



WHAT PHILOSOPHY CAN DO

John Haldane

Until not so very long ago, many truly great minds devoted themselves to natural theology. In more recent times, however, the subject has receded as the Western world has come under the influence of styles of thinking, which, though varied, have in common a presumption that for now I will simply label “materialist naturalism.” We face a genuine intellectual challenge in keeping alive issues that were once constitutive of philosophy and overlapped with the concerns of theologians—issues such as what it might mean to say that human beings are rational animals, and whether human rationality implies the existence of an immaterial principle, and how the existence of rational animals might point to the existence of a supreme being: in short, issues of mind, soul, and deity.

Yet there is a further problem with discussing these issues in a way that can engage the audience envisaged when, in 1885, Adam Lord Gifford left a bequest providing for “a Lectureship or Popular Chair for Promoting, Advancing, Teaching, and Diffusing the

study of ‘Natural Theology’ in the widest sense of that term.” The problem is the academic professionalization of thought, a process that has often resulted in a narrowing of discussion and a loss of comprehension. This trend has become a threat to the sharing of serious thoughts about serious matters among serious people—and a threat as well to the future well-being of those branches of academic study that have traditionally been looked to for illumination on matters of fundamental importance and common human interest.

I am not at all of the view that it reflects badly on philosophers if an intelligent person who has not engaged in philosophical studies is unable to understand the structure of their analyses or the formulation of their arguments. Protracted thought quite properly conjoins and articulates its conclusions in ways that are not always immediately intelligible. Similarly, methods may be developed whose practice and point can be hard and perhaps practically impossible for the untrained to grasp. Of itself, that does not imply a fault in those methods.

Here I am in agreement with Timothy Williamson, formerly of Edinburgh University and now of Oxford, who in a contribution to a recent volume entitled *The Future of Philosophy* writes: “A question may be easy to ask but hard to answer. Even if it is posed in dramatic and accessible terms, that does not entail that the reflections needed to select between rival answers are equally dramatic and accessible. Such contrasts are commonplace in other disciplines; it would have been amazing if they had not occurred in philosophy.”

Williamson, however, then continues in a manner that might be judged to have passed from warranted defense to provocation: “Impatience with the long haul of technical reflection is a form of shallowness, often thinly disguised by histrionic advocacy of depth. Serious philosophy is always likely to bore those with short attention spans.” Indeed, in a footnote he adds, “Popularization has its place, in philosophy as in physics, but should not be confused with the primary activity.”

Certainly, the methods by which philosophers try to answer generally intelligible questions may be technical and the associated concepts obscure. But what is avoidable—and is thus culpable for not being avoided or discouraged—is the systematic development of speculative thought in ways that resist entry by non-professionals. Those who reasonably complain of this need not be histrionic ad-

vocates of depth, or burdened with short attention spans, or satisfied with “popularization” in place of the primary activity.

It is no good to say that the problems have become technical or that discoveries have left the layman’s understanding far behind. That would make sense if we were talking about physics or mathematics (and it may be significant that Williamson draws a parallel with the first of these), but we are concerned here with philosophy, broadly understood. Philosophical reflection begins with questions that intelligent and speculatively minded people ask. However protracted, specific, or technical the pursuit of answers may become, it should still be possible to formulate the substance of answers in terms that will be intelligible to intelligent and speculatively minded people—and not in terms that only fellow professionals (and only *some* of these) can understand.

Even worse than losing the power of communication is losing a sense of the importance of things to be communicated. This sometimes happens when philosophers forget philosophy’s intellectual roots in human beings’ common, pre-professional speculation—or, worse, forget what prompted an inquiry in the first place. So, for example, one may puzzle over whether it is better to think of a three-dimensional object—an ice cube, say—as *enduring* or *per-during* through an extended period of time: Is what exists at a given instant the whole of the object, a time-slice of it, or a time-point instantiation? These are genuine issues in metaphysics, as is the question of whether the cube is a substance, a cluster of co-instantiated properties, or a logical construction out of sense-data.

In thinking about such issues, however, it is tremendously important to remember that they arise because of pre-technical questions about identity—such as what makes the sapling of a decade ago and the tree of today one and the same plant, or what qualifies a modern building to be one and the same temple as existed on the same site hundreds of years previously.

