

Memoir of a Metaphilosopher

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Abstract: This essay seeks to finalize a personal conception of the method of philosophizing. It aims to argue that works of philosophy are to be considered as well informed expressions of belief. It does this by first introducing the topic, considering the broad views of the analytic, continental, and pragmatic traditions, and then presenting an exposition of passages on the topic. Finally, a novel contribution is presented in consideration of those passages before ending in concluding remarks.

I: Introduction

This essay is a personal ending of a philosophical chapter for me. While all works of philosophy entail some amount of answering the question of what philosophy is, or what it's for indirectly by acting it out, metaphilosophy is a direct connection to that question. This essay is very personal as over the past three or four years, metaphilosophy has been my focus. I figured, in order to do philosophy well, I had better *really* know what it is that I am doing in order to do it well. I have come to a point where I am confident I can move on, though the answer to the question is not quite perfect. You see, I have a desk ornament I received as a gift that looks like an email from a scientist to the project director that reads: "We have not succeeded in answering all your problems. The answers we have found only serve to raise a whole new set of questions. In some ways I feel we are as confused as ever, but I believe we are confused on a higher level about more important things." This quote has encapsulated my study of metaphilosophy nicely. I am satisfied enough to move on to things I find apply more directly to my life, and leave the field of explicit metaphilosophy behind. This essay is my closing of that chapter. I intend to argue that works of philosophy are well informed expressions of belief. A philosophical work is artistic in a way, due to its expressive nature. Yet, philosophical works are also aimed at ascertaining a truth by which we have no other means than speculation.

The form of this paper is educative, while also being rather meditative in nature. This stems from my belief that philosophical works are a well informed belief. In writing this paper, I will give some of the ongoing debate by first presenting a broad spectrum of views from the analytic, continental and pragmatic traditions of philosophy. Then, I will present some more specific passages regarding the nature of philosophy. Lastly, I will present my view, considering the informational backdrop used to form that belief.

II: Analytic, Continental and Pragmatic Traditions

The first stop on our path towards understanding the nature and aims of philosophy has to do with looking at the broad spectrum views of the analytic, continental and pragmatic traditions. This brief overview will look at each view specifically as to give a decent starting point on our journey and exploration.

The first view we are going to look at is the analytic tradition. The analytic tradition got its start with Wittgenstein. The essential point was that if we could just get straight what we mean when we say things, we wouldn't disagree at all. This led to a focus in precision in linguistics for philosophical works. Philosophers began, and continue to, ensure that important terms are clearly identified and defined. This, some thought, was the death of metaphysics. Instead of caring about what the thing actually was, philosophers should just focus on accepting what one is saying and use it as a means of taking what they say in context of what it would lead to. This combination of precision and implication led to a focus in explicit logic. When we have our terms clearly defined, we can present an argument with absolute clarity, so as to avoid any misunderstandings, which are the only thing that lead to disagreement as Wittgenstein suggested.

The second view is of the continental tradition of philosophy. It starkly contrasts with the analytic tradition with a focus on such things as being and emotions. A major school of thought from the continental tradition takes this as far as it can in the form of phenomenology. The major question of asking what its like to be whatever we are studying. Instead of analyzing what the world is, the state of affairs, as the analytics do, continental philosophy focuses on what the state of affairs is *like*. That is to say, instead of stating that there is a keyboard in front of me, the continental wants to know what it's *like* for a keyboard to be in front of me.

The last view is the pragmatic tradition. In many ways, the pragmatic tradition can be seen as a synthesis between the two prior views of analytic and continental philosophy. The idea is the same as with many other pragmatic notions: what is true is what works. The focus is on practicality as truth. Pragmatism takes the descriptive notions of the analytic, and puts them in context of how we would actually use it from the continental tradition.

III: Exposition of Views

In this section of the paper, I will be providing some passages from historical views, both classical and contemporary regarding the nature and aims of philosophy. This will be done by first giving context to the passage, present the passage, and then I will interpret the passage. There is no specific order to the presentation and the order of the passages should not be taken as an admission of importance or credence.

III.I: Karl Jaspers, "On My Philosophy"

The first passage comes from Karl Jaspers. Jaspers is trying to grapple with what it is we are doing in philosophy. He asks how philosophy is done.

