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Where Is Philosophy at the Start of the Twenty-First Century?

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# V\*—WHERE IS PHILOSOPHY AT THE START OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?

by Graham Priest

**ABSTRACT** This paper sketches an analysis of the development of 20th-century philosophy. Starting with the foundational work of Frege and Husserl, the paper traces two parallel strands of philosophy developing from their work. It diagnoses three phases of development: the optimistic phase, the pessimistic phase, and finally the phase of fragmentation. The paper ends with some speculations as to where philosophy will go this century.

## I

**I**ntrouction. We lie at the beginning of a new century—indeed, a new millennium. Those of a reflective nature cannot but ponder where we are going. And philosophers, in particular, will ponder where philosophy is going. What it will be like in 1000 years' time—indeed, whether there will be people around to philosophise then—only a foolhardy person would claim to know. Even trying to discern what philosophy might be like in 100 years can be undertaken only in an extremely speculative fashion. We might hope to have a little more success on the matter of where it is going in the more immediate future, though this is still a speculative enterprise. If any success can be achieved in this, the key is to understand where we are now, and how we got there; from this we may hope to make a limited extrapolation of the trajectory of philosophy. This is what I will attempt here. In particular, I will try to discern where the last 100 years of philosophy has left us.

It should go without saying, I hope, that one can do no serious justice to a review of the last 100 years in a limited space of this kind. Generations hence, historians of philosophy are likely to write tomes on the subject. In the space I have, I can but be highly selective, and therefore partial. And since I select, I may

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fairly be accused of giving, not so much an objective account, as one from my own personal perspective. Here, I can only plead guilty.

Another feature of the situation militates against doing justice to a review. To have a sense of perspective on a subject, one has to be far enough away from it. This is possible with respect to the earlier parts of the century—perhaps. It is certainly not possible with respect to its later parts. Hence, even my personal perspective must be a particularly short-sighted one.

These problems notwithstanding, the following is at least a start to putting the century into perspective. If others reject the analysis, then it may at least prompt them to do better. And if posterity ultimately disagrees with me—as it almost certainly will—there is still some merit in having on record the way that things appeared to one philosopher at the beginning of the 21st century.

## II

*The End of the Nineteenth Century.* So let us start by winding back the clock, and looking at where philosophy was a century ago. Figure 1 is the Contents page of the 1901–1902 Proceedings of this Society. Figures 2 and 3 are the Contents pages of the volumes of *Mind* for 1901 and 1902, respectively. A perusal of these figures gives some idea of the state of the discipline 100 years ago. Two things are, I think, striking. The first is the fact that there are several papers in the area of what we would now call psychology. One should remember that there was no autonomous discipline of psychology at this time—or perhaps more accurately, there was one that was only nascent. Wundt and Külpe might have thought of psychology as a separate discipline, but Brentano and James made no distinction between their philosophical work and their psychological work; nor did they need to. The full splitting of psychology from philosophy started only around the 1920s, with the rise of behaviourism. The title of the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* when it was first published in 1923, was *the Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy*, a title that it retained until 1947. From its foundation in 1876, *Mind* was subtitled ‘A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy’; this was changed to ‘A Quarterly Review of Philosophy’

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Fig. 1: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 1901-2.*

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Fig. 3: *Mind* 1902.

as late as 1974. At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, then, psychological studies were an important part of our discipline. Since they are no longer so, I shall say nothing more about them here.

The second striking fact about the tables of contents is that, setting the psychological papers aside, there is one tradition of philosophy that predominates: German Idealism, and specifically Kant and Hegel. There are several articles on these two philosophers and their ideas; and several written by or on well known Anglo-Hegelians of the time, like Bradley and McTaggart. There is therefore no doubt about what dominated philosophy at the turn of the century.

