

The Perpetual Emptiness of Academic Philosophy, and its strange inability to address the one issue that matters

[Peter Eastman, London, 2014]

The purpose of this short study is to give some help to those hoping to gain an insight into the metaphysical realms of their being, and who would like some guidance with regard to those formal and academic disciplines supposedly geared to dealing with that very subject. If you are genuinely motivated by a sense of confusion and hopelessness when it comes to matters of your ultimate destiny and fulfilment, then you will surely feel greatly intimidated by the vast collection of material that already exists in fields such as philosophy, metaphysics, theology and science; and you will likely approach these disciplines with an overwhelming sense of trepidation and inadequacy. Humility and a willingness to learn is one thing, but the mistaken belief that these disciplines have already cracked the code for the human condition is another. The problem is that these disciplines actively court self-serving obfuscation and bluster, pretending to know much more than they actually do. It can be greatly heartening to know this, and to be able to see the reach of intellectual subterfuge for yourself. So at least part of this study is an exercise in demystification.

Introduction

If you turn to philosophy in the hope of finding answers to the 'big questions' of life and existence – questions about the meaning and purpose of life, and about your ultimate destiny – you will be sorely disappointed. Philosophy has nothing to offer on these topics, and never has done. You would think that, given the fact that our ultimate fulfilment is the most important, the most crucial, the most immediate issue facing all of us, that philosophy – supposedly a discipline that has some remote connection to the idea of the 'love of wisdom' – would concentrate all its efforts on the subject and have no time for anything else, yet this is not even distantly the case. You won't find a single philosophical book on the question of ultimate human fulfilment anywhere, either in a bookshop, or in the dusty stacks of some library reserve collection. Even after thousands of years of philosophical musings, stretching back to the Pre-Socratics, we still do not have a single convincing philosophical account of the human condition, nor anything approaching one. Nor do we have a single 'big name' in the entire history of philosophy – not a single one ! – who could be termed a specialist in the subject, and to whom one could turn, if not for guidance, at least for a few useful ideas. And this is, if you think about it, a most astonishing situation. When it comes to the topics that really matter, scholarly philosophy is a complete disaster.

Of course criticising philosophy is not new, and in fact is as old as the idea of philosophy itself. But it tends to come from people who disparage any sort of reflective thinking on life, and who think that the solution to everything is simply to 'get on with it'. This is not the line being pursued here; we are arguing that philosophy doesn't do enough reflective thinking, and that the right kind of reflective thinking is of the utmost value and importance, and that we should all be doing a lot more of it, not that it is a waste of time.

How to negotiate this mess ? We might start by looking for some kind of simple causal explanation, in the hope that it will at the same time deliver a simple solution, yet strange as it may seem, having some sort of handle on this aspect of the problem is not really that important in the long run. It doesn't much matter whether it's that people are just not that much interested in what ultimately becomes of them, or that professional philosophers are stupid and bad at their job. Far more pressing is the question as to what can be done about it, and here we run straight into the sand. Obviously the simple answer is: get on with the task of direct exploration of the human condition and the human predicament, and put other considerations aside. There is no doubt that this is the definitive answer, and the most immediate solution. But there are sure to be some who would like to know if a genuine metaphysics can be integrated with

something like the discipline of academic philosophy as it now stands, and how these two would relate to one another. And in order to do this we need to show how philosophy could be greatly improved if its principles were clarified, and how the quite distinct and separate discipline of metaphysics could be transformed from misguided speculation into something essential and valuable, by giving it direction. In the case of philosophy, the clarification of principles involves redefining philosophy such that it becomes strictly confined to the principles and practice of critical thinking, thereby consigning any and all speculative content to quite separate disciplines such as epistemology, cosmology, metaphysics, ontology, aesthetics and so on; and with regard to metaphysics, cogency is achieved by directing it exclusively towards ultimate human fulfilment, and consigning all other issues and speculations to the dustbin.

So we would end up with philosophy as the technique of critical thinking, and metaphysics as the science of ultimate human fulfilment. This may not seem like much of an achievement, given that we are still at the level of redefining and repositioning, and we might be accused of merely playing with words: what difference could it possibly make to the quality of any outcome to consign philosophy's speculative capacity to separate disciplines? Drivel will remain drivel, even after repackaging. And isn't 'ultimate fulfilment' just another label for some kind of conclusion? And if metaphysics still hasn't yet managed to engage with the topic of some kind of conclusive soteriological accomplishment, what difference is a new label going to make?

