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Leiden

The Netherlands

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Doomen, J.

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Philosophy's End

Introduction

Philosophy's task is at present not easily qualified. As scientific endeavors have led to results that reduce philosophical pursuits in many cases to little more than a reflection without practical outcomes, it must reflect on its own enterprise. What is philosophy's present role? Philosophers are typically interested in truth. The question presents itself why someone should be interested in a 'truth' beyond the standards¹ the sciences have apparently adapted (viz., accept a theory as long as it works and no superior one is envisaged).

Is the quest for 'truth' merely the need to solve a puzzle, or does grasping it simply provide a stable result, so that one can rest assured and need not look further? In any event, it seems difficult to find a task here for philosophy that is not exhausted by the sciences. Of course, there are questions they have not even begun to deal with – the most important ones in life, which may, ironically, be of such a nature that they cannot be answered at all –, but philosophy's track record in that department is not impressive either, to put it mildly, philosophers providing answers without agreeing on the criteria to determine their merit. It is, then, necessary to see how philosophy's presence may be justified. That is the question this article attempts to answer.

1. Disintegration

'Philosophy's end' can be taken to mean (at least) three things. First, one may speak of the end of philosophy in the sense of its goal. Such a goal may be said to be happiness.² This is not what I mean here. Second, the end of philosophy may be identified with the completion ('Vollendung') of metaphysics.³ There is a common ground with my position in this article, although I do not subscribe to this outcome. Third, philosophy's end in the sense of its ending can be said to follow from its increasingly specialist outlook. It is this interpretation that is the focus of this article.

¹ I say 'standards' (plural) as the social sciences and the exact sciences have different degrees of exactness (and within these categories, further varying degrees can be distinguished).

² Aristotle 1960, 1097a, 1097b.

³ Heidegger 2007, 70.

In the case of the sciences, the same process has manifested itself. In order to be able to implement the procedures that have been developed in the field of medicine, e. g., specializations and subspecializations have come to the fore. This is an example of an external element that leads to specialization, which is exemplary for sciences' (sub)specializations. In the case of medicine, it is clear how this works: if a particular treatment (the external element in this case) becomes available, one wants to have it available, so that doctors need to master the knowledge and skills involved; as more treatments are developed, the need for specialization increases. In turn, these specialists have the opportunity to research more specifically than before, so that the process of specialization is again increased.

Such external elements are apparently lacking in philosophy. In its case, conversely, specializations seem to have been prompted by ongoing debates with ever new viewpoints, a dialectical process if you will, although with an apparent lack of progress. 'Progress' is, of course, a difficult notion, but in the case of the sciences, the external elements can point out wherein it may consist (one would, for instance (*ceteris paribus*), prefer a medical treatment in the present day and age, with the present resources available, to a treatment in an earlier period of time). Some of the discussions that have started with, e. g., Plato, Descartes or Berkeley⁴ have not been concluded; those that *may* be said to have been concluded have received an answer from one or more sciences, whether they be psychology, physics or other sciences. This does not mean, incidentally, that such discussions are *forever* concluded, since scientific insights are provisory and must be abandoned once superior explanations become available, but it does mean that they are not, or at least not exclusively, considered to be of a philosophical nature anymore.

Those philosophical quandaries that remain have become increasingly intricate, but have not been resolved. In fact, it may be argued that a philosophical issue can only be solved if a scientific response is provided.⁵ The question what knowledge is, e. g., has led to many characterizations, such that they may be said to testify to an increasing awareness of the difficulties involved in providing a definitive account.⁶ The notion of knowledge as a justified belief, e. g.,

⁴ These philosophers' positions have emerged in intellectual contexts, of course, and have not arisen *ex nihilo*.

⁵ Alternatively, an account from a non-scientific source that is not (presumably) available or even imaginable, such as those propounded by religions, may in the same way provide a solution non-philosophically, but it goes without saying that the question whether such an account is at all possible is not universally answered in the affirmative.

⁶ Perhaps a basic error is to presume that a definitive account, one that transcends the various approaches under the general banner of epistemology, is possible at all. These approaches are all characterized by some feature that is not shared universally (those known as 'coherentists' disagreeing with those whose view is dubbed 'foundationalist', for example, or those who present an 'internalist' approach with those who adhere to an 'externalist' outlook). This is an important issue, but not pursued here.

has come under fire in the light of the observations Gettier has famously put forward.⁷ This problematization of 'knowledge' has in its turn led to many responses, such as the idea that knowledge is available as long as conclusive reasons are present.⁸

It is difficult to establish where this process (and many others in philosophy) would end. What I mean is the following. If an account is provided that seems plausible, such as the notion that knowledge is true, justified belief, but which is then (seemingly) refuted by another (supposedly superior) one, which is then itself (seemingly) refuted, at what point is the right (or 'right') account given? And how is one to determine this? Applied to the present example, there are those who will cling to a pre-Gettier notion of knowledge, those who accept Gettier's arguments, and those who will provide their own alternative, without some impartial party to establish once and for all which explanation is right (in this (alleged) case not 'right' but actually right, since a (purportedly) objective point of view must be the case here, lest the discussion be reduced to an intellectual game, a possibility that cannot, incidentally, outrightly be dismissed). An additional difficulty is that the human perspective, from which it seems hard or impossible to escape, serves as the standard, so one seems unable to determine whether the objective perspective, presuming it exists, is reached.

The most likely outcome, if a radical alternative such as Rorty's⁹ is dismissed, is that the various positions will continue to exist next to one another, in the worst scenario even leading to subdisciplines in philosophy, just as philosophy has demonstrated from the end of the Middle Ages, culminating (so far at least) in the present era. This would not be an unwelcome development as long as there were some justification, such as in the field of medicine, whose expansion in such diverse areas as nephrology, radiology and psychiatry is due to the fact that physicians are not supposed to be able to oversee or master each treatment, as I pointed out above. The same can be said for the other sciences. It is precisely such a justification which is not a given in philosophy. In its case, there is no replacement of theories by one another, which are presumably their superiors, but an ever ongoing accretion of new theories without an abandonment of the old. Such theories are not discarded; at most, something formerly considered philosophical is considered to be scientific once it can be corroborated or refuted on the basis of empirical data, and unless writings are lost because of unrelated factors such as natural disasters (a minor issue in a digital age), they will not become merely historically interesting, such as their *scientific* counterparts that are now considered outdated. In the knowledge case (and others) the question looms what it would matter which party is right. Suppose the question what knowledge is were 'resolved' in a way acceptable for everyone

⁷ Gettier 1963, *passim*.

⁸ Dretske 1971, *passim*.

⁹ Rorty 1980, 264: "[...] the notion of philosophy as having foundations is as mistaken as that of knowledge having foundations."

(in that they would all agree and be able to provide the evidence to support the 'resolve'), what would be gained? It is clear that it would not matter to scientists, who may or may not use an implicit (unclear) notion of knowledge, and whose pursuits are not in the least affected by these definitional matters, as they may be called. Scientists do not have to immerse themselves in philosophy, nor are they anxiously awaiting philosophers' debates' outcomes before starting their own research.

For philosophers themselves, it would simply mean that they would turn their attention to other matters to be 'resolved'. Their pursuits can, then, be likened to the solving of crossword puzzles, which are no longer of interest once all the squares are filled. This is, of course, a hypothetical scenario, since, again, a philosophical issue does not seem to be resolved unless in the literal sense, i. e., when it disappears, because it has become part of a science. In time, many of the discussions in philosophy will perhaps lead to the same derision that the scholastic philosophers' debates received from their successors. To return to the matter adumbrated above, about the necessary characteristics (or 'essence', to use the once popular vernacular) of knowledge, it would seem that James's observation with regard to 'truth' applies (*mutatis mutandis*): "What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right."¹⁰ 'Truth' is then to be approached as follows: "Purely objective truth, truth in whose establishment the function of giving human satisfaction in marrying previous parts of experience with newer parts played no rôle whatever, is nowhere to be found. The reasons why we call things true is the reason why they *are* true, for 'to be true' *means* only to perform this marriage-function."¹¹

Scientists, in line with this observation, take the reverse attitude vis-à-vis 'knowledge' to those philosophers that do *not* adhere to a pragmatic outlook. Scientists need not first establish what knowledge is, so that they may differentiate between 'true' and 'untrue' statements; rather, they have their own methods on the basis of which they determine what is true and what, accordingly, constitutes knowledge. Knowledge is a result rather than a starting-point in the process. This procedural difference between the sciences on the one hand and (non-pragmatic) philosophy on the other explains why sciences can make progress¹² and philosophy cannot (as I intimated above, as soon as a science

¹⁰ James 1975, Lecture II, p. 28.

¹¹ James 1975, Lecture II, p. 37.