One should not turn a blind eye to other things, though, even if they do not loom large in the journal pages. In particular, there were three other 'isms' that were to exercise some influence on the future of philosophy. The first of these is empiricism, largely Hume-inspired. The writings of J. S. Mill, in England, and of the positivists Comte and Mach, on mainland Europe, were to exert an important influence in the new century.

The second 'ism' is existentialism, as found in the writings of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. These were, I think, somewhat isolated writings at the time, but they were to exert their influence as well. The third 'ism' is Marxism, as found in the writings of Marx himself, Engels, and others. At this time, these writings, too, had had as yet little impact on professional philosophy.

At any rate, German idealism plus these three other 'isms' set the scene for our story.

### III

*The Rise of Twentieth-Century Philosophy.* It is now a truism that 20th-century philosophy started by rebelling against German Idealism. But where and how did it rebel? To those with eyes to see it, the rebellion had started well before the turn of the century, in the writings of two philosophers who did more than any others to set the agenda for philosophy in the 20th Century. These were both German-speaking: Gottlob Frege and Edmund Husserl.

Their common tongue was just the start of what these two thinkers had in common. Both thinkers' initial concern was the

nature of mathematics. For both, this led them to an analysis of the nature of logic. Both launched an attack on psychologism in logic. Both were driven to the problem of meaning: How do things mean, and in what way? In this way, they came to what was, I think, the most central and recurrent problem in 20th-century philosophy: the nature of representation in language and thought.

Where the two thinkers differed was not so much in their agenda as in the tools that they forged to attack their problems. The main weapon that Frege developed was what we would now call modern logic (both formal and the philosophy thereof): the theory of quantification, truth functions, and corresponding semantic doctrines concerning concept and object, sense and reference, and so on. The main weapon that Husserl developed, by contrast, was phenomenology: the analysis of the nature of consciousness as it presents itself.

How adequate these tools were for their intended application, we may still dispute. But what cannot be disputed is that the tools, once developed, took on a life of their own. In them, several generations of philosophers were to see the appropriate basis for attacking many important philosophical problems.

#### IV

*Twentieth-Century Philosophy: the Optimistic Phase.* The first phase of 20th-century philosophy proper—roughly the first half of the century—can be thought of as a time of optimism. Philosophers thought that by applying the new tools, they were going to forge ahead and break much new ground, possibly sorting out some old philosophical problems once and for all. The two tools that Frege and Husserl had forged defined two different traditions, however. The logic tool defined what is usually now called ‘analytic philosophy’; the phenomenological tool defined what is often called ‘continental philosophy’. These names are highly inappropriate in many ways, but they are now too well entrenched to change easily, so I will use them anyway.

On the analytic side, we have Russell and Wittgenstein applying the new logic not only in the philosophy of mathematics, but in an analysis of the fundamental nature of reality, language, and mind. The logical positivists, such as Reichenbach, Carnap,

Schlick, too, took up the new machinery, and applied it energetically to epistemology and the philosophy of science, hoping to do away with metaphysics altogether. It is here that the influence of empiricism played an important role. Logical positivism equals positivism plus modern logic. It should be noted that positivism had its US version too, in the pragmatism of James and Dewey.

On the continental side of the divide, Heidegger adopted Husserl's phenomenology, but rejected Husserl's phenomenological bracketing of consciousness, allowing phenomenology to provide an analysis of much in the world itself—including, most importantly, what it is to be a person, *Dasein*. The project was taken up, developed, and changed, by Heidegger's most famous student, Sartre, and by other phenomenologists, such as Merleau-Ponty. It is on this side of the ledger that the influence of existentialism was felt. We might think of this tradition as Husserl's phenomenology plus existentialism.

## V

*Twentieth-Century Philosophy: the Pessimistic Phase.* So much for the optimistic phase. By about the middle years of the century, or just after, this was running out of steam. Too many cracks were appearing in the grand architectures. The traditions were then subjected to telling attacks.