“A great philosopher demands unrelenting penetration into his texts... [But,] Only as an individual can man become a philosopher... But in philosophy's realm of the spirit there is no objective certainty and no confirmation. In the realm of the spirit, men become companions-in-thought through the millennia, become occasions for each other to find the way to truth from their own source, although they cannot present each other with readymade truth. It is a self-development of individual in communication with individual. It is a development of the individual into community and from there to the plane of history, without breaking with contemporary life. It is the effort to live from and on behalf of the fundamental, though these become audible to him who philosophises, without objective certainty (as in religion), and only through indirect hints as possibilities in the totality of philosophy.” (Karl Jaspers, “On My Philosophy”)

What Jaspers here is trying to say is that philosophy, even if ‘done’ alone in solitary, is still well versed. The most common way of explaining Jaspers’ metaphilosophy is by the metaphor of following roadsigns. First we are on a nice road travelling along. We then come to a sign that reads “for the falls, go right, for the mountains go left.” After picking a direction, and following it to the next roadsign, we keep finding ourselves on less kept paths until eventually, after seeing no sign and finding a dead end, we forge our own little path. Each signpost we follow is like a new philosophical idea. Eventually after having researched all the ideas we could find, we only have ourselves to trust in our own exploration, forging our own path into the wilderness.

II.II: Roger Scruton, “A Short History of Modern Philosophy”

The next view we are going to look at comes from Roger Scruton in the introduction of “A Short History of Modern Philosophy.” In his introduction, Scruton seems to grapple with one of

the major complaints of philosophy in that it doesn't seem to progress. Problems of a philosophical nature from the very beginning are just as relevant today as when they were first proposed.

“It is useful here to contrast philosophy with science on the one hand, and literature on the other. As I have suggested, a scientist may with impunity ignore all but the recent history of his subject and be none the less expert for that... When we turn to literature, however, we find a completely different state of affairs. First, it is implausible to suggest that there is an innate tendency of literature to progress—since there is nothing towards which it is progressing. Science, which moves towards truth, builds always on what has been established, and has an inalienable right to overthrow and demolish the most ingenious, satisfying and beautiful of its established systems, as Copernicus and Galileo overthrew the Ptolemaic and Aristotelian cosmology. It follows that someone who had never heard of Ptolemy or even of Aristotle might still be the greatest living cosmologist. Literature, by contrast, has its high points and its low points, but no semblance of a necessary progression from one to the other.” (Roger Scruton, “A Short History of Modern Philosophy”)

What Scruton is trying to point out here is that yes, it may seem like philosophy doesn't progress (and he suggests earlier that it indeed does progress, just so slowly that we can't really tell.) However, this lack of progression should not be seen as a detriment to philosophical inquiry, it just requires a reformulation of what philosophy is. While many have considered philosophy as a means of ascertaining the truth of the state of affairs, as the dominating tradition for English speaking philosophy, the analytic tradition might suggest, Scruton argues that philosophy can also be seen through the lens of literature. That yes, while philosophy is attempting to ascertain truth, the truth that it is trying to ascertain is more ethereal; it can't be

analyzed in the same empirical way that science can. Any answers to the question of right and wrong can't particularly be explained away scientifically, nor can concepts of knowledge or the nature of the thing in question. Try holding philosophy in your hand, for instance, or love, or any number of things, Plato might suggest "chairness." You can't hold love, philosophy or "chairness" in your hand. You cannot analyze it as you would a specific chair. The only thing we can do is take a literary standpoint of it as an insight of possibility.

II.III: I. M. Bochenski, "Contemporary European Philosophy"

The following passage looks to see what philosophers are capable of. Bochenski considers philosophers as generally a laughing stock, which can be seen by the perceived victory of science over philosophy by the masses. The philosopher may be seen as harmless, and fully absorbed into thought. However, Bochenski points out where the philosopher is headed.

"...those who wish to know in what direction they are going would do well to give their attention not to the politicians but to the philosophers, for what they propound today will be the faith of tomorrow." (I. M. Bochenski, "Contemporary European Philosophy")

The point here is that philosophers are the creators of our general agreement of belief systems. In recent times, this has been seen with the change in culture. We have largely changed views surrounding justice, for example, as a result of philosophers. This speaks to the progression Scruton may have been alluding to.

