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PLOTTING PHILOSOPHY'S FUTURE

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Fifty years ago, on May 7, 1959, the British novelist and scientist C. P. Snow presented the Rede Lecture at Cambridge University titled "The Two Cultures." The gist of that lecture was that a wide and worrisome gap had developed in Western society between the sciences and the humanities. During and after World War II, Snow had helped conduct interviews of thousands of British scientists and engineers. When he asked his subjects what books they had read, their typical reply was: "I've tried a bit of Dickens." Humanists, he discovered, were equally ignorant when it came to science. He surmised that they had about as much insight into

modern physics as did their Neolithic ancestors. Snow put much of the blame for this gap on overspecialization in education. He worried that the house of Western culture had become so deeply divided that it was losing its ability to keep pace with Russia and China and to "think with wisdom" in a world of accelerating social change where the rich "live precariously among the poor."

A different "two cultures" problem afflicts my own discipline of philosophy, and that is my subject here. But perhaps thinking about philosophy's future offers us additional insight into the problem that Snow expounded.

When nonphilosophers think about philosophy, they tend to think of it as the history of philosophy. They think of it as a succession of eminent philosophers—along with, of course, the theories those philosophers developed, the texts they wrote, and the movements they inspired. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle are the perennial favorites. After that, the lists vary according to taste and background, but there are some philosophers who seem never to get on these lists. I have found, for example, that a good way to kill conversations with nonphilosophers is to ask what they think of Willard Quine or Saul Kripke. Because Quine and Kripke are among the most influential American philosophers of the past fifty years, there is reason to wonder why they are not better known outside of philosophy.

One reason for their extramural obscurity is suggested by an imperious quip attributed to Quine, who is alleged to have said: "There are two kinds of philosophers, those who are interested in the history of philosophy and those who are interested in philosophy." What is intimated here is that the history of philosophy is not really philosophy at all, and that those who pursue such a history are not really philosophers.

Quine knew full well that philosophy departments were expected to conduct research and teach classes in the history of philosophy, but he did not think that service of that kind had much to do with the proper business of philosophy—working out solutions to philosophical problems like, What is there? and, What can we know? In other words, he saw two cultures within philosophy: a can-do culture akin to mathematics and science, and a can-teach culture akin to the humanities.

As a humanist and historian of philosophy, I am tempted to dismiss Quine's dichotomy as false. I am ready to point out that philoso-

phy, unlike the natural sciences, is the custodian of its own history. Astrophysicists do not think it is their task to write histories of astrophysics. They relegate that task to historians of science—a branch of learning that belongs to the humanities. Philosophers, in contrast, are jealous guardians of this duty and, thus, of their own footing in the humanities. I am also disposed to argue that every chapter in the history of philosophy is an experiment from which we can learn valuable lessons. I am inclined to insist that retelling the story of philosophy can be a powerful way of doing and critiquing philosophy. But these objections may miss a deeper point. Perhaps Quine's dichotomy should be construed, not as an imperious quip, but as a provocative way of raising an Aristotelian question about the telos—the good—of philosophy. Is the telos of philosophy to solve problems in the manner of the natural sciences, or is it to produce a rich succession of inspiring texts and ideas?

The answer I would like to give is, "Both!" Unfortunately, both alternatives face significant difficulties.

The first alternative is compromised by the fact that, after 2,500 years, philosophers have not reached agreement on the solution to a single, central philosophical problem by means of philosophical methods or argument. Scientists, in contrast, have enjoyed spectacular success in reaching provisional agreement on a wide range of problems and in changing the face of the world with technological applications. I emphasize the word *provisional*, for agreement in science is always subject to revision when new evidence warrants. If you had asked astrophysicists twelve ago what the universe is made of, they would have said "matter and energy" and referred you to the "standard model" of particles and forces, plus gravity, to describe the details. Today, most astrophysicists will tell you that that ordinary matter and energy make up only about 5 percent of what there is. The rest, they now say, is dark matter and dark energy—elusive stuff whose origin and characteristics remain unknown. Again, this is provisional knowledge, but it is the best answer we can get now, because it fits the relevant data better than any previous answer does. To page back in the history of science for an answer one finds more congenial or inspiring would be foolishness.

