but also an influential diagnosis. According to Hume, sceptical philosophical arguments, such as Berkeley's arguments for immaterialism and his own arguments against mental substance, bring us to conclusions so opposed to common-sense that human nature prevents our believing them, an impasse that 'carelessness and in-attention alone can afford us any remedy'⁴: thinking with the learned and speaking with the vulgar were incapable of peaceful co-existence. Hume's diagnosis was that philosophy had gone astray by failing to recognise the ways in which thought is hemmed in and structured by instinct, habit and passion, thereby concerning itself with questions which reason cannot in principle decide, but has no need of deciding. Reason is legitimately employed in 'abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number' and 'experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence', but when overextended in metaphysical reasoning, the results could be 'nothing but sophistry and illusion'.⁵ This strategy of distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate forms of philosophy - in this case, between Hume's own analyses and rationalist metaphysics - was to become a mainstay of subsequent metaphilosophy. And another important metaphilosophical effect of Hume's work was to bring philosophy's relation to common-sense centre stage, for it was in

³ Berkeley, G., *The Principles of Human Knowledge*. Sect. 51.

⁴ Hume, D., *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Book I, Part IV, Sect. II.

response to Hume that Reid founded the Scottish common-sense school. Reid denied reason is naturally opposed to common-sense, blaming Hume's conclusions on his subjectivist Cartesian premises.⁶ Reid's alternative, that philosophy should begin in an elucidation of common-sense, was to re-emerge strongly in the twentieth century.

The nineteenth century saw two distinct forces driving metaphilosophical conceptions in opposite directions. On the one hand, the influence of German metaphysics, and especially Hegel, led to more ambitious conceptions of philosophy, an emphasis on metaphysics rather than epistemology, and much closer ties with theology. On the other hand, the rise of empirical science and materialism - diametrically opposed to the *a priori* system building and idealism of the Hegelians - led to increased suspicions of philosophy, as codified in Compté's influential view that metaphysics is simply a stage in the progression of knowledge towards science.⁷ This view of philosophy as proto-science, the 'fissiparous mother of all the sciences' rather than the 'queen of all the sciences', is still voiced today.⁸ However, the next important metaphilosophical statements from British philosophers were to come with twentieth century attempts to secure for philosophy its own specialist niche, so that it might no longer be seen as challenging science, or as superseded by science, but rather as a complimentary endeavour.

The guiding idea behind the linguistic turn in philosophy was that the grammatical form of language might be a misleading guide to its underlying logical form, and that philosophical problems could be shown to result from taking grammar at face value. Such problems could then be resolved - or rather dissolved - by revealing the actual logical form or 'syntax' in question. Russell thought this method, exemplified by his own theory of descriptions, had inaugurated a new scientific era in philosophy: his *History of Western Philosophy* begins by defining philosophy as 'something intermediate between theology and science', a 'No Man's Land, exposed to attack from both sides', and ends in a manifesto for the 'philosophy of logical analysis', which claims questions 'formerly obscured by the fog of metaphysics' could now be 'answered with precision' - though moral and political philosophy would have to remain in the

⁵ Hume, D., *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. Sect. XII, Part III.

⁶ Reid, T., *An Inquiry into the Human Mind*. Chicago: Chicago University Press 1970, p. 127.

⁷ Andreski, S. (ed.) *The Essential Compté* (trans. M. Clarke). London: Croom Helm 1974, p. 19.

⁸ Urmson, J.O. (ed.) *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers*. London: Hutchinson 1960, editor's introduction, p. 11; Kant, op. cit., p. 7.

hinterland.⁹ This demarcation of philosophical analysis from metaphysics is radicalised in Ayer's logical positivism, with the proposal that metaphysics must be 'eliminated'. Ayer thought of himself as updating Hume, whose prescription for avoiding 'sophistry and illusion' was simply a 'rhetorical version' of Ayer's own verificationist rejection of the sentences of metaphysics and theology as 'devoid of literal significance', and by showing that 'the majority of those who are commonly supposed to have been great philosophers were primarily not metaphysicians but analysts', Ayer sought to replace suspicion of philosophy with suspicion of metaphysics, in which the new, scientific philosopher could enthusiastically concur. Not only was there no potential for conflict between science and philosophy, but philosophy could in fact be of great benefit to science, providing definitions to lay bare the connections between scientific language and experience, and helping newer sciences like psychology to 'emancipate themselves from metaphysics'.¹⁰

Philosophy's connection with common-sense, though downplayed by Russell and logical positivists like Ayer, was already a central theme of the new linguistic philosophy in Moore, and is reaffirmed in Wittgenstein's view that 'philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*'¹¹, that is, when forms of language are taken out of the ordinary contexts of use which determine their meaning. Wittgenstein's insistence that philosophy is not a science, in stark contrast to the aspirations of logical positivism, and his therapeutic conception of philosophy, for which philosophical problems are conceptual confusions to be dissolved by reminding ourselves how language is used in everyday life, were to lead to the preoccupation with the minutiae of ordinary linguistic idioms which characterised the ordinary language movement. For Ryle, the appeal to ordinary language was based on both a scepticism about there being any unitary underlying logical form amidst the vast multiplicity of functions language can perform - as he wrote, 'Back to ordinary language' can be ... the slogan of those who have awoken from the formaliser's dream' - as well as a distrust of philosophical terms of art which had 'acquired no discipline of their own', by contrast with words learnt 'in the hard school of daily life'.¹²

⁹ Russell, B., *History of Western Philosophy*. London: Routledge 1991, p. 13 & pp. 783-9.

¹⁰ Ayer, A. J., *Language, Truth and Logic*. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1971, pp. 70-72 & pp. 200-202.

¹¹ Wittgenstein, L., *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G.E.M. Anscombe). Oxford: Blackwell 1953, sect. 38.

¹² Ryle, G., *Collected Papers, vol. 2*. London: Hutchinson 1971, pp. 315-7.

Much ordinary language philosophy was polemical in intent, seeking to dissolve traditional problems by revealing ‘category mistakes’ (Ryle) or exposing simplifying and decontextualising assumptions (Austin), but there were also more positive metaphilosophical agendas. Austin, for example, hoped that through the piece-meal and fine-grained study of language he recommended, a ‘comprehensive science of language’ might develop, thereby disposing of ‘one more part of philosophy (there will still be plenty left) in the only way we ever can get rid of philosophy, by kicking it upstairs.’¹³ And Strawson, though he started out as a paradigmatic ordinary language philosopher, was soon to embrace what he called ‘descriptive metaphysics’, thereby reconceiving the Kantian project of uncovering the conceptual limitations of human thought as a study of ordinary language, the purpose of which was to reveal the ‘commonplaces of the least refined thinking’ which were nevertheless ‘the indispensable core of the conceptual equipment of the most sophisticated human beings’.¹⁴ This attempt to revive the fortunes of metaphysics by scaling down its ambitions has a striking parallel in Collingwood’s conception of a ‘metaphysics without ontology’, the task of which was to identify the ‘absolute presuppositions’ of different forms of inquiry.¹⁵ This parallel belies the fact that Collingwood came from the idealist tradition, and was an active critic of the new linguistic philosophy: metaphilosophy, like philosophy itself, does not develop along constant trajectories.

In more recent years, the level of metaphilosophical reflection within British philosophy has remained high. Michael Dummett has been the most prominent advocate of the view that philosophy must take on a ‘genuinely scientific character’, holding that ‘philosophy has only just very recently struggled out of its early stage into maturity’, but is now ready, through the development of a systematic theory of meaning, to become a collective enterprise with agreed upon methodologies and criteria of success.¹⁶ A very different perspective, however, is adopted by Colin McGinn in his *Problems in Philosophy*, a rare book-length treatment of metaphilosophy, which defends the view that,

The reason we find philosophical knowledge so hard to obtain ... is not that we are asking vacuous pseudo-questions, nor that we are bewitched away from commanding a clear

¹³ Austin, J.L., *Philosophical Papers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1970, p. 232.

¹⁴ Strawson, P.F., *Individuals*. London: Methuen 1959, p. 10.

¹⁵ Collingwood, R., *An Essay on Metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998, pp. 17-48.

¹⁶ Dummett, M., *Truth and Other Enigmas*. London: Duckworth 1978, pp. 454-8.

view of our own ordinary concepts, nor that the truth lies concealed too deeply within our conceptual scheme, nor that we are dealing with a peculiarly rarefied ontology. It is, rather, that we are trying to force our cognitive faculties to deliver knowledge of phenomena whose nature those faculties are not cut out to comprehend.¹⁷

On this view, lack of progress in philosophy is not only real, but bound to continue, since the discipline centres on issues irresolvable for members of our biological species, issues simply too far removed from the pressures our cognition evolved to deal with. Whatever its merits, McGinn's view certainly augments the traditional stock of metaphilosophical options, and may signal a new proliferation of metaphilosophical reflection. Whether this would be favourable to philosophy is another question: that there is already so much divergence in metaphilosophy may, as many suspect, reflect some flaw or lack of cohesion to philosophical activity. But it may, alternatively, reflect nothing more than that philosophy remains a field of inquiry in which nothing is taken for granted; perhaps this is a symptom of its health.

¹⁷ McGinn, C., *Problems in Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell 1993, p. 150.