¹² I have already pointed to the difficulties involved with this notion and will merely remark that a critical stance vis-à-vis the sciences is no less warranted than in the case of philosophy and that one may perhaps say that "[...] it is only during periods of normal science that progress seems both obvious and assured." (Kuhn 1996, 163),

provides an answer to a philosophical quandary, the issue is perhaps not to be considered philosophical anymore). As long as philosophers utilize their own notions of 'truth' and 'knowledge', they will remain confined to the conceptual prisons they have fabricated for themselves. It resembles the situation in which a scientist would introduce notions to his field of research that he can never corroborate or refute.¹³ Scientists steer clear of such a course of action, of course, realizing that it would be useless, a useful outcome being *their* goal. As long as philosophers fail to adopt the same standard, their discussions will remain seemingly relevant only for themselves, and not even that (but rather irrelevant), once they start to reflect on these discussions in addition to the topics they ponder.

2. Salvaging philosophy

The critical observations put forward in section 1 should not be taken to entail that philosophy (or rather *all* philosophy) is useless. First, one may point to some fields of study that are not evidently without use, on account of their being aids to other fields of inquiry, such as logic and argumentation theory. Second, philosophy points out the various starting-points used in the sciences, of which their practitioners may not always be sufficiently aware, so that scientists' critical stance may be incited.

Third, not unrelated to the second point, philosophy is pre-eminently the domain to reflect on the use of enterprises such as scientific pursuits, but, more broadly, life itself. Confrontational questions, such as the one why one should be involved in specific ambitions, or, more radically, why one should propagate or even continue to live, are not answered by the sciences, which may be said not to reflect at all. After all, scientific pursuits are usually not problematized, nor need they be: one's objective is clear, at least roughly, and the fact that this may change in the course of the actual research does not derogate from this basic given. In fact, it is precisely this from which scientists derive the justification of their pursuits, whereas philosophers find the justification of theirs (*inter alia*) in their very reflection on these pursuits. The non-abating critical stance vis-à-vis anything, including scientific activities, keeps philosophy from being a trivial pursuit.

This position is, however, at risk of becoming unattainable, in the light of what I pointed out in section 1. As philosophical issues become more specialized,

'normal science' meaning here "[...] the research firmly based upon one or more past scientific achievements, achievements that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for its further practice." (Kuhn 1996, 10).

¹³ Thus acting against Popper's precept that an empirical system should be falsifiable (Popper 1962, 92).

they will become devoid of use, or even of meaning. The sciences specialize too, but in their case, this is a consequence of the external elements mentioned, a situation which does not apply to philosophy (for if it did, philosophy would no longer exist but be reduced to one or several sciences¹⁴). Should philosophy go the way of the sciences, it can no longer act as their critical observer and relativize their claims. Philosophy will, if it will continue to develop as it has over the last decade, cease to be a single discipline but rather fall apart into *separate* fields such as epistemology, ethics and logic. I say 'separate', for although these sub-disciplines are of course already acknowledged, there is still a common frame of reference that unites them, even though this already seems to be faltering.¹⁵ This can only be maintained if one remembers why the philosophical matters that are investigated are of interest in the first place.

It is important to realize that the ability of philosophy to provide a 'grand narrative' (philosophy in the 'classical' sense) is the only justification for its presence (save for the first two points adumbrated in the beginning of this section, but their value is a merely instrumental one, and, besides, scientists who take their own enterprise seriously do not need philosophers for them to maintain a critical stance). One may deny that such a narrative is possible,¹⁶ but this would surely bring philosophy's end (in the sense of its ending) with it. (Such a position is not, by the way, incorrect on the basis that its outcome is undesirable; this would be a clear example of an argumentum ad consequentiam.)

A philosophical enterprise such as Fichte's, which aspires to allot to philosophy the role of determining the nature of the sciences,¹⁷ or a stance such as Descartes's, who famously likens philosophy to a tree whose roots are metaphysics, and whose trunk is physics, the branches springing from it constituting all the other sciences,¹⁸ is no longer representative of the relation between philosophy and the sciences. Thinkers such as Descartes and Fichte, who devise complete philosophical systems, may have contemporary epigones, but if these should consider philosophy's stance in a similar way as their precursors did, they would have a hard time defending their position against those accusing them of ad-

¹⁴ That this is philosophy's path is, incidentally, pleaded by Quine (1969, 75–78, 82–84), but he focuses on only part of what philosophy is, so that his analysis is too narrow to conclude that philosophy is already 'dissolved'.