The case with philosophy is very different. If you ask philosophers, "What is there?" you will get a multitude of competing answers—including, "It's a matter of faith," from Roy Clouser, in *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*, and Quine's deflationary analysis, from "On What There Is," "To be is to be the value of a bound vari-

able." What you will not get is consensus, provisional or otherwise. Plato complained in *The Republic* that the quarrels of philosophers discredited the search for wisdom. Two thousand years later, René Descartes drew an even bleaker picture and set out to fix it: "As to philosophy," he wrote, "it [has] been cultivated for many centuries by men of the most outstanding ability, and that none the less there is not a single thing of which it treats which is not still in dispute, and nothing therefore, which is free from doubt."

Until a few decades ago, most philosophers nurtured the hope that a revolution in methodology or reforms in standards of practice could change this picture. Ludwig Wittgenstein, whom Bertrand Russell accused of having "the pride of Lucifer," claimed in 1921, in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, to have "found, on all essential points, the final solution of the problems [of philosophy]."

Eleven years later, the English pragmatist F. C. S. Schiller predicted in *Must Philosophers Disagree? And Other Essays in Philosophy* that, if philosophers selected for their "open-mindedness, honesty, and good temper" were brought together for "thorough and systematic discussion" under conditions that encouraged mutual understanding and the working out of differences, "they could clear up and clear away a majority of the questions which cast a slur on Philosophy in considerably less than . . . five to ten years."

Philosophers today are far more skeptical about the chances for philosophical consensus. Few think that agreement on central problems will ever be realized, and some declare openly that philosophical problems are unsolvable (Hilary Putnam, in *Realism with a Human Face*) or at least unsolvable for human brains (Colin

McGinn, *Problems in Philosophy*).

Given philosophers' failure to reach agreement and the erosion of hope that this might one day change, the second alternative seems all the more appealing. If the telos of philosophy is to produce a rich succession of inspiring texts and ideas, then it may be a plus that the ingenious worldviews and critical insights that philosophers have developed over the centuries don't converge. Aristotle's teleological worldview fell from favor a long time ago, but it remains a majestically coherent way of thinking about ourselves and the world we inhabit. George Berkeley's arguments that one cannot prove the existence of material substances have never been decisively refuted—not even by Samuel Johnson's petulant kicking of a rock. But practically no one today accepts Berkeley's conclusion that all that exists are minds and ideas.

When seen from this angle, the beauty of philosophy is very much like the beauty of poetry. I don't share John Milton's theology—though I am sometimes tempted to believe that Satan invented gunpowder—but I am happy to share the world he envisioned. Milton's world is a kind of refuge, a place where the ways of God and the woes of man are united in poetic intelligibility.

Sometimes I like to slip into Franz Kafka's world, a nightmarish warren in which earnest people strive in vain to get on with their lives in the face of hopeless odds and cosmic silence. Kafka consoles me for having to commute on the New Jersey Turnpike. I also like to roam James Joyce's Dublin, where microcosm becomes microcosm and the mundane is transfigured into the mythic. Each of these worlds is remarkable in its own right, but it would be foolish to ask which represents the consensus of poets or the best answer to date in light of relevant evidence.

So why not treat philosophy the same way? Jean-Paul Sartre is among my favorite philosophers. At a time when other philosophers were trying to dissolve the problem of consciousness by reducing it to something else, Sartre put it at the center of his philosophy. In his most important work, *Being and Nothingness*, he called consciousness Nothingness (*le Néant*) to emphasize that it is a nonsubstantial being that can exist only as a revelation of something other than itself. What flows from this is a rich worldview that includes, among other things, a radical theory of free will and an original framework for psychoanalysis. Sartre's world is as atheistic and pessimistic as Milton's is theistic and hopeful. He closes the main body of *Being and Nothingness* with these words:

"Thus the passion of man is the opposite of that Christ, for man loses himself as man so that God can be born. But the idea of God is contradictory, and we lose ourselves in vain. Man is a useless passion."

Now, as much as I admire the gritty originality of Sartre's picture of the world, I find it unconvincing in many respects. I doubt the usefulness of treating consciousness as its own kind of being. I am not convinced that human beings have as much free will as Sartre claimed. I find his psychoanalytic theory naive. I don't think the concept of God is contradictory. And I believe the pessimism of *Being and Nothingness* had more to do with temper of the times—the darkest days of World War II—than with anything basic to Sartre's understanding of the human condition. Sartre himself confirmed this by turning his pessimism into optimism after the liberation of Paris. (His best-known repudiation of his pessimistic assessment of the human condition was a lecture he gave at the Club Maintenant on October 28, 1945, titled "Existentialism Is a Humanism"—that lecture was published a few months later and has since become a classic.) Today the gloominess of Sartre's writing before 1945 is more likely to elicit smiles than shudders. Perhaps, nothing illustrates this more cheerfully than Danny Shanahan's 1991 *New Yorker* cartoon "The Letters of Jean-Paul Sartre to his Mother." A stocky Madame Sartre stands before an empty rural mailbox. A balloon shows us her thoughts: "*Sacre bleu*! Again with the nothingness, and on my birthday, yet!"

