

What is Philosophy?

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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. Philosophers are too impressed by the apparent lack of progress of their discipline. There is some – albeit little – progress in philosophy. When philosophy makes progress, it delivers knowledge. Contra Armstrong, this is compatible with its theses remaining disputed:

“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)

It is also compatible with the claim that philosophers should 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 under-described, 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)

We should also refrain from making the wrong distinctions – like, e.g., the one between ‘continental’ and ‘analytic’ philosophy. We may, however, distinguish between two kinds of history of philosophy – strictly historical research and ‘commentary’ – and between philosophy – aiming at truth – and the ‘history of ideas’, which is neither history nor philosophy.

Is philosophy conceptual analysis, i.e. analysis of ‘words-as-we-understand-them’ (Jackson 1998: 33)? 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

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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.

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 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’ 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. If they are to be tolerated too, they must be tolerated for other reasons.

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