Whatever significance such cases have, they are not, in the first instance at least, examples illustrative of developed philosophical theories. Rather, such questions naturally arise in the minds of the intellectually curious. I would go further and say that such curiosity is typically prompted and sustained by a background of practical interest. In the case of the plant’s identity, it might be a matter of ownership or liability, and in the case of the temple, one of religious propriety or simple pride.

I am not suggesting that every time metaphysicians think about identity, they have to trace things back to pre-theoretical puzzlement. Rather, they should ask why the particular abstract issue is important. And it will not do for serious philosophy to answer that it is merely a satisfying theoretical puzzle. That is game playing, be it ever so cerebral. It profits a philosopher nothing if in gaining a method of intellectual problem-solving he loses the significance and importance of the original problem.

Another way of becoming detached and losing a sense of what might be communicated between professional philosophers and other thinking people is to substitute new issues of lesser or limited significance for old ones of great and extensive importance. In the eighteenth century Kant identified three postulates of practical reason: the existence of God, the freedom of the will, and the immortality of the soul. What is involved in being a “practical postulate” is not something I can go into now, but I want to note that Kant’s selection is still close to the core preoccupations of philosophy through the ages.

For many thinking people these topics retain their fascination and significance. But in the two hundred years since Kant, they have become increasingly marginal to the mainstream of philosophy, and little now is said about them in the works that professionals produce for their colleagues. What accounts for this change?

A short answer might be that philosophers today, unlike their counterparts in earlier periods, no longer believe in God, immortal souls, or metaphysical freedom, and they have long tired of proving the non-existence of these. There may be something to this—but not, I think, very much. Pressed on these matters most professional philosophers, speaking *qua* philosophers, would be more likely to express agnosticism than nihilism about such possibilities, and no small number live, *qua* persons, as if they believe in them (or at least hold them as postulates).

The explanation for the gulf between the interest in such questions among non-philosophers and the neglect of them among academic thinkers lies elsewhere, I believe. It lies principally in a change, within academic circles, in the understanding of the nature and purpose of philosophy.

The ancient schools of thought—Platonic, Aristotelian, Cynic, Stoic, Epicurean, and Skeptic—commonly drew a distinction be-

tween “philosophy,” meaning the moral and spiritual formation of the soul or person, and “discourse about philosophy,” understood as the investigation of the nature of things and the modes of our knowledge of them. This distinction is related to the more familiar categories of practical and speculative philosophy. But whereas late-modern, recent, and contemporary thought has invested greatest effort and talent in the pursuit of *speculation*—in the form of epistemology, metaphysics and the philosophies of language and logic—the ancients give priority to *practice*, and, within that, to the cultivation of wisdom and the development of what the Greeks called “untroubledness” (*ataraxia*).

Much more of the writing of antiquity, the middle ages, and the early modern period belongs to “philosophy” in the sense of the “practice of wisdom” than is now generally recognized. The French historian of philosophy, Pierre Hadot, has argued that the Western idea of spirituality, which we are apt to think of as entirely religious in source, may have originated not in the Desert Fathers of Christianity, but in pre-existing philosophical traditions.

Indeed, he also suggests that this ancient conception of philosophy as practice need not be lost to us: “I think modern man can practice the spiritual exercises of antiquity, at the same time separating them from the philosophical or mythic discourse that came along with them. The same spiritual exercises can, in fact, be justified by extremely diverse philosophical discourses. These latter are nothing but clumsy attempts, coming after the fact, to describe and justify inner experiences whose existential security is not, in the last analysis, susceptible of any attempts at theorization or systematization.”

Though my thinking about these issues owes something to Hadot, I believe that what he says here about the separability of theory and practice is mistaken in an important way. If a practice is to be more than a sensory training, like a relaxation exercise, then it will have an intentional structure that constrains and is constrained by what one believes. Just as one cannot intend to do what one holds to be impossible, so one’s contemplative gaze is constrained by one’s conception of what lies at its point of focus. This is connected to the difference between *meditation*, which need have no object, and *contemplation*, which requires (at least an intentional) one—and it is connected as well with the fact that religious practice in the absence of belief is felt to be a doubtful thing.

Hadot may be wrong to loosen the link between philosophy and philosophical discourse, but he does at least remind us that phi-

losophers themselves once held them to be conjoined in overall philosophical practice. And while Hadot thinks we can have Stoic spirituality without Stoic logic and metaphysics, contemporary philosophers think we can and should have logic and metaphysics without Stoic spirituality—or any spirituality at all.