I have talked about Sartre in some detail as a way of illustrating my own comfort with looking at philosophy through the lens of

history and appreciating the power and originality of individual philosophers without worrying about consensus on the solution to philosophical problems. I must confess that I have been looking at philosophy this way for a long time. I started college as a physics major, but after causing a nasty explosion in a chemistry lab, I was counseled to seek a major in which I was likely to do less harm. Philosophy seemed like a safe haven, especially if one stuck to the task of studying and teaching the ideas of eminent philosophers rather of trying to solve philosophical problems.

As the years went by, I realized that you can take the lad out the lab, but you can't take the lab out of the lad. I never lost my interest in science or my reservations about the ability of philosophy to secure knowledge of the world through methods independent of empirical research. Luckily, my style as a teacher was to celebrate what was best in each philosophical text, and my duties as a dean insulated me from thinking very deeply about anything. But things began to unravel several years ago, when I started to write the book *Why Philosophers Can't Agree.* It occurred to me that my historical outlook embodied a historical distortion. One may treat philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes as akin to great poets, but that is not how they saw themselves. They wanted to answer philosophical questions and to do so in ways that would be persuasive to anyone who was willing and able to follow their arguments. In essence, they agreed with Quine that the telos of philosophy was to solve its problems rather than to celebrate its history.

So the second alternative cannot stand on its own. To do justice to

the history of philosophy, we need to acknowledge the priority that nearly all celebrated philosophers have given to problem solving and try to explain why they have failed to reach agreement. My own explanation for the persistence of philosophical disagreement has multiple facets, but I shall mention only two. One is that philosophers often strive to acquire knowledge with characteristics that may be impossible for humans to obtain: knowledge that is categorical, essentialistic, and necessarily true. Another facet is that philosophers lack a process for discarding theories.

Stephen Jay Gould, who was both a biologist and a historian of biology, observed in *The Mismeasure of Man*, “Science advances primarily by replacement, not by addition. If the barrel is always full, then the rotten apples must be discarded before better ones can be added.” Scientists, unlike philosophers, rely on the testing of empirical predictions extracted from their theories to help them reach agreement on what theories to discard. The process is sometimes messy, and its implementation varies from one science to another, but it works surprisingly well.

Philosophers are not blind to their lack of a comparable discarding process. They joke among themselves about the dean who was chiding the physics department for spending too much money on lab equipment. “Why can’t you be more like the math department?” she asked. “All they ask for are pencils, paper, and wastebaskets. Or, better yet, why can’t you be like the philosophy department? All they ask for are pencils and paper.”

Philosophers generally rely on reasoning and intuition to debate the relative superiority of philosophical theories, but they have never succeeded in developing a process that commands consensus on which theories must be removed from the apple barrel of provisional knowledge and tossed into the wastebasket of history. Perhaps the closest they come is by tacit agreement that some theories are no longer interesting.

Is my explanation surprising? For many philosophers today, it may seem little more than a confirmation of the truism that philosophy isn’t science. But the methodological chasm between philosophy and science, now so familiar to us, is the culmination of a fissure that was still being formed a century ago. It is worth noting that more than 25 percent of Aristotle’s extant writings are biological treatises and heavily empirical in content. Descartes, who was best known in his own day as a mathematician and physicist, dissected animal carcasses to study the interaction of brains and bodies. The arch experimentalist Robert Boyle wrote essays on moral philoso-

phy. David Hume subtitled his *Treatise of Human Nature*: "Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects." Had Immanuel Kant died before he wrote *Critique of Pure Reason*, his most original work would have been his essays in astronomy. Adam Smith was influential as an ethicist, and John Stuart Mill as an economist. William James was trained as a medical doctor and helped found modern psychology. His celebrated treatise *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), was used as a textbook in both psychology classes and philosophy classes.

