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Engaged philosophy: (Re-)connecting with the real world

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Introduction

Today humankind faces a large number of problems on a scale, if not yet a magnitude, unprecedented in its history. If ever the rational, clear-minded examination of the human condition and its place in the world were needed, surely it is now. Yet the two main philosophical streams of the 20th century—analytic philosophy and so-called 'continental' philosophy—do not, on the face of it, seem to offer much help. Analytic philosophy has carried out a program of identifying paradoxes, ambiguities or conceptual problems at the foundation of various disciplines and practices (sciences, morality, psychology, etc.), but generally without serious regard to real-world problems and without much success in terms of resolving problems. Continental philosophy, by contrast, remained connected to

existential and social realities, but the upshot of much of the musing was too abstruse for the uninitiated.

For philosophy to contribute something meaningful to the myriad challenges facing humankind—and we believe that, as a publicly funded knowledge enterprise, it should—philosophers must become directly engaged with those problems. This will require reconsidering both the kinds of questions currently entertained in philosophical discourse, and the methods of attacking them, in order to work in a way which is more productive. With notable exceptions, this is not a challenge that has yet been taken up by mainstream philosophy departments. However, we believe that it is a road that some philosophers must take if the discipline as a whole is to fulfill the responsibilities implicit in the social contract underpinning philosophy as a profession, and for it to remain vibrant as a publicly funded enterprise.

In this paper we will describe two instances of engaged philosophy, one in public health, the other in cognitive science. What these case studies will demonstrate is that philosophy can be done in a way that is useful to other disciplines without sacrificing rigor or compromising the basic tasks of philosophy. This requires philosophers to acquire domain-specific knowledge, not least to reveal to the philosopher herself what the underlying philosophical problems of a discipline are. However, once a philosopher's work begins to incorporate large elements of intellectual inquiry from another domain, the question as to whether this is 'real' philosophy inevitably seems to arise. We argue that *real* philosophy, far from being isolated from other disciplines, *ought* to remain interdisciplinary—that is, open to and engaged with other domains of enquiry and knowledge. This is, after all, how philosophy began and historically was conducted until relatively recently.

The paradigm example of contemporary engaged philosophy, in our view, is the *What Sorts of People* blog network (http://whatsortsofpeople.wordpress.com/) and the recently launched *Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada* project that grew out of it. Both are the brain-children of Rob Wilson, professor of philosophy at the University of Alberta (Edmonton) and best known for his published work in cognitive science and philosophy of biology. Wilson became involved in uncovering and preserving the history of eugenics in western Canada during preparation of a course on biology and society, specifically, a module on eugenics (pers. com. Wilson, 17 Feb 2011). Interviews with sterilization survivors and lawyers involved in hundreds of cases led Wilson and others to establish ACHE (Alberta Consortium on the History of Eugenices), the first community group dedicated to exploring the personal and collective issues raised by these policies and practices. Wilson is principal investigator on Living Archives, a five-year, government-funded project involving 31 research scholars and sterilization survivors and 12 'community partners' aimed at "developing accessible resources to bring to light the history of eugenics in Canada…[and create] a communal space to explore the relationships between that history and current polices and practices" (http://eugenicsarchive.ca/#about-section).

Case Study No. 1

Louise's adventures in engaged philosophy began several years ago, first in dialogue and then in collaboration with academics in Public Health. This began in a modest fashion, by participation in discussions on highly visible ethical issues then the subject of current public dialogue (e.g., vaccination of pre-adolescent girls with the HPV vaccine), and contributions to a new postgraduate course in Public Health Ethics, aimed at public health practitioners. It led to a collaboration on a paper critiquing the current fashion in public health practice for 'community empowerment'

approaches, in which we identified a crucial tension between theory and practice, and suggested a more coherent and practical theoretical approach to community engagement in health promotion (Braunack-Mayer and Louise 2008). This was not a project which itself required much familiarity with the discipline of public health, although the domain-specific knowledge of the specialist coauthor was essential to draw Louise's attention to current practice and theory that would otherwise have remained obscure.

Over time, greater engagement with academics and students from public health has identified many more potential challenges and opportunities. Teaching the public health ethics course was also a learning experience, as discussion with the students brought to light a wealth of complex and difficult ethical issues. Many of these required sophisticated theoretical tools to analyse and resolve properly, tools beyond the scope of any ethics course taught as part of a degree in the health sciences. Further discussion and collaboration with academics in public health suggested many areas in which a philosopher's skills and expertise—for example, in ethical theory, social philosophy, philosophy of science and epistemology—could productively be brought to bear, not only in analysing problems and proposing solutions, but also providing coherent theoretical justifications for consensus views. Key questions arise, for instance, regarding the reliability of scientific evidence underlying regulatory decisions, the interplay between social determinants of health and individual responsibility for health behaviours, and questions about collective and individual rationality regarding health as a public good.