Since questions about God, the soul, and freedom lie within, or close to, the field of spirituality, even in the non-religious sense of the ancients, it is no surprise that these issues have tended to be left behind in favor of technical questions internal to the discourse of philosophy: questions about meaning, reference, logical consequence, epistemic justification, and so on. I am not suggesting that these are not philosophical issues—any more than a member of one of the ancient Athenian schools would have. But I am saying, as the ancients would, that the importance of these issues lies in the contribution they make to philosophy in the broader sense, which subsumes discourse and practice, and in which every thinking human being has an interest by virtue of being a thinking human being.

Someone might be tempted to reply that I am confusing philosophy with therapy or edification, and philosophers with therapists or sages. Certainly I want to avoid anything like the situation common in North American bookstores, in which metaphysics is taken to be a subdivision of the self-help category and books on aromatherapy sensual massage are shelved alongside others on dream interpretation, crystals, and theosophy. Once that absurdity is set aside, however, it is not clear just why we are supposed to reject the ancient understanding of philosophy as primarily concerned with the nature and destiny of man. Indeed, adapting the words of Timothy Williamson, one might say that impatience with the expectation of wisdom is a form of shallowness, often thinly disguised by rhetorical advocacy of discursive rigor.

To understand fully the neglect of mind, soul, and deity among academic thinkers, however, we must note a second change that has overtaken philosophy. Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the discipline came under pressure from two opposing sides: on the one side, material science, whose goal is empirical explanation, broadly understood; on the other side, a kind of hermeneutic theorizing, the aim of which is subversive disclosure. The main responses to these pressures fall into four camps: a yielding to scientism, or a yielding to hermeneuticism, or a turning to

historical accounts, or a swaying to and fro in a state of confusion about the nature and possibility of philosophical inquiry.

The scientific and hermeneutical pressures upon philosophy have their origins in nineteenth-century theorizing. There is a model of explanation of which chemistry, structured by the table of chemical elements and the laws governing their interactions, is perhaps the clearest example. According to this model, the full range of diverse entities and attributes is explicable in terms of a finite base and mode of combination. Such a theory allows one to say in terms of a lower level why things are as they are at a higher level and how they will be if certain causes are applied. The picture of explanation is reminiscent of the classical philosophical notion of demonstration: the derivation, by means of purely deductive reasoning from indubitable premises, of certain conclusions.

Modern scientists were not inclined to think that their subject could ever attain the status attributed by the ancients and medievals to a deductive system involving certain first principles. Not only did they recognize the difficulty of establishing such principles, but they realized that the formation and application of theories involved fallible judgment. Still, the success of chemistry posed a challenge to those wedded to the possibility of certain and universal knowledge—namely, philosophers.

The response to that challenge was varied. J.F. Ferrier of St. Andrews (originator of the term “epistemology”) tried, for instance, to revive the methods of the rationalists and develop metaphysics as a deductive science—only to be ridiculed by J.S. Mill, who had imbibed the new scientific model. Mill also noted that real science was probabilistic and provisional, and he judged that philosophy had better accept that it is similarly fallible.

One could explore other examples of the diverse response to the challenge from science, but the result would be to establish a general point: In direct inversion of the earlier state of things, science was taken by many philosophers to be the model of organized knowledge. And in an effort to attain for their own subject something of the success and consequent prestige enjoyed by science in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many philosophers conformed the style of their inquiries to those of scientists. Anyone familiar with metaphysics, philosophy of language, and philosophy of mind, as well as metaethics and increasingly even ethical theory, will know what I mean. Philosophy in these fields has taken the

form of creating theories to explain phenomena—where “explain” is closely tied to, and in some cases equivalent to, “prediction.”

Certainly, that amounts to a change of subject from philosophy as the ancients conceived it. But before we can claim that this represents an error, we need to explore the question of what philosophy’s purpose properly is. There is one large family of modern thought that would readily agree the scientific model of explanation is the wrong one for philosophy. This is the school of hermeneutic theories, which aims at subversive disclosure. In calling this approach “subversive,” I do not mean that it has no positive aims. Indeed, typically such approaches see themselves as offering some kind of liberation, a freeing from illusion or delusion—an emancipatory mission one can hear in the phrase used by some of its advocates: “prophetic postmodernism.”