¹⁵ A possible explanation for this is that this frame of reference may be said to have a negative origin, namely that what these fields have in common is that they have not (or not yet) been adopted by the sciences (although they may serve a supportive role (e. g. logic for mathematics)).

¹⁶ Notably Lyotard 1979, *passim*.

¹⁷ Fichte 1965, § 2 (123); cf. § 3 (127, 128), philosophy itself being characterized a science in his system of thought, by the way (§ 1 (112), § 2 (120), § 3 (128)), and logic being a separate discipline from philosophy (§ 6 (137)).

¹⁸ Descartes 1964, 14. His ambition also becomes apparent in the very title of another work: *Discours de la Methode pour bien conduire sa raison et chercher la verité dans les sciences* (original spelling).

hering to air castles of their own making. This is not to say that philosophy should not be engaged in a grand narrative – it may in fact be argued that this is the only way it can avoid a swift demise along the line sketched above¹⁹ –, but merely that its pretence concerning scientific enterprises must be mitigated.

Possibly no less important in practice than this is the way literature is incorporated into one's writings. Ideally, references to publications would appear only if their presence is relevant. This remark would seem to speak for itself. Yet many referees of prospective publications expect writers to include recent literature in which their subject matter is dealt with, even if such an inclusion would add nothing to the point one is trying to make, so that the publication gains nothing in import by adding such virtually mandatory 'ornaments' whose presence serves decorative purposes only. Such a stance needs to be relinquished if philosophy is to be kept from losing its common frame of reference (and, in the wake of this development, be annihilated).²⁰ After all, the more one is focused on the current debates in one's particular field, the less one is able to keep an overview (let alone to follow (globally) the developments in other disciplines), especially if such a focus leads to an inclusion of only the latest publications, the 'classical' books and articles serving merely as intellectual scenery.

Relevant literature must be used, of course, but simply mentioning it for the sake of demonstrating that one is aware of the fact that others are involved in the same discussion is neither a productive nor a sensible course of action. In the case illustrated above, scientists are not in the least concerned about philosophers' attempts to define knowledge, but an encompassing position that includes observations with a basis in both epistemology and the philosophy of science may alternatively be of value. Such a position is on the verge of becoming unattainable, if philosophy should indeed proceed in the same way as the sciences have.

Fourth, there are fields such as ethics and meta-ethics which cannot, it seems, be incorporated in such a way into one or several sciences that they would be emancipated from philosophy, as it were.²¹ What I mentioned above with regard to the abundance of literature applies here, too. One must focus on the crucial issues, lest the discussions should lose their value.²² An example of

¹⁹ Crucially, one should, of course, not introduce such a narrative in order to salvage philosophy, which would be a most incredible way to operate.

²⁰ I leave it to the reader to decide whether I have managed to avoid this myself and the present article has not succumbed to the same problem and must request him or her to base the judgment on the given that I have earnestly attempted to include only those references that actually contribute something.

²¹ From a meta-ethical point of view, problems can be raised regarding the status of some (or all) of the pivotal notions in ethics, but that does not mean that ethical questions lose their import. Since this is not the place to deal with this matter, I must limit myself here to mentioning that they must, in the light of such problems, be considered critically.

²² This carries an ambiguity in the case of ethics.

such an issue is given above, viz., why one should be concerned with scientific or philosophical issues at all (provided that they do not – immediately – lead to an increase of pleasure or a decrease of pain). Philosophy can, then, be salvaged, but only if it moves counterclockwise to the sciences, whose merit consists in ever new discoveries, which carries with it the continual need to specialize and even subdivide, whereas its presence is justified by its ability to reflect, an activity that can only remain of use if one steers clear from a similar path as that of the sciences.

Conclusion

Philosophical debates are not necessarily useless, but in order to keep philosophy from becoming a futile enterprise, it must follow its own path. This means that the consequences of far-reaching specializations must be acknowledged. Sciences are forced to follow this course, in the wake of their progression. This is not the case with philosophy, and in its case, radical specializations would even be detrimental. Its discussions would be reduced to attempts to solve puzzles whose outcomes would be of interest to no-one save those philosophers engaged in them, and even for them it would be nothing but the intellectual gratification of finding a consistent and elegant outcome that would be at stake. As long as it is still possible to avert this outcome (or, more cynically, to halt its decline), a plea for a renewed focus on the relevant issues in philosophy is in order.

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