Is consensus in philosophy possible? I believe philosophers could achieve agreement on at least some of their central problems, if they were willing to formulate theories that yielded predictions as testable as those in science. How this might work in practice has barely been explored, but a new movement called experimental philosophy has suggested some promising steps. Philosophers often appeal to intuitions as critical links in their arguments, but they seldom explain what intuitions are or why we should rely on them. Experimental philosophy borrows techniques from experimental psychology to gather systematic data on philosophically interesting intuitions, such as what counts as knowledge or under what circumstances a person is morally responsible. It takes armchair pronouncements about what is obvious to all or natural to believe and tests them against the reported intuitions of actual subjects. It sets up experiments that are designed to discover whether variations in intuitions correlate with contingencies such as a subject's cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic background.

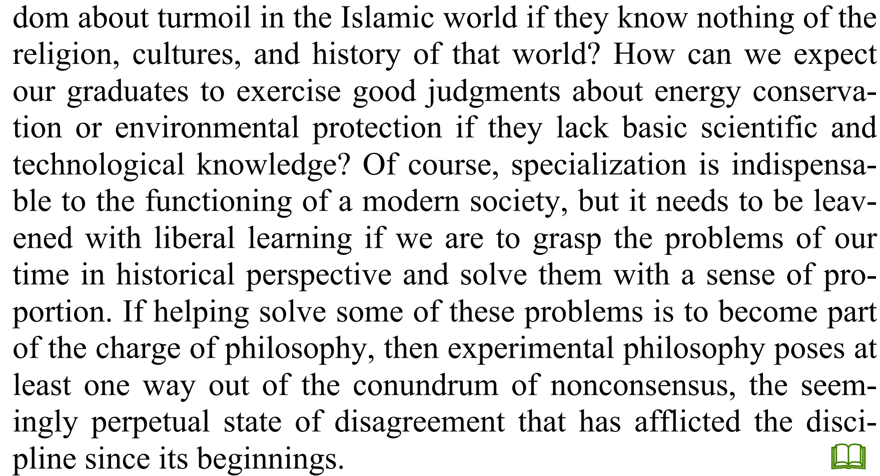
One of the fringe benefits of experimental philosophy is that it lends itself to student participation. Last fall, I asked the students in my freshman seminar "Morality, Mind, and Free Will," to join me in developing a survey designed to test John Stuart Mill's thesis on qualitatively superior pleasures. In *Utilitarianism*, Mill contends that it is better to be a dissatisfied human than a satisfied pig, better a dissatisfied Socrates than a satisfied fool. In defense of this thesis, he cites the "unquestionable fact" that those who have experienced both prefer the higher to the lower. He says, "No intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs." But do these preferences belong to a category of unquestionable fact? My students and I found that the preferences collected by our survey were far more diverse and ambiva-

lent than Mill predicted.

An intriguing question for me is whether philosophers would be willing to let their theories be discarded if those theories yielded false predictions about the intuitions of appropriate subjects. Would an aesthetician be willing to give up a theory of art if it turned out that artists and art professionals had intuitions incompatible with the theory? Clive Bell argued that William Powell Firth's popular painting *The Railway Station* was not art because it lacked "significant form." Would Bell have been willing to give up his theory if painters, museum curators, and art historians found Firth's painting to be a work of art?

There is considerable interest at present in the naturalization of philosophy and a spirited debate growing about the fruitfulness or futility of seeking wisdom from an armchair. Many philosophers regard the very idea of trading the autonomy of philosophy for the promise of gaining sciencelike agreement as a Faustian bargain. But I think they overlook the riskiness that has always attended originality in philosophy and underestimate the toughness of philosophy's soul. At the very least, an earnest effort to bridge the methodological gap between science and philosophy would be a thrilling experiment. Admittedly, not all experiments are successful. But this one might open a new chapter in the history of philosophy and help draw cognitive scientists into new areas of fruitful collaboration with philosophers.

Unlike C. P. Snow, I have not said much about the drawbacks of an overspecialized and illiberal education, but a moment's reflection should make some of those drawbacks obvious. How can we expect financial executives to behave responsibly when they turn a blind eye to economic history and can't—or won't—recognize a bubble that is about to blow sky high? How can we expect the citizens we educate and the governments they elect to think with wis-



dom about turmoil in the Islamic world if they know nothing of the religion, cultures, and history of that world? How can we expect our graduates to exercise good judgments about energy conservation or environmental protection if they lack basic scientific and technological knowledge? Of course, specialization is indispensable to the functioning of a modern society, but it needs to be leavened with liberal learning if we are to grasp the problems of our time in historical perspective and solve them with a sense of proportion. If helping solve some of these problems is to become part of the charge of philosophy, then experimental philosophy poses at least one way out of the conundrum of nonconsensus, the seemingly perpetual state of disagreement that has afflicted the discipline since its beginnings.

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