Of course, these questions are being addressed within the health sciences, often with great insight and sophistication. Nevertheless, it was evident that a philosopher could contribute usefully to the debates, by bringing to bear a deeper

and more nuanced understanding of ethical theory, a greater facility with conceptual analysis, and a familiarity with certain kinds of useful argumentative moves. To wield these philosophical tools and skills in a useful way, however, a more sophisticated understanding of various aspects of public health was needed to avoid misunderstanding problems, failing to identify unstated, discipline-specific assumptions and general knowledge, or missing problems entirely due to unfamiliarity with the landscape. Thus Louise currently is studying for an additional qualification in biostatistics and actively seeking collaborative engagement with public health academics. Moreover, she is adopting a more interdisciplinary outlook on her work in ethical theory, for example, seeking to test certain theoretical views regarding agency and weakness of will against relevant empirical research (e.g. in behavioural psychology) and to determine the implications of those views for public health policy.

Case Study No. 2

'Foundations for a Cognitive Biology' is a research network of philosophers and scientists at 11 institutions on three continents, the hub of which is located at the University of Adelaide Discipline of Philosophy. (For more project-specific information, see http://www.hss.adelaide.edu.au/philosophy/cogbio/). The network, which evolved out of Lyon's PhD thesis, is concerned with foundational issues in cognitive science, specifically, the development of a common language for describing cognitive processes across widely diverse phyla. It is an unfortunate (and somewhat scandalous) fact that despite truly amazing advancements in understanding the brain and behavior, we still have no means of identifying cognition in the natural world (Lyon 2006). Cognition currently is like art: People know it when they see it, but everybody sees something different. Some scientists will say that insects, and even bacteria, are cognizers, while others deny 'genuine' cognition (whatever that is) to

dogs and cats. Problems of identification generally have not persisted in other sciences as long as they have in the sciences concerned with cognition.

On the other hand, definition of theoretical constructs is not a trivial or ‘merely semantic’ matter, nor is it usually something that is done once and for all. This is especially the case regarding constructs covering highly complex phenomena. However, definitions determine what sorts of data are useful and what sorts are not. Currently, it is impossible to say whether data on memory in bacteria will be useful in understanding memory in mammals, including humans, not least because there is no consensus on whether ‘memory’ means the same thing in the two cases.

But why should it not? At the most basic level ‘gene’ means the same thing in bacteria and humans, although the microbial chromosome is single and circular and human chromosomes many and x-shaped. The same is true of ‘respiration’. Although the machinery instantiating it is very different in the two distantly related phyla, the function of respiration in a bacterium and in a human is covered by the same biological definition. The aim of the cognitive biology project, which is still in its infancy, is to devise a working toolkit of constructs that will allow scientists and theorists working in different research ‘silos’ related to cognition to benefit from work in diverse model organisms, as is standard in the study of other biological functions, and thereby assist in the development of general principles. It is a project that could not be done by philosophers alone, because scientists must ‘own’ and then use the constructs; but given the hyper-specialization of the biological sciences generally and the continual pressure for novel empirical results, it probably would not be done without them.

The key consideration for all the participants is how to add value to the scientific enterprise, essentially by connecting dots currently widely dispersed in large

literatures covering varying levels of biological complexity, so that the resulting synthesis may provide a better grip on the three foundational questions of cognitive science: what cognition is (as a biological function), what it does in the energetic economy of living systems, and how it works (Bechtel, Abrahamsen et al. 1998). These philosophical questions date to Aristotle, who is also the father of biology (Lennox 2001). At present there is no discernible division of labor between the philosophers and scientists in the network. The philosophers involved have a high degree of domain-specific knowledge, or the scientists wouldn't bother; their time is too precious. The dialogue has only just begun, but it has commenced. There is no funding, but the hope is that, within the next year or two, the collaboration will form the basis of several grant applications, in Australia, the United States, and Europe. In the meantime, a number of collaborative writing projects are under way.

As a result of this work, Lyon was recruited by two rheumatologists, long-time research partners in the field of chronic widespread pain, to 'think about' how an evolutionarily conserved stress response might give rise to the clinically baffling symptoms of fibromyalgia syndrome. The initial result of that collaboration was a presentation to a scientific conference (Cohen, Lyon et al. 2009) that grew into a detailed biomedical hypothesis, in which the philosopher is lead author. The hypothesis is yet to be published but on the strength of it Lyon was granted affiliate status in a research group studying the social epidemiology of chronic stress. Lyon's role in the research group will involve the classic tasks of the philosopher, as Aristotle first set them out: to think broadly about the stress response and its implications for human health both across disciplines and levels of analysis (from molecules to whole organism); to identify patterns and gaps in diverse bodies of knowledge, ascertain general principles as possible, and then mount effective arguments for them.