An example may help one to see how these ideas work. According to Marx, the human world of thought and action is rooted in, and does not go beyond, its material base in economics. Social history is the record of class struggle. Marx was indebted to Hegel for the idea of historical dialectic, but where Hegel looked to art, religion, and philosophy to see the working out of a rational principle, Marx looked to economics and believed that what he saw there was the underlying reality of history in material evolution.

The extent to which this view is deterministic remains an interesting question, but, at any rate, the model of explanation seems, to those who hold it, to offer a form of subversive disclosure. Social structures, institutions, and practices may *appear* products of reason to the naive and deluded, but in reality they are effects of brute material force. At a certain level of resolution, differences between theories of this sort give way to striking resemblances. So Marxists and post-Marxists, Freudians and post-Freudians, Nietzscheans and post-Nietzscheans, Foucaultians and Derrideans, for all their differences, agree that the categories of philosophical and ethical analysis as traditionally understood are products of false consciousness—tales we tell ourselves and others in the interest of acquiring and retaining power and position in society.

Philosophers in the analytical tradition sometimes point out in a sentence or two that such theories commit the genetic or effective fallacies, as if this alone were enough to see them off as rival claimants to their position. The foundation of the charge is the idea that it is a confusion to identify the *content* of a claim with the *causes* or *effects* of its being made. Someone’s believing that marriage or the fine arts are valuable may be the result of his having

had this idea drummed into him, or of the fact that believing it makes things go better for him or for his interest group. But this has nothing to do with the question of whether the believed proposition is true.

Though insightful, this response can be question-begging, for it may be that there is indeed no truth at stake in the belief, in which case reference to cause and effect may be the only available explanation for why the belief is held. Equally, while the question of truth may remain, it may also be the case that what we think is more extensively the result of forces than of reasons, in which case the hermeneutic of subversive disclosure may provide the more relevant analysis.

In the face of this kind of challenge, some philosophers have yielded, giving up on traditional analysis and argumentation. Others continue to resist but do so by adding to the formal point of the genetic fallacy a studied indifference to the historical and social context of their own inquiries. This reaction suggests they may indeed be troubled by the possibility that these are determining factors—and so, in fear of that prospect, they bow their heads in conspicuous devotion to questions that could have no practical interest. Either response is an impoverishment of philosophy as traditionally practiced.

Some thinkers—believing it impossible to return philosophy to its earlier condition but filled with a distaste for the alternatives—have turned from the practice of philosophy to the study of its history. I am not one who draws a sharp line between these two. Indeed, I believe there is such a thing as “doing philosophy historically,” or engaging philosophically with earlier times and figures. There is also such a thing as working within a philosophical tradition that is extended across times and cultures. (I myself stand in this relation to Aquinas and to the tradition of Thomism.) Still, it is one thing to retain confidence in philosophical practice as something continuing across the centuries and another to retreat into the study of the past in face of a challenge from the present to which one thinks there is no adequate reply.

Finally, there is the reaction of those who neither yield wholly to the challenges nor hope to escape the implications for their own practice by returning to a study of the past. I have in mind here those who sway to and fro in a state of confusion, not really knowing what to say about whether there are perennial philosophical

issues or distinctive philosophical methods—which is to say, not really knowing whether there is such a subject as philosophy as traditionally conceived.

The phrase “philosophy as traditionally conceived” invites the question of what exactly philosophy is on this understanding. Part of the reply is *the integration of an answer to the question of how one ought to act as a human being in the world as one conceives it to be, with a true understanding of what it is to be a human being, of what it is for there to be a world, and of what is involved in thinking truly and acting rightly*. Such a reply gives the broad aims and content of philosophy, but it does not address an issue that has been felt most keenly in recent and contemporary times by philosophers. This is the very short question: What is philosophical thinking?

G.E.M. Anscombe, one of the finest philosophers of the twentieth century, characterized her subject as “thinking about the most difficult and ultimate questions.” Memorable as this may be, it is, as the scholastics would say, an extrinsic denomination. It tells us about philosophy by saying again what it is concerned with. I suspect, however, that Anscombe’s omission of a specification of the kind of thinking involved was not an oversight.

If I say that philosophy is abstract reflection, few will disagree, but that is because the phrase “abstract reflection” now connotes little more than rarefied thought. Historically, however, something definite was intended by this phrase. In the work of the medieval schoolmen, “abstraction” means thought removed from, and typically in the absence of, its immediate objects. This is in contrast to “intuitive cognition,” which means thinking about a thing itself as and when it is before us. Suppose we say we are able to think of a thing when it is present—because it impresses itself upon the mind. How then is it possible to think of it when it is absent? The traditional answer is that we can do so by having formed a concept of that thing, and more likely a general concept of things of that sort.

Similarly, with regard to reflection, the scholastics distinguished two levels of thinking, terming them “acts of first intention” and “acts of second intention.” In an act of first intention, one uses an abstracted concept to think of a thing or things answering to it—as when I now think of my family’s cat, Molly. In an act of second intention, the mind turns back upon the concept itself and makes it

the object of intellectual attention. So, in sum, abstract reflection is thinking about the contents of one's concepts.

This understanding—which has its roots in Plato and Aristotle, and is developed by Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, and Kant—is related to the practice of conceptual analysis that for many years defined the dominant mode of philosophy in the English-speaking world. And yet, when W.V.O. Quine and other twentieth-century American philosophers in the pragmatist tradition made their attack on the analytic-synthetic distinction, this notion of philosophy seemed to emerge mortally wounded.

In his 1704 *New Essays on the Human Understanding*, Leibniz drew a distinction between truths of reason and truths of fact, arguing that the former are necessary (or true in all possible worlds), while the latter are only contingently true (or true in this world). This seems to imply that truths of reason do not depend on any empirical fact while truths of fact depend upon something actually being thus or so. The distinction was enormously important in subsequent philosophy, paving the way for Hume and thereby for the logical positivism he inspired. Writing in his 1748 *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume makes the now-famous observation:


All the objects of human reason or inquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit relations of idea, and matters of fact. Of the first kind are the sciences of geometry, algebra, and arithmetic; and in short, every affirmation that is either intuitively or demonstratively certain. . . . Propositions of this kind are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe. . . . Matters of fact, which are the second objects of human reason, are not ascertained in the same manner; nor is our evidence of their truth, however great, of a like nature with the foregoing. The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness, as if ever so conformable to reality.

These sentences provided Hume and his followers with a method of challenging what had hitherto been assumed about the veracity of reasoning with respect to morality and value more generally, and with respect to religion and metaphysics: Are they matters of *fact*? If so, point to them. Are they matters of *reason*? If so, show the contradiction involved in denying them. The fact-reason distinction also provided an answer to the question of how philosophy could ever be certain—by showing that it could be so only if it were confined to the analysis of ideas and of the necessary relations between them.

Quine's achievement was to show that this distinction is question-begging. But where does this leave us? If as Quine sometimes seemed to suggest, all truths (other than strictly logical ones) are empirical, then what is the future for philosophy? Since Quine was himself of the scientific persuasion, he did not feel any problem in treating his practice as a form of rather general science. What, though, if one thinks there are genuinely metaphysical issues—such as those of the mind, soul, and deity—that do not belong to natural science?

The answer, I believe, lies in seeing that the possibility of philosophy as rational abstract reflection does not depend upon having a view of the scheme of truths and of modes of inquiry of the sort described by Hume and rejected by Quine. Here the phrase *abstract reflection* comes back into its own.

Suppose we say that concepts are formed in our dealings with reality and so are, in that respect, answerable to it. Even concepts built out of these reality-determined concepts have a connection back to actuality. Still, abstraction and reflection might remove one very far from particular things, and at that point one may be thinking about the most general and abstract possibilities. If what I have said is right, however, these scenarios will not be ungrounded possibilities. For example, to show that something is possible, it will not be sufficient to show that no logical contradiction follows from its supposition. Rather, one will have to look back to reality and ask what there determines how things can be. Along the way, there will continue to be conceptual truths to think about—not only those true merely by virtue of definition, but also those whose negation cannot be made sense of, given the body of beliefs, concepts, and conceptual connections we accept. On this understanding, thought and the world of common experience interpenetrate.

Philosophy, then, is the practical integration of an answer to the question of how one ought to act as a human being in the world as one conceives it to be, with a true understanding of what it is to be a human being, of what it is for there to be a world, and of what is involved in thinking truly and acting rightly. This integration is achieved through rational abstract reflection: the examination of the content of concepts derived from our engagement with reality—by which, through holistic interpretation, we arrive at rational truths, including ones relevant to answering questions about the existence and nature of mind, soul, and deity. 

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Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

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