The value of these redefinitions lies in their ability to clarify, and focus attention; and clarity is at a premium in a topic as occluded as the metaphysics of the human predicament. Learning to observe, and witness, and ponder is relatively easy, but often one's observations and conclusions are violently disfigured and falsified by the other thoughts that one has swirling about in one's mind, and many of these other thoughts are based on one's expectations and judgements arising out of what one has been taught, and conditioned to believe. If you live in an intellectual world where the only alternatives are scientific materialism and religious belief, it takes an enormously powerful independence and maturity of mind to be able to clarify various ideas for oneself, and then to come to vaguely the right conclusions.

The Human Metaphysical Predicament

To elucidate the value of a relationship between a clearly defined philosophy, and a very simple and straightforward metaphysics of fulfilment, we need to have a clear idea of what it is we are talking about when discussing the mystery at the centre of the human condition. This mystery, and our inability to resolve it, is the essence of the human predicament. The first task of metaphysics is to elucidate this mystery as best we can - not with the intention of wallowing in its capacity to confound us, but in order to try to find a way to resolve it, thereby fulfilling ourselves as human beings.

The basic human metaphysical predicament can be portrayed in very stark and easily graspable terms. We can begin by characterising its emergence in a phase of adolescence - usually in the mid to late teens - when the whole experience of life starts to take on a perplexing quality, and seems to become mysterious to itself. There are hints of this state even in childhood, but it does not reveal itself fully until at least the mid-teens. Existence becomes strangely unfathomable, and elusive, as well as oddly unsatisfying, even when life seems to be going well. Familiar experiences take on an absurdist quality, and nothing seems to have any fixed value, or any true meaning. We find ourselves provoked into questioning the very purpose of existence, and we start to wonder if anything really makes any sense at all. Our entire existence seems to yearn for some kind of cosmic explanation, as well as some kind of final resolution. Yet no matter how hard we look for it, this final resolution is nowhere to be found - and it is certainly not lurking somewhere in our everyday consciousness - and so one is left vaguely defeated, and condemned to a state of unfulfilled emptiness. This is how we encounter life as a 'peculiar predicament', and this encounter is experienced by everyone - to varying degrees and at varying times - as is the sense of being in a kind of half-expectant limbo; though most people manage these feelings by suppressing them, or by distracting themselves with other concerns. And although our experience of existence as a predicament never disappears altogether, its power to interfere with our general sense of well-being seems to diminish as one gets older, and so we can come to think of our strange cosmic dissatisfaction as having more to do with adolescent uncertainty and immaturity than with an opportunity for any kind of

metaphysical gnosis. We just get on with living, and we tell ourselves that our accomplishments in life will put paid to any ongoing sense of emptiness.

That's the way most people deal with their existential uncertainty. They find a way to close their minds to the peculiar darkness and ignorance at the centre of their being. But there are a select few who find that the desire to resolve this mystery takes a firm hold of them, and persists way beyond adolescence, and then condemns them to a very conflicted existence. On the one hand they might feel inclined towards religion, and inclined to embrace faith, belief and prescribed practice; and on the other there is an inclination towards a more distantiated, independent, reflective approach, with reading, discussing, learning, and trying - by intellectual means - to work things out for yourself. Religion demands that you plunge in; reflective thought demands that you stand back. These are not options that one could come to a conclusive decision about over the course of a mere few months; it takes years, and certainly involves many changes of mind, many wrong decisions and many blunders into the unknown, all the time hoping for the best, and with only a trust in fate to hold on to.

Studying philosophy as an option in a quest for metaphysical knowledge

So let us suppose you find yourself deeply provoked by the big questions of life and existence, and would like to make some serious efforts towards finding answers to them. You've read some books, and had long discussions with various friends. You know about religion, and you know about science, but neither of these two avenues offer you the kind of objectivity you think is essential to your quest because, having an inquiring, analytical mind, you suspect that they skew the outlook in their favour right from the start. You also know a bit about psychology, and you feel that there may be profound human truths in there somewhere, but the day to day concerns of psychologists seem a long way from any kind of direct engagement with the deeper truths of life.

Which leaves philosophy. It is almost impossible for an outsider to imagine what philosophy would be like prior to their actually studying it in a formal setting. You will be sure to approach it with all kinds of imaginings, most of which are seriously mistaken. You might think that you will soon be discussing all possible major topics of life and existence, and analysing them in great detail - and the reading list you have been given seems to back this up - but the reality is always very different, and always massively disappointing. You will find yourself having to study the history of philosophy - which is unconscionably dull - and, more importantly, having to learn how to constrain your philosophical musings in line with very strict rules of engagement, none of which encourages the kind of penetrating questioning which gets to the heart of life and existence. You can't help but feel yourself being brutally brought down to earth, and intellectually refashioned, supposedly in the name of scholarly precision, intellectual substantiality, and academic rectitude; and all these in turn in the service of real thought, and the highest standards of academic judgement.

Not knowing any better, the hapless supplicant has no choice but to trust philosophical authority. You well understand that it is right for you to have to learn how to break your ideas down into their conceptual components, and then to subject these components to the most stringent rational and intellectual analysis. You expected something like this, but the actuality is far more radical and destructive than you could have imagined. Philosophy becomes quite other than what you thought it was going to be, but who are you, as an ill-informed outsider, to question so august a system? Worse still, if someone asked you what exactly what your complaint with the system was, you wouldn't know what to say. So you defer judgement on the whole process because, after all, you are at a reputable institution studying for a reputable degree validated by the academic community, so any misgivings you might have start to look increasingly unwarranted and unjustified.

And this is how it goes. And by the time you come to your senses - if you ever do - it will be too late. You will have had the stuffing knocked out of you by the system, and you will not be in any position to mount some form of rear-guard action. You will long since have abandoned questions like 'What is the meaning of life?' in favour of convoluted absurdities like 'Can a use of the first-person concept fail to refer?', and you will actually come to believe that you now think more clearly than you did before you started. You will snort derisively at any

non-professional using the term 'metaphysics', as they are guaranteed to be using the term in a 'non-standard' way, and are sure to have no idea what they are talking about.

This is one key way in which the system of scholarly philosophy destroys the capacity to ask perfectly valid and straightforward questions of an existential nature. It is because the most profound and searching questions any human being can ask – questions about their ultimate fulfilment – are simply too deep for the trivial minds that populate the world of professional philosophy. Philosophers would argue that the so-called 'big questions' of life and existence are really non-questions, and need to be rephrased – in other words, redirected, diluted, and emptied of content - in terms more amenable to standard philosophical discourse, so that they can be dismissed as misjudgements.

Philosophy in the popular imagination, & the need to demystify it

There is another important dimension to the position of philosophy as a gateway to metaphysics, and this concerns the idea of philosophy as it exists in the popular imagination. Despite the fact that the popular understanding of philosophy is very different from those better informed, the popular view of philosophy remains noticeably compelling, and influential. This is because outsiders like to imbue philosophy with a whiff of mysticism, conferring on philosophers a hint of esoteric charisma, as if their studies definitely involved some sort of initiation into advanced and sophisticated modes of thought, and possibly into hidden truths. The fact that the reality of philosophy is the very opposite of this hardly matters, because the illusion is its own reward, and this is what even educated people feel inclined to believe; and philosophers themselves make no effort to disabuse them of this view. Philosophers like the idea that ordinary people think that philosophers know something ordinary people don't.

This conflation of philosophy with esoteric insight is not the harmless bit of fluff it might seem. It is an everyday fantasy that has been surprisingly pernicious. It has contributed - in its own insidious way - to a persistent lack of clarity as regards the principles underpinning philosophy, beginning with the crucial distinction between the techniques and procedures of critical thinking on the one hand, and all forms of theoretical construct on the other. Philosophy needs to limit itself to the former, and disassociate itself from the latter. If this distinction is not made very clear, and is not well understood from the very outset, a situation arises where philosophers feel emboldened to pontificate authoritatively on any subject that takes their fancy, in the exalted belief that their ideas flow directly from something called 'philosophy', which consists of a vast repository² of 'rigorous formulations' and 'subtle logical analyses'³, and into which the elect can plunge any time they feel the need. This would of itself guarantee that any pronouncements made by an accredited philosopher are of a very high order, and possibly well out of reach of the average mortal. The problem is that no such repository of high order philosophical knowledge exists, and what is being passed off as philosophical insight is mere opinion, and most of it, when stripped of its grandiose esoteric trappings, is dishearteningly trivial.

Basic methodological principle: academic philosophy is the art and science of critical thinking⁴, and nothing besides

Philosophy should not be thought of as possessing any substantial theoretical content of its own. It is a method, a skillset, a series of techniques, not a repository of various highbrow theories, whether about mind, epistemology, ontology, cosmology, science, or anything else. It is a methodological preparation for any and all manner of intellectual exploration, but it remains distinct from the content of such undertakings. The theoretic underpinnings of various distinct disciplines, such as history, or science, or aesthetics, should not be thought of as 'the philosophy' of these disciplines but should be designated by other specialist titles, so as not to perpetuate the idea that there is some kind of knowledge base called 'philosophy', which somehow lends itself to various disciplines to help construct and inform their theoretical principles. Philosophy should only be thought of as contributing intellectual rigor to a discipline, and not theoretical or conceptual content.

So it would therefore advance the cause of genuine metaphysical enquiry greatly if everyone understood where philosophy ends and metaphysics begins, and that the two are not

interdependent. This can only happen if a very clear distinction between philosophy as critical methodology, and all forms of theoretical construct, is understood from the outset, and strictly adhered to.

And we need to remind ourselves that the point here is not simply to clarify the principles of philosophy; the point is to clear the way for a genuine metaphysics. Genuine metaphysical enquiry is greatly facilitated if everyone understands that metaphysics is not some form of conceptual outgrowth, parasitically dependent for its every feature – and for its very existence – on a body of knowledge called ‘philosophy’, which itself has evolved out of the countless hours of philosophical chatter in seminar rooms all over the world, combined with the steady stream of philosophical writings throughout history. The simple fact is, there is no such body of knowledge called ‘philosophy’, consisting of a repository of useful concepts, distinctions and procedures, nor is there anything approximating to it; there is only critical thinking, and then the range of subjects – from epistemology, to ontology, to science, to aesthetics – to which such critical thinking can be applied.

‘Philosophy of Life’

We should point out, however, as a proviso to the very restricted view of academic philosophy defined above, that there is a widespread and popular use of the term ‘philosophy’ which, though perfectly instructive and legitimate, unfortunately contributes to the very mystification of the metaphilosophical principles we have just tried to clarify. And this is the use of the term ‘philosophy’ in the phrase ‘philosophy of life’, meaning a considered approach to life, incorporating one’s values and strategies for achieving one’s goals. It wouldn’t be justified to attempt to prevent ‘philosophy’ from being used in this way, because part of the enjoyment to be had from non-scholarly, worldly ‘philosophising’ – in an armchair, or in the pub – comes from the hint of mystical magic accompanying the idea of striving towards wisdom. But where this mystical magic leaks out of its worldly context and begins to infect the scholarly idea of philosophy, the trouble begins.

Metaphysics as a separate and quite distinct enterprise from philosophy

How do we define ‘metaphysics’? Metaphysics is a formal discipline designed to give intellectual coherence to our thoughts relating to our capacity to explore the features of our metaphysical condition. As human beings, we have a physical capacity, a psychological capacity, an intellectual capacity; and a metaphysical capacity which transcends the other capacities in its ability to witness, reflect and explore every aspect of these other capacities without itself being incorporated into them. The intellectual formalisation of explorations and reflections within our metaphysical capacity would properly be the content of metaphysics as a discipline. And the discipline of metaphysics would include material both academic and non-academic, in that the value of metaphysical explorations – from whatever source – ought to be judged in terms of their accuracy, rather than their scholarly virtue.

And of course metaphysics as a discipline is not an open-ended opportunity for endless speculation, because it derives its meaning and purpose from the desire we have to fulfil ourselves by resolving the mystery at the core of our existence; insofar as we understand – or hope, or believe – that resolving this mystery will result in our ultimate fulfilment. Perhaps it won’t, but then we will continue our quest for fulfilment from within the new situation in which we find ourselves. It makes no sense for us to say that we are not interested in our ultimate fulfilment – however we conceive of it – because what else could possibly take its place? Even the desire to be unfulfilled would, paradoxically, have to stand in as a kind of desired fulfilment.

Now how could the distinction between philosophy as methodological skillset, and the theoretical content which it should be applied to, possibly help advance our understanding of the human metaphysical predicament? First of all by making it clear that academic philosophy is about learning how to think, and not about being taught some fashionable philosopher’s half-baked idea of how things are. Philosophy should not be about the acquiring of wisdom, but about acquiring the tools necessary for clarity of thought, and the ability to analyse ideas. Anyone can learn the principles of logical thinking and rational expression, and this does not make them either worldly wise or metaphysically realised. To achieve either wisdom or gnosis

they will need to take their philosophical skills and apply them to specific realms of experience; and if they then want to pronounce on these topics they do so as 'sages', 'metaphysicians', or 'logicians', and not as 'philosophers'. This might seem a very insignificant move in the great cause of clarifying different categories of knowledge, but it is not: philosophers like to pretend to themselves they operate in a domain of advanced and sophisticated thinking, and are using high-powered cleverness to apprehend things the rest of us are only dimly and mistakenly aware of, whereas in fact most ordinary philosophers are basically confused metaphysicians, struggling to make the case for superficial conceptions of life and experience that, if shown for what they were, would be derided as simple-minded and absurd. These often very naïve and shallow conceptions of reality are hidden under layers of subterfuge – the more elusive and definitionally complicated the better – and then defended with a mixture of superciliousness and bombast. Any apparent self-confidence is entirely a defensive posture, and the verbal dexterity and the slippery distinctions conceal a genuine sense of inadequacy and a fear of ridicule. It is often said that philosophers hate being asked by ordinary people to explain what it is that philosophers do⁵, and this embarrassment is a confirmation of the fact that, despite the supposed grandiloquence of their status, your average philosopher knows that they are going to sound very foolish when trying to justify what appear to be a self-serving series of complex distinctions and definitions based on a very naïve conception of what life is all about. The humiliation could be done away with if the honest and accurate answer was 'I teach critical thinking' - no more, no less. If the conversation then strays into a wider conception of what life is all about, in the pursuit of speculative worldly wisdom, the philosopher-technician ought to make it clear that they are straying into the realms of personal opinion, and that their real field of expertise is of an altogether more pragmatic nature.

So if academic philosophers understood themselves to be technicians in the first instance – albeit of a highly specialised and valuable order - and that their discipline was solely a matter of mastering intellectual and critical technique, and that their pedagogical role was only to impart the principles of critical thinking to others, most – if not all – of the absurdity and mystical confusion surrounding philosophy would disappear. Students would study philosophy to be taught critical techniques, not be initiated – surreptitiously - into doctrines of metaphysics, science and religion. Metaphysics, theology and worldly wisdom should be kept entirely separate from the notion of philosophy though, of course, the critical skills of philosophy – understood as the discipline which specialises in perfecting critical skills – would be of inestimable value in any exploration of metaphysics, or theology, or politics, or history, or of any subject whatsoever amenable to an intellectual approach.

The question of human fulfilment

To anchor this whole discussion we need to further elucidate to the idea of fulfilment. 'Fulfilment' is the kind of term which might be bandied about in many contexts, starting with psychology, and then extending to include all kinds of New Agery, but properly understood it retains an elemental cogency which far transcends all of the soteriological markers which are usually employed to indicate some form of meaningful terminus or conclusion to human striving.

For example, the most crucial and significant question I can ask of my existence, and one that cannot meaningfully be transcended by any other, is 'how do I achieve my ultimate fulfilment?' This would not be to obsess on the ergonomics of the 'how'; it would be to direct myself to this possibility, and to strive towards its achievement. It wouldn't make sense for me to say that I was not interested in my ultimate fulfilment, or that I could conceive of something more important than that, given that the whole notion of importance would surely revolve around some kind of critical relevance to an ultimate 'me' situated in an ultimate 'condition' for me. This is not trivial, or tautologous: ultimate states and conditions which may apply to me, yet which do not supply the elements which would leave me ultimately satisfied, are clearly not going to constitute my ultimate fulfilment. We can play with ideas here, and introduce paradoxical logic, quantum physics and all the rest of it, but the validity of the basic formulation - grounded in a certain simplicity of ordinary thought – remains: it is not possible, or meaningful, for me to direct myself at anything other than my ultimate fulfilment, even if I am uncertain as to every element in my conception thereof, and remain so indefinitely.

In a very direct way, of course, our lives are all about – and only about - our attempts at striving for ultimate fulfilment, even in those conditions where we settle for less, because we do so in a state of expectation, and readiness for something better; even if, once again, we are less than decisive in our engagements with opportunities. Life is basically a ‘heading towards something’ (usually only death !) - a transitional process, and insofar as any one of us is self-concerned, or in some way interested in their own destiny, it is meaningful – and accurate - to characterise this transitional process as directed at self-fulfilment. We may not achieve it, but we cannot abandon it.

This somewhat loose conceptual study of fulfilment includes within it the possibility that I might seriously have misapprehended and misunderstood every aspect of my being and my selfhood - and even that no such thing as ‘ultimate fulfilment’ exists - but until I am better appraised of the situation, it is meaningful for me to try to seek fulfilment of this sort. Of course there is a certain circularity in this type of argument, but its validity is not diminished thereby.

All other forms of profound questioning derive their value from their proximity to the issue of one’s ultimate fulfilment. Whether or not there is a God, or whether or not scientific determinism and evolution are the last word on everything - and any and all questions of a similar nature - are only issues of relevance and value to me if their resolution – one way or another - contributes to my ultimate fulfilment; if some essential part of me is left out of the equation, then it makes no sense for me to consider them crucial.

For example, some thinkers consider the question ‘why is there something rather than nothing?’ to be of profound importance in any ongoing quest for ultimate knowledge. Well, it’s clearly not a trivial question, yet even if it were somehow ‘answered’ – people like Hawking think they can do it with their scientific explanations - what has it got to do with me? In other words, where do I fit into the grand answer, the grand equation? Where does the essential component of ‘my being’ get itself, not merely incorporated into, but crucially fulfilled by the answer? Who’s to care why the universe is something out of nothing, if I am left out of it? The same line of reasoning can be applied to the idea of a ‘God’ or to the idea of any particular state of affairs: when all is said and done, there is only one single crucial element that needs to be attended to, and it is the elusive, unconstrained ‘me’ of ‘myself’.

There are two main counters to this, but both are superficial. The first would be to identify any talk of a ‘me’ with the idea of a rampant egotism of the most selfish and infantile kind, and then to denigrate this infantile egotism in the name of some sort of higher, usually quasi-religious, ‘selfless’ conception of self, and selfless conception of universal purpose. But there can be infinitely more sophisticated conceptions of the innermost ‘me’ which have little or nothing to do with that kind of grossly selfish egotism, while yet remaining compellingly important as features of my ordinary experience. The ‘me’ of my ordinary thoughts is almost always embarrassingly sentimental and infantile, but that is not the element of my experience which I would seek to fulfil in some greater sense: it would be a much loftier, extensive, all-encompassing and intimate conception of myself which escapes capture in ordinary thought and thinking, yet which is impossible for me to ignore, or disregard. Any conception of the cosmos, or ultimate state of affairs which does not address the fact of this ‘innermost, uppermost, ultimate me’ is obviously of no real interest to me. How could it be? This is not the same as solipsism, as we are all in the same position, and all subject to the same sense of innermost, uppermost self, whether we are prepared to acknowledge it or not.

The second objection, a variation on the first, is grounded in materialist dogma. It is predisposed to disregard any ‘soft’ features of experience in the name of hard science, and it relies on reductionist logic to deny – and thereby explain away – the existence of what it would consider to be anomalies and inconsistencies. In this model, soft features such as a ‘sense of self’ are identified with physical properties, reduced thereby, and then disregarded. The cosmos is conceived of as playing itself out in the complete absence of self-agencies – or at least, in the absence of any metaphysical reality of innermost selves – and so the issue of human fulfilment, in the grand scheme of things, simply does not arise. According to this scheme, we are all supposed to consider any and all features of our experience which we ourselves would value as important or crucial as of no consequence, either in the short or the long term. This kind of

dehumanised conception appears to be very attractive to certain types of people, but perhaps they genuinely don't possess an innermost sense of self which they feel motivated to respond to.

This discussion is concerned with ultimate human fulfilment, and has investigated the extent to which philosophy could contribute to the process. Part of the problem with philosophy is that its self-image is grandiose, and supposedly of a piece with wisdom and advanced insight, but when it comes down to it, what passes as philosophical thought is invariably misguided and trivial.

Textual examples

Wittgenstein's 'Philosophical Investigations' (1953) is the perfect instance of loose and aimless theorising cloaking itself in the mantle of 'philosophy' in order to imbue it with a sense of depth and substance it does not deserve. The text itself is a series of largely non-sequential and often cryptic epigrammatic paragraphs, with a certain emphasis on the topics of language and communication, but as likely as not pronouncing on a host of other subjects, from epistemology to mathematics. It is somewhat more than a glorified notebook, but considerably less than a specific argument, or even a series of directed propositions; and the overall effect is to hint mysteriously at some wider, more encompassing realisation elsewhere – an altogether greater understanding, perhaps - which Wittgenstein is not yet quite ready to share.

If the strict definition of philosophy as critical thinking was imposed on Wittgenstein's musings, he might have been forced to choose a title more along the lines of 'Random Thoughts of a Theoretical Nature on Various Unimportant Topics' which, for obvious reasons, does not have exactly the mystical profundity of 'Philosophical Investigations'. Wittgenstein and his ilk wanted to be thought of as 'philosophers' – people engaged in the fathoming of the depths of deepest thought – rather than as mere tenured clever dicks specialising in unrecognised paradoxes and brain teasers; and it is precisely this type of mystical cachet ordinary philosophers want to enjoy, while somehow avoiding the embarrassment of having to explain to the rest of us what it is they do that warrants such lofty status, because, as we've already seen, nothing they do warrants it.

And as could be expected, there is nothing in the entirety of Wittgenstein's investigations that comes remotely near the subject of the human predicament, or the metaphysics of fulfilment. That should on its own be reason enough to condemn the book as a complete waste of time, yet it has become a canonical text in the world of academic philosophy, inspiring endless seminars and journal articles, and treated with a reverence that is as stunning as it is pathetic.