II.IV: Jaques Derrida, "The Principle of Reason"

Continuing on, the next passage comes from Derrida. With Derrida, we can see a potential reason why philosophy itself has a focus on reason epistemically. Derrida grapples with reason as the means of philosophizing.

"Who is more faithful to reason's call, who hears it with a keener ear... the one who offers questions in return and tries to think through the possibility of that summons, or the one who does not want to hear any question about the principle of reason?"

(Jacques Derrida, "The Principle of Reason")

For Derrida, reason is the main component of philosophy. The philosopher, in turn, is the one who hears reasons call, and contemplates reason, with reason.

II.V: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Phenomenology of Perception"

The next passage we are going to look at comes from Merleau-Ponty, the founder of phenomenology, or the question of what its like to be the subject. This passage seeks to find out what philosophers are creating when philosophizing.

"The philosopher cannot fail to draw others with him into his reflective retreat, because in the uncertainty of the world, he has for ever learned to treat them as consorts, and because all his knowledge is built on this datum of opinion." (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Phenomenology of Perception")

In a way, we can see here what it is like to be a philosopher, according to Merleau-Ponty. According to which, the philosopher tries to bring interlocutors on a journey of personal discovery based on opinions. Opinions, in this way should not be seen as a negative thing, but as to point out the only thing from which we can base our knowledge claims of philosophical subjects on. Philosophy is introspective, and thus the goal of a philosophical work is to bring others along on a trip into our selves.

II.VI: Friedrich Nietzsche, "Ecce Homo"

In his famous "Ecce Homo," Nietzsche seeks to explain, with this passage, what the philosopher is like in terms of what it's like to philosophize at all. The euphemism used to express what philosophy is like is a genuine attempt to place the grandeur of philosophy as trailblazing.

"Philosophy, as I have so far understood and lived it, means living voluntarily among ice and high mountains - seeking out everything strange and questionable in existence, everything so far placed under the ban by morality." (Friedrich Nietzsche, "Ecce Homo")

The point Nietzsche is trying to make here is that philosophy seeks to question what is usually seen as mundane. We see a chair, we sit in it, we use it, but a non-philosopher would stop there. The philosopher, on the other hand, would want to know strangely, what makes it a chair? What makes a chair a 'good' chair, if there is such a thing? Can we know anything about 'chairness?' The chair is mundane, but the philosopher brings to light that it isn't.

II.VII: Friedrich von Schlegel, "Athenaeum Fragments"

As far as anyone could go insofar as to claim the title of "father of metaphilosophy," Friedrich von Schlegel would have to take the crown. In this passage, von Schlegel describes what philosophers do in regards to the historical progression of the field.

"As yet every great philosopher has explained his predecessors - often quite unintentionally - in such a way that it seemed that before him they had been entirely misunderstood." (Friedrich von Schlegel, "Athenaeum Fragments")

In this passage, von Schlegel points out that in a progression of philosophy, philosophers are taking previous writings on their subject and using it as a means to gain a further and further conception of the truth. In other words, philosophers take other philosophers and point out a misunderstanding in order to further our view of the concrete of the matter. Think of a haze in front of a painting, a philosopher pushes closer to the painting and stops. Another picks up from where they were and moves a bit closer, reaching further towards total clarity of the art piece.

II.VIII: Emmanuel Levinas, "Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence"

This next passage touches on a key element that philosophers ought to have. In every good philosopher lies a skeptical bone. Levinas explains as follows:

"Philosophy is inseparable from scepticism, which follows it like a shadow that it chases away by refuting it, only to find it once again under its feet." (Emmanuel Levinas, "Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence")

The point of this euphemism is to say that for the philosopher, they allow skepticism to creep in over and over again. For many, when that skepticism arises, all that happens is a shooing away of it. However, the philosopher attacks it head on in refutation (or substantiation if that ends up being the case) until it pops up again.

III: Transition

While I could go on and on with passages concerning philosophy, the ones presented are the ones that have been most formative in my view regarding what philosophy is, what its aims are, and how to philosophize. There are many great passages that are being left out, from Plato to Heidegger. However, the goal of this paper is to present what has really formed my view, not necessarily a complete recitation of views on philosophy.