But is it philosophy?

We have just described two case studies in which we, as philosophers, were able to identify opportunities to contribute to other fields. These contributions required training and experience in philosophy, but a deeper familiarity with the other discipline was needed before philosophical engagement could be truly productive. The end result is research that applies the tools of philosophy to questions and issues of another field, using language, assumptions, knowledge and frameworks internal to that field.

Because of this, many philosophers wonder whether such research counts as 'real' philosophy at all. The feeling seems to be that analysis of concepts and arguments with a specific applied focus, rather than for their own sake, must lack the requisite rigor or sophistication to count as a genuine philosophical contribution. Although the work is making use of the tools of philosophy (for example, critical thinking, conceptual analysis, theoretical terms and frameworks), there is a perception in some quarters that the tools, and the use to which they are put, are too crude and basic for the result to count as genuine philosophical investigation.

This kind of thinking, in our view, is a product of the phenomenon to which we have already alluded—namely, that it is difficult to make a genuinely useful contribution until one has accumulated a good deal of domain-specific expertise. Without domain-specific knowledge, philosophers are condemned to float on the surface of another discipline, addressing only those problems that lend themselves to the crude application of the blunter philosophical instruments. A deeper knowledge of the discipline allows the philosopher to identify more subtle and complex issues, which require more subtle and sophisticated tools.

The investigation of these issues, therefore, can indeed count as 'real philosophy' by virtue of the complexity and difficulty of many of the arguments, and the need for well-developed theoretical frameworks to deal with them. 'Proper' philosophical work in logic, theories of rationality, ethics, moral psychology, epistemology, metaphysics and philosophy of mind may not only find *applications* in other disciplines, but may indeed be *done* through the investigation of problems in these other disciplines. Constantly measuring theory against reality provides a much-needed check on pure theorising, and a full appreciation of the relevant reality helps to identify theoretical lacunae or deficiencies that otherwise would have remained undiscovered but for a serendipitous thought experiment.

Another reason for thinking of this kind of interdisciplinary research as philosophy is that it really can only be done by trained philosophers. It is true that many practitioners of other disciplines can think critically, evaluate arguments, think about foundational issues and worry about conceptual clarity. But doing these things *well* generally requires years of experience, training in the identification and evaluation of various argumentative moves, and practice gained by much use of argument and counterargument. Of course, the fact that X can only be done by someone trained in discipline Y does not mean that doing X is a central element of Y. But there is also little reason to deny that the kind of work we are doing counts as real philosophy; indeed, there are many compelling reasons to consider it a core part of the philosophical enterprise.

Why, then, do many philosophers persist in thinking of such interdisciplinary research as somehow not proper philosophy? It may be an attempt to erect and police strict boundaries around a discipline that has, in recent decades, seen much of its territory ceded to others (e.g., psychology, linguistics, cognitive science), but such

an impulse is blind to history. Philosophy has long been the quintessentially interdisciplinary—even *non*-disciplinary—knowledge enterprise. There are no questions closed to philosophy, in one sense, because philosophy—or, rather, the human questioning response to existence—gave birth to them all. Aristotle's 'natural philosophy' gave us biology; Galileo's and Newton's gave us physics; Descartes' gave us the scientific study of perception. Yes, scientific disciplines are today highly specialized, indeed canalized, but every discipline and sub-discipline has its foundational problems, and those problems relate to the meanings of theoretical constructs and the relations between them, how we know what we know (what counts as evidence), and what makes one explanation better than another. On occasion scientists may tackle the 'big questions' of a discipline, but when they do so they are, generally speaking, engaging in philosophy and are seen to be doing so.

Conclusion

We have argued that being socially engaged is something that more philosophers need to be. This certainly doesn't mean there shouldn't be metaphysicians, epistemologists, ethicists, aestheticians and others working at the more abstract problems of the discipline. There should be, and always will be. But more of us should work at the coalface of humanity's myriad real-life dilemmas, where our expertise and skills are needed. In many disciplines crucial to improving life on this planet, data are accumulating at a rate that "almost inhibits meaning" (Rose 1998). The tendency to narrow specialization contributes materially to the inability to make meaning out of oceanic data, and pattern recognition software will only take us so far. As one professor in the health sciences pointed out: There are too few 'creatives' in the business, too few who can see a larger picture. What philosophers have to offer, if they can avoid becoming too hyper-specialised

themselves, is the ability to take a big-picture view and look at the problems and issues that too often vanish from view within a domain itself.

Engaged philosophy should help philosophy as a discipline, but this is a byproduct and not the reason we should be doing it. Rather, we should do it because it is necessary.

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