Major attacks came from without. For example, on the analytic side of the divide, the work of Kuhn devastated what was left of logical positivism, showing that science just didn't work in the way that positivists had claimed. On the other side of the divide, and inspired by Bachelard and the Marxism of Althusser, Foucault was doing similar things. Indeed, Kuhn and Foucault play much the same role in their respective traditions. Both attacked their tradition's foundationalism; both argued that knowledge comes in historical epochs separated by ruptures; both raised the spectre of relativism.

Perhaps the most important attacks on the respective traditions were not external, however, but internal. On the analytic side of the divide, Wittgenstein himself dismantled the *Tractatus*, the most solid achievement of that tradition. In a parallel move on the other side of the divide, Heidegger's *Kehre* caused him to

become less sanguine about his earlier project of answering ‘the question of Being’—or at least in the way that he had earlier hoped to achieve it—and to articulate a critique of any straightforward way of doing so. Ultimately, perhaps the most important internal attacks were by people who developed the pertinent ideas to their logical conclusions, in a self-inflicted *reductio ad absurdum*. The key figures here are Quine and Derrida. Quine showed that the principles of the logical positivists (and pragmatists) ultimately entail the destruction of everything that they held dear. And Derrida extended the arguments of Heidegger about the inability of language to express Being, to conclude the inability of language to express any ‘transcendental signified’, that is, to have any determinate meaning.

In fact, the upshot of the critiques of Wittgenstein, Quine, and Derrida, each in its own way, was, in a certain sense, the destruction of the very possibility of meaning. Think of Wittgenstein’s view that there is nothing to determine meaning as such, of Quine’s view of the indeterminacy of reference, and of Derrida’s view that language never breaks out of a vertiginous regress of self-reference. The key issue of how representation was possible, became shipwrecked on the pessimistic conclusion that it was not.

## VI

*Moral and Political Philosophy.* So far, you will have observed, I have said nothing about moral and political philosophy. Though some will disagree with me, I think that the 20th Century—or, at least, most of it until its last 30 years or so—was a pretty barren time for moral philosophy. Nor is this an accident: the major traditions that we have been talking about leave little room for interesting moral philosophy. In positivism, for example, once one has said ‘Killing; boo,’ and things like it, there is nothing much left to say. And existentialism, with its ‘You are free; choose,’ is not much better.

What interesting moral and political philosophy there was in the period we have been looking at was taking place in an academically marginal tradition: Marxism. It was here that the most interesting novel ideas were being developed. It, too, though, showed the same pattern of an optimistic period, followed by a period of destruction. In the first half of the century, the theoretical tools

that Marx had forged were applied and extended. Lukács and Gramsci, for example, developed the ideas of class and class consciousness, of ideology and the power of culture.

Marxism had a brief flowering in English-speaking philosophy departments in the 1960s and early 1970s, and a much more substantial presence in French and German-speaking universities, but it, too, collapsed under its own weight, just as Stalinism itself was to do a decade or two later. Marxism became articulated in so many different ways that it just ceased to be clear what it was any more, what was central to it, and what its fundamental doctrines meant. Who had it right? . . . members of the Frankfurt school, like Marcuse; the old-fashioned Russians, like Ilyenkov; or philosophers, like Althusser, who were part of a general flourishing of structuralism in France at the time—not to mention Maoists and various other theoretical groups. Late in the century, Marxism, too, was therefore in a state of disarray and collapse.

## VII

*Twentieth-Century Philosophy: Fragmentation.* Quite generally, the picture I have drawn of philosophy in the major part of the 20th Century is one of the development and application of novel techniques, eventually collapsing under its own weight. What has been the result of this collapse?

Let me start to address this question by asking who the most influential philosophers of the last 20 years of the century were. (I do not ask who was the best, or who will be remembered longest; just who had most effect during the period.) Let us take this country-by-country. The most influential British philosopher, one would have to say, is Dummett. In the US, it is Kripke—or, if one is concerned with moral philosophy, Rawls. The most influential Australasian, it would seem to me, is Armