

## **What is Philosophy?**

C.P. Ragland and Sarah Heidt, eds.

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The title of this collection of essays is a question that I expect many professional philosophers have addressed in one form or another, whether trying to explain their discipline to family and friends, or to students new to philosophy. But how many of us would be ready to discuss it as a philosophical problem with other philosophers, and especially to reflect on philosophically for ourselves? This text is a collection of papers from a conference at Yale University in 1998, where seven philosophers addressed the question, “What is Philosophy?” to an audience of (mostly) other philosophers. The essays of six out of the seven conference participants are included in this volume (the paper by Richard Rorty is not included): Barry Stroud, Karsten Harries, Robert Brandom, Allen Wood, Martha C. Nussbaum, and Karl-Otto Apel. The editors claim in the Introduction that the text is accessible to undergraduates, but the degree and manner in which many of the authors assume previous knowledge of the history of philosophy on the part of their audience means that it would best serve as assigned reading for upper-division undergraduate or graduate courses. As discussed below, I think this text may also be fruitfully used by philosophy teachers as a catalyst for self-reflection on just what it is we are engaging in when we do and teach philosophy.

There is something a little unsettling about attempting to discover the nature of a discipline from within, by using the very methods that one is to elucidate thereby. It seems on the face of it that such an inquiry can never be complete, that in the process of using philosophical thinking to reflect back on philosophical thinking, a blind spot may perpetually result. The editors of this text hint in this direction at the end of the Introduction when they say that “Philosophy may pierce the darkness, but the interior of its torch must remain hidden from the light” (22). Yet in another sense it is perfectly fitting for philosophers to engage in self-reflection on their own enterprise, if, as many of the authors in this

volume suggest, philosophy itself could be considered a form of self-reflection. The editors argue that investigating the nature of philosophy “does seem to be a necessary part of philosophy,” since “the philosophical charge to ‘know thyself’ applies just as much to us *qua* philosophers as it does to us *qua* human beings” (4).

That the authors in this volume address the question “What is Philosophy?” philosophically goes a long way towards explaining why, as the editors point out, the authors approach this question largely in a normative, rather than a descriptive fashion, by focusing more on what philosophy “ought to be” than what it is “in fact” (6). As philosophers, we are not so interested in what we are and have been doing as we are in what we *ought* to be doing and why. Still, the former certainly informs the latter, since the process of *philosophically* discussing what our discipline ought to be will inevitably take place through the philosophical commitments that, as individual philosophers, we already have. In this collection of essays, it is quite clear that each author approaches the question from the perspective of their own concerns, commitments, and area of research expertise, that each is doing what Barry Stroud most explicitly claims to be doing: addressing the question “How do I see philosophy?” rather than the more general (and perhaps unanswerable) question, “What is philosophy?” as a whole (25-26).

Still, this is not to say that there are no broad bases of agreement between the ways the authors in this collection explain and defend their view of the nature of philosophy (and what it should be). Each accepts, implicitly or explicitly, the idea that philosophical thinking is a form of self-reflection, an investigation into the ways we as humans think about, understand, and act in the world. Each also accepts the basic ideas that philosophical thought crucially involves the practice of investigating and criticizing fundamental concepts, assumptions and principles, requiring that they be justified by reasons, and granting assent to what is justified by the best argument. Accordingly, though each answer given in this text to the question “What is Philosophy?” differs, each is a product of a philosopher reflecting on his/her own activity and that of others in the discipline, and rationally defending what it is that

philosophers ought to be doing – informed in no small part by the history of philosophy itself and the philosophical commitments of each author.

The authors appeal to the history of philosophy in varying ways and degrees, as a means of explicating the nature of the discipline. Robert Brandom, in “Reason, Expression, and the Philosophic Enterprise,” argues in Hegelian fashion that we can understand the nature of philosophy by “rationally reconstructing the tradition,” by “recast[ing] it into a form in which we can see a constellation of ideas emerging,” unfolding into progressively greater explicitness (75, 92). Brandom’s own view of such a “constellation of ideas” emerging from the history of philosophy is that the “distinctive concern” of philosophy is “a certain kind of *self-consciousness*,” namely making explicit to ourselves our nature as beings who use concepts to make things explicit (92). The point of this activity is to make our conceptual commitments available for “reasoned assessment, challenge, and defense,” by exposing their (otherwise often hidden) assumptions and consequences (93).

Barry Stroud, in “What is Philosophy?,” appeals to the need to consider the history of philosophy in a different way – philosophers, he argues, should be paying more attention than they often do to the origins of the problems and questions they address, before attempting to answer them. This means examining “the assumptions, the demands, the preconceptions, and the aspirations that lead to a question’s having the particular significance it now has for us” (42). Otherwise, we end up attempting to answer a question “before understanding what it is and where it comes from,” which is like trying to cure an illness without diagnosing it first (42). For Stroud, philosophers should not be concerned with adhering to a particular “position or doctrine or theory” in their approach to answering philosophical questions, but rather investigating first “the sources of the so-called problems, to see where they come from and why they take the forms that they do” as a crucial step in determining how to address them (37, 40).

In “Philosophy: Enlightenment Apology, Enlightenment Critique,” Allen Wood argues that philosophy today should be largely what it was to the philosophers of the Enlightenment, since Western

philosophers today are heirs to the Enlightenment (even those who criticize Enlightenment principles and values still adhere to them, according to Wood (115)). Philosophers during the Enlightenment were concerned with rational reflection for the sake of action, including social transformation: “Reason is a capacity to know the world, but chiefly it is a capacity to act in it, and because reason is also oriented toward society, its vocation above all is to transform the social order – actualizing the Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity” (111). Instead of separating themselves from the social and practical dimension of reason, engaging in “thinking separated from social practice,” philosophers today should be more conscious of their social role as instigators of social change (114).

Karsten Harries also appeals implicitly to enlightenment values when he speaks of philosophical thought as characterized largely by freedom, a freedom that is in tension with current conceptions of the discipline as “an industry, a business, a trade,” wherein individuals are expected to align themselves with a particular theoretical community or school of thought (52). For Harries, philosophy is best connected to “the demand for authenticity, the demand that the individual should act and think for himself or herself,” and to “the refusal to rest content with what has come to be established, accepted, and taken for granted” (61). Harries argues that philosophy engenders such autonomy of thought because its questions originate in “dislocations or derailments” that “open us to possibilities that remain unconsidered as long as life is on track,” and that thereby open us up to freedom (63). Still, Harries insists, this freedom to think differently must be a finite one, bound by our particularity, our embodied self “experiencing care and desire,” such that we keep intact our ability to respond to where we are, here and now (67).

Martha Nussbaum also argues that philosophy needs to be grounded in and respond back to the realm of practice and action. She argues similarly to Wood when she says, in “Public Philosophy and International Feminism,” that philosophy “has to be grounded in experience and concerned with practice, or it will rightly be dismissed as irrelevant” (146). Nussbaum grounds her essay in her experience working on a project with philosophers and economists to revise conceptions and

measurements of “quality of life” that are used in international development policy. She reports that the expertise of philosophers in investigating “core concepts” of its own and other disciplines, in “the critical scrutiny of arguments,” and in holding to “high standards of rigor and refinement in argument” is crucially needed in discussions of public policy, since these traits and practices are not as well-represented in the social sciences as in philosophy (129). But in order to be effective in the world of practice, philosophy must both remain tied to that world and yet operative in the theoretical realm of abstraction, “concerned with conceptual distinctions,” since that forms the origin of its distinctive contribution to practical action (146). Philosophy must move continuously between the realms of theory and practice.

Finally, Karl-Otto Apel’s essay, “What is Philosophy? The Philosophical Point of View After the End of Dogmatic Metaphysics,” ends the collection with an argument for a new kind of transcendental “first philosophy,” one that can provide a better grounding for knowledge and ethics than that put forward by Kant. Apel begins by arguing that the “total” critique of reason suggested by philosophers such as Rorty, Lyotard, Foucault and Derrida is doomed to failure in that it must take place through the use of reason itself: such arguments always end up in a kind of performative contradiction, where the content of the propositions involved is inconsistent with “the validity claims that are implied in the speech acts by which those propositions must be brought forward” (156). According to Apel, “any act of argumentation within a discourse community” always includes performatively-expressed “universal validity claims” (166). Apel argues that rather than trying for a total critique of reason as if it could be done from an impossible position outside of reason itself, a “first philosophy” today should undertake a rational critique of reason, wherein the “ultimate foundation for philosophy” consists of “those presuppositions of argumentation that cannot be disputed without committing a performative self-contradiction” (176).

In my own experience as a teacher of philosophy, I have found it important to discuss the nature of philosophical activity in courses where numerous students are new to the discipline. When we

directly address the nature of philosophy in class numerous times during the semester, through lecture and discussion, journal and paper assignments, students are often better able to deal with some of the common objections and hindrances to doing philosophy for the first time. Without a focus on an established body of facts or formulas to memorize, students can often conclude that philosophical questions are unanswerable, or amenable only to answers relative to individuals or groups. This conclusion can often (certainly not always) be moderated or avoided when students are encouraged to consider explicitly the particular methods of philosophy, the kinds of questions it addresses and why, and the results one can hope to obtain.

Of course, to engage one's classes in ongoing discussion and discovery of just what philosophical activity is, and what philosophers do, requires that one has undertaken a fair amount of self-reflection on these questions oneself (or at least, is willing to undertake it along with students in the course, as the semester goes by). This collection provides great food for thought, and a catalyst for self-reflection on the part of philosophy teachers and (advanced) students, regarding just what it is we are doing when we are doing philosophy.

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