

THE NEONATAL INTENSIVE CARE UNIT OF THEORY

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Harvard symposium
on philosophical
progress

PHILOSOPHICAL PROGRESS?

- Progressive achievement of the goals of philosophy
- What would those be?
- What is philosophy?
- A certain kind of *guild*

GUILDS

- **Communities in general**
 - Membership provides an identity
 - Membership provides reasons for action
 - In particular, for partiality toward other members
- **A guild is a community that perpetuates through apprenticeship**
 - Members of the guild are experts at performing a certain task
 - Expertise is expert-level knowhow, grasp of instructions
 - Such grasp is the basis of execution, conveyance, and assessment
 - The apprentice shadows the master to come to grasp the instructions
- **The associated partiality includes restriction of trade**
 - For better and for worse

THE ACADEMIC GUILD

- Doctoral guilds possess expertise in remedying vexation
 - MDs: bodily vexation
 - JDs: social vexation
 - PhDs: cognitive vexation
 - Collins's *Sociology of Philosophies*: similar in other periods and nationalities
- PhDs are experts at *answering questions*:
 - 'Which'-questions: 'once you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth'
 - 'Why'-questions: want the *because*—assuming nothing weird happens, what makes the target phenomenon a certainty
- To answer any question, need a 'paradigm': presuppositions on
 1. Which options to consider
 2. What to take for granted
 3. How to gather evidence
 4. How to characterize evidence
 5. How to calculate incompatibilities
 6. What to expect v what is weird

ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

- **Topical disciplines**
 - Subguilds
 - Expertise in answering questions about X
- **Investigative disciplines/special sciences:**
 - Chemistry—questions about the behavior of molecules
 - History—questions about the doings of past societies
- **Hermeneutic disciplines/arts:**
 - Questions about the world encoded in a representation?
- **Is philosophy a topical discipline?**

PHILOSOPHY AS UNIVERSAL

■ No:

- Chalmers: ‘If you get interested in X, you just say ‘I’m working on the philosophy of X’’
- Philosophy is the academic discipline that answers questions *about anything*
 - Thus the ‘centripetal’ character of our departments as contrasted with the ‘centrifugal’ character of topical departments: ‘if working only on molecules is an identity, so is working only on these molecules’; there is no professional identity that is a determinate of *philosopher*

■ Objections:

- Don’t philosophers address characteristic questions—ethics and the like?
 - Philosophers don’t do bench science: why not?
- ## ■ We’ll come back to that

UNIVERSALITY AND DISAGREEMENT

- Topical disciplines tend toward agreement:
 - In answering questions about the behavior of molecules, the aim is to answer as many such interesting questions as can be asked
 - The individual researcher says something original and valued by adding to the 'big pile of agreement': the class of results accepted in chemistry
 - Of course, answering a question (about a molecule), as we saw, requires taking a lot for granted: the 'paradigm'
 - Though hard-won, the paradigm's status is of no intrinsic interest
- A universal discipline would tend toward disagreement:
 - But if *any* question is of intrinsic interest, then the chemical paradigm can be questioned
 - The individual researcher says something original and valued by answering the questions it answers in different ways
 - The same would go for *anything* taken for granted in answering *any* question

THE MIND OF THE SKEPTIC

- Philosophers, then, while academics, are also *skeptics*. Individuals provide answers, while also attacking, and offering alternatives to presuppositions of, everyone else's answers
- Immersion among skeptics infuses three cognitive traits:
 1. A 'legalistic' facility with creativity and rigor: creative in attacking the views of others (preparing alternatives, poking holes), scrupulously rigorous in bracing for attack
 2. Sympathy for opponents: keeping the guild together requires mutual benefit—we attack our colleagues, but also help to develop their views by suggesting lines of defense against our own attacks; this requires 'triangulation' or 'translation'
 3. Comfort with cognitive dissonance: I must give answers but must also question everything, which requires taking answers opposed to my own seriously—hard to distinguish from believing them; I have answers but everyone else mistakenly thought so as well

TRAGEDY AND HISTORY

- This last aspect lends philosophy what Jon Simon has described as a ‘tragic’ cast (Hume on backgammon): we face a choice among
 - I. Abandoning the academic goal of giving answers
 - II. Lapsing into an unseemly dogmatism
 - III. Global incoherence
- Global incoherence is inherent in the nature of cognition (hope for the best, prepare for the worst; trust but verify; act in confidence—but keep that insurance policy), but it almost never shows up in the moment: facing it squarely can be vertiginous
- Solace: if Kant stared mightily into the abyss, I can too. Philosophy offers a shot at this sort of immortality. A kind of *stare decisis*: throw Kant out and there goes my shot. Our professional courtesy: perpetually the new thing (Lavoisier not as much)

A QUESTION IS NOT FOR US WHEN ...

- It requires mastery of a big pile of agreement
- A fortiori, other people are already working on it
- Nothing in the nature of the profession prevents us from joining in but it would not be an effective use of our training

A QUESTION IS FOR US WHEN ...

- a. It suspends absolute presuppositions of special sciences
 - Is there an external world? Do I see what I think I see?
- b. Some of its answers differ from special science standard practice but the meat of special science theory is translatable without significant loss
 - Ontology
- c. It concerns relations among special science subject-matter
 - Interlevel metaphysics
- d. Seeking agreement on it within the academy would clash with other socially important goals
 - Ethics, political philosophy: we shouldn't all pay people to preach
- e. Special sciences gave up on it because of old philosophical fashion that got out into the wild or because highly influential theories used up all the oxygen
 - Psychology and consciousness studies set back a century by abandonment of the Brentanian tradition; vitalism making a comeback?

A QUESTION IS FOR US WHEN ...

- f.** Answering it requires suspension of presuppositions that are deeply entrenched within special sciences
 - Questions about relativism, perspective, objectivity
- g.** Answering it requires distinctive expertise with rigor
 - Interpretation of QM, evolutionary theory; statistical inference
- h.** It concerns the subject-matter of a ‘young’ special-science field: especially when our traditional mathematical skills or bodies of theory are useful, or when the subject-matter bears on a question in which we are already interested
 - Semantics, game theory, decision theory; neuroethics
- i.** No one else has asked it and when no special-science training provides an obvious competitive advantage
 - Jane Heal on simulationism? Ludlow on cyberspace ethics?
Anscombe and Davidson on action? Barry Smith on intuitive space?

PHILOSOPHICAL PROGRESS?

- Vertical v horizontal progress
 - Progress within special science fields primarily 'vertical': add to the big pile of agreement atop a rich widespread standard practice
 - Progress within philosophy primarily 'horizontal': add to array of personal or small-group paradigms
- Who needs horizontal progress?

THE NICU OF THEORY

- New theories can be very socially important (for science, for policy, for politics, for generating personal meaning); philosophy is in the business of generating a big spread of theories and providing them with rigorous early care
 - For many years a ‘political’ conception of philosophy prevailed: the ‘queen and servant of the sciences’. Since the sciences go on fine without us, that makes us a queen without a realm, a servant without a master
 - But of course! Doctoral professionals are experts at relieving vexation rather than at leading or following. Our medical analogy is much more initially plausible
- Rosen: ‘the second-most depressing job in the world’—but perhaps the tragic figure should acknowledge freedom and respond rather with elation