The fact is, philosophy - as it is currently understood and practiced - does not offer anyone the least opportunity to explore the metaphysics of the human condition. We can't even say that it has been forced to concede ground to religion and science, because it never held the ground in the first place, or even tried to. This allows a book like Hawking's 'The Grand Design: New Answers to the Ultimate Questions in Life' (2010) to be openly contemptuous of traditional philosophy, at the same time as replacing it with a pseudo-philosophical scientific dogma every bit as misguided and inadequate as any you might find in the tradition itself. For example, Hawking makes it clear that '...philosophy is dead. Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics. Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge.'⁶ and 'This book is rooted in the concept of scientific determinism, which implies that the answer ...is that there are no miracles, or exceptions to the laws of nature.'⁷ In other words, if you're looking for the last word on all things, then this is it.

According to this very pedestrian materialist doctrine, everything is ultimately physical, and this means the 'answer' to everything can be found in a scientific law. So something like 'fulfilment' presumably lies in getting that idea into our thick skulls. And even those mysterious and elusive things like subatomic particles - which they happily admit we cannot actually 'see'⁸ - are physical, so the idea of metaphysics, like the idea of God, is basically mistaken, and imaginary, and devoid of scientific value. Much of the argumentation in the book is directed against ideas of divine intervention, giving the impression there aren't any other theories worth rebutting, so if you don't believe in God you have no alternative but to go with science. But more

startlingly, given the peculiarly dehumanised, insensate and abstracted undercurrent to the entire natural scientific ethos, one wonders what sort of creature is meant to take heart from the whole scientific project. Of course we all love gadgets, and modern medicine, but are we seriously meant just to surrender to the idea that existence is for nothing? And succumb to it without even exploring – to the bitter end – some serious alternatives? Perhaps the scientific ethos is really just preparing the way for the arrival of some kind of alien life force, devoid of essential human features; that would figure.

Hawking is part of a vanguard of scientific thinkers – Richard Dawkins, Laurence Krauss, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett are others – who are dealing with the ‘big questions of life and existence’ by invoking a kind of scientific mysticism – a devotional confidence in the whole project⁹ – and having it underpin everything they say. Scientific mysticism operates in the same way as does philosophical, in that it invokes a certain powerful image – in this case the incontestable and very visible achievements of technology – to act as a contextual framework within which to pitch exceptionally primitive explanations of life and existence, such that if you doubt what you are being told, you are doubting the whole of our modern world. Which probably means you believe in God. The metaphysics of this thoroughly anti-metaphysical outlook is that everything is to be explained by the dead hand of scientific explanation, and that there is nowhere else to look, and nothing else to do but to succumb to it.

Perspective: what conceivable difference is any of this going to make?

We cannot expect a seismic shift in what people are interested in, so we are not suddenly going to go from a situation in which philosophy has nothing to say about the human predicament, to a newly redefined philosophy which suddenly gives rise to an explosion of dedicated and insightful metaphysicians. People will likely always be wary of genuine metaphysics – as opposed to the speculative flights of fancy you find in science, religion and academia – and find it more effort than it is worth. Not because it is intellectually demanding, but because it requires a certain rare non-attached dedication and persistence.

But the point is not to change the world, set a new fashion, or attract a massive following, but to make it easier, and clearer, for those few who are interested in getting to the core of the mystery of existence, to get some idea on how to get started on this quest, as well as where to get started, and not to be put off by the idiocy of those who speak in the name of grandiose sounding disciplines like philosophy or quantum physics, or evolutionary biology. These people are not delivering conclusive accounts of anything; they are merely presenting theoretical interpretations of a very narrow range of phenomena, and doing so within the confines of very restricting sets of beliefs. Exploring the metaphysical reality of the human condition does not require any complex theoretical preparation, or any profundity of insight and experience, it simply requires the capacity to look, and look again, and think about what you see, or what you don’t see. On such simple foundations, genuine metaphysical insight can establish itself.

Concluding remarks:

Philosophy has always been thought of as the place to go for impartial wisdom on any subject that mattered. The reality is that philosophers have no idea what their skills are, or should be, or what they should use them for. They are simply addicted to the idea of complex definitions and distinctions, and a belief in the idea that tying your brain in knots with words is a significant achievement. And if scholarly philosophy could be detached from the idea of some kind of mystical connection to wisdom – and the cachet that goes with it – and redefine itself simply as a matter of acquiring the skills of critical thinking, then each of the theoretical disciplines that have until now sheltered under the wing of philosophy would have to argue their case on their own, be subject to independent critical examination, and be seen for what they are, which is not very much.

For metaphysics to avoid becoming open ended and ungrounded speculation, it needs to focus on the human predicament, and direct its efforts towards the ultimate fulfilment of the human condition. Clarification of the basic principles involved will greatly assist in this process,

and the demystification of philosophy, and the establishment of an independent, fulfilment-orientated metaphysics would be a good start.

Summary:

- 1) A metaphysics of the human condition, that is to say, an elucidation of the human predicament and whatever steps are required to resolve and fulfil that predicament, is the ultimate knowledge for any human being. Anything other than this is less than crucial.
- 2) Philosophy, as an intellectual resource, both academic and non-academic, is, when it comes to the question of ultimate human fulfilment, a total disaster and a complete waste of time, and always has been.
- 3) Why ? Because it has not yet even successfully managed to acknowledge the issue of the human metaphysical predicament, let alone made steps to elucidate it, let alone offered even the most paltry ideas as to how it might be resolved.
- 4) Why is this ? Who knows; perhaps humans really don't much care about their ultimate destiny, and their ultimate purpose, and are happy just to be absorbed in the richness of the moment.
- 5) What to do about it ? The sole purpose behind any and all of this is to contribute meaningfully to a simple, objective, comprehensible metaphysics of the human predicament – our basic engagement with life and experience - with a view to resolving that predicament, and hopefully achieving ultimate human fulfilment thereby. What could possibly be more important, more crucial, or more valuable for any human being ?
- 6) How to set about this ? First, to clarify our intellectual resources - and in this particular case - academic 'philosophy'. And as part of a drive towards a very basic, elementary, uncomplicated metaphysical clarity, it would be helpful to clear away the mystification surrounding the strangely popular and very numinous idea of 'philosophy' as some kind of repository of profound concepts, all relating to, and possibly emanating from, some kind of free floating 'wisdom'; this idea seems to have a strong hold on both academics and non-academics alike.
- 7) And this can be achieved by clarifying the principles and practice of academic philosophy: 'philosophy' should be strictly separated from all supposedly philosophical sub-disciplines – epistemology, ontology, ethics, metaphysics &c – and made solely the 'art and science of critical thinking'. All other disciplines that previously sheltered under the umbrella of philosophy must then stand on their own and justify themselves, from first principles, without pretending that they are mystically connected to some substantial 'repository of wisdom' called 'philosophy'.
- 8) This will have the effect of exposing much of what passes as ultimate explanations of life and existence – whether from science, or metaphysics, or religion - as based on unprovable assumptions. In other words, when intellectual scrutiny is applied to any of the so-called ultimate solutions to the big questions of life and existence – detached from their mystical background - they invariably collapse into infantile principles which are no less faith-based than the most wish-fulfilling of religious dogmas.
- 9) What's the next step ? To explore the metaphysics of the human condition, as simply, straightforwardly, objectively and clearly as possible.

The clarification of the principles of philosophy will not usher in a new age of metaphysics. In itself, it is no more than an exercise in intellectual housekeeping, involving tidying things up, and putting them in order. Professional philosophers worldwide are not going to be intimidated

by this, or shamed into reforming themselves. This is not the way things go. Nor does it matter that nothing will change; this clarifying and tidying up is for those who want to make progress towards metaphysical insight on their own, and such people will appreciate this kind of ruthless identification of intellectual subterfuge. Pretending you have access to special knowledge is a well-known feature of most human endeavours, but it is pernicious when it comes to the issues that matter.

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Endnotes

¹ Peacocke (2008) p.103.

² Cox (2010) p.11: 'philosophy is...the sum total of humankind's accumulated and still accumulating philosophising.'

³ Gutting (2009) p.106.

⁴ [Wikiquotes](#) has a series of differing definitions from various famous philosophers, most of them displaying the same conflation of rational analysis with the pursuit of certain kinds of intellectual knowledge. Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 4.112 states that 'The object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a theory but an activity. A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations. The result of philosophy is not a number of 'philosophical propositions', but to make propositions clear. Philosophy should make clear and delimit sharply the thoughts which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred.' And this of all the selected definitions is closest to the one that is being outlined in this article. Anthony Quinton also sounds a hopeful note in his statement that: 'The shortest definition, and it is quite a good one, is that philosophy is thinking about thinking. That brings out the generally second-order character of the subject, as reflective thought about particular kinds of thinking — formation of beliefs, claims to knowledge — about the world or large parts of it.' But he then goes on to spoil the clarity and simplicity of this characterisation by adding that: 'A more detailed, but still uncontroversial comprehensive, definition is that philosophy is rationally [critical thinking](#), of a more or less systematic kind about the general nature of the world (metaphysics or theory of existence), the justification of belief (epistemology or [theory](#) of knowledge), and the conduct of life (ethics or theory of value).' This is a considerably more misleading definition because it leads back to exactly the conflation of form and content which needs to be avoided if clarity of thought is to be achieved.

⁵ Ayer (1969) p.1.

⁶ Hawking (2010) p.5.

⁷ Ibid.p.34.

⁸ Ibid. p.47.

⁹ Well instanced in the documentary 'The Unbelievers' (2014).