At this point, it might be helpful to recap and transition to a more novel and personal contribution regarding metaphilosophy. At the onset, I presented the major views around philosophy, the analytic, continental and pragmatic traditions. Next I presented multiple passages and interpreted their meaning on the topic. Now, we are transitioning to a more novel approach where I intend to argue that works of philosophy are well informed expressions of belief.

IV: Novel Contribution

At this point of the essay, I am going to argue that works of philosophy are to be considered as well informed expressions of belief. That is to say that philosophers have considered a wide range of arguments for their topic, and in consideration of those arguments present their own. For an uninformed philosopher, is not a philosopher at all.

As Levinas pointed out, skepticism is always present. This is the foundation of why a philosopher (ought to) act at all. If the philosopher is arguing purely to defend their point and not to secure themselves from skepticism, they are no philosopher, but a rhetorician or sophist. The philosopher is not trying to feed their bias, but to come to truth by means of argumentation. When researching, it is reading to understand, not reading to reply for the philosopher. For the sophist and rhetorician, the reading is done to reply, not to understand. The skepticism, for the philosopher, creeps in, and an urge to seek out truth by means of research and articulation from that research is what defines them. This being the case, however, skepticism will always creep back in. Which leaves the philosopher not absolutely and entirely sure of their belief, leaving it as a seeking of truth, and as I argue, an expression of current belief, rather than a pure unadulterated recitation of objective truth.

The means of doing this comes about from researching arguments around the given topic. Which is where Jaspers can come in. The point being that a philosopher needs to really read other philosophers to try and grapple with their problem, and only then can they really go out on their own and philosophize, but when they do, it is only they themselves they can rely on.

This leads to a definitional problem in philosophy. What does philosophy discover, if anything? If it is one person's view, in context of informed views, well, what does that make a work of philosophy? Roger Scruton pointed out aptly, given what was previously written, that philosophy must sit between literature and science. There is a well formed opinion, but it remains a belief, and not necessarily knowledge, unless of course one believes that a justified belief as knowledge, as I do. That is to say that knowledge, philosophical knowledge, cannot be verified as true, but all we have insofar as the traditional analysis of knowledge, or justified true belief model of knowledge goes, we only have a belief and justification for that belief. My first philosophy professor called this more of an epistemic obligation as a definition for knowledge. This is as far as philosophy can claim knowledge of anything.

In doing all of this, we can safely say that we “stand on the shoulders of giants” and fix what previous philosophers thought. This is in regards to von Schlegel’s comment. In other words, we take what was previously said, and clarify it further, as the analytic philosopher would. But further clarity is not total clarity, for that is impossible (even this knowledge claim about that is not total clarity.) This standing on the shoulders of giants is the basis for my argument in regard to the well informed section that a philosopher must have. Further, it comes to talk about the belief, rather than truth claims that philosophers make.

V: Concluding Remarks

There is much left unsaid in this paper. I did not touch on every passage presented. Or even present all the passages that have shaped my view on metaphilosophy. However, every passage has crept into what I spoke about in my novel contribution. The goal of the passages was to present what has helped form my view that works of philosophy are to be considered as well informed expressions of belief. I have done this by suggesting that an uninformed belief is a defense of a bias. I further conclude that knowledge, which is an aim of philosophy, is never completely clear, there will always be a speck of dirt found on its cover that will need to be swept of to gain more clarity. As such, philosophy remains a recitation of a belief, not of truth.

With this essay, I intend to complete my work on metaphilosophy. I began researching metaphilosophy with the aim of knowing what I am doing, in order to do it well. However, it seems that problems of a philosophical nature only leave researchers with more problems. While I am firm in my belief, I do not count it as total truth, as my view very well may change. However, it is time, I think, to move on. While I may never have a full grasp of what philosophy really is or how to best do philosophy, I am confident that my view that works of philosophy are to be considered as well informed expressions of belief is an operable method for doing

philosophy. This view is, of course, ambiguous. It allows for many methodologies, including pedagogical, of doing philosophy to be included in its grasp. However, maybe that's the point, the literary art in philosophy is that no two philosophers 'do' philosophy the same way. That is the beauty of their work, and the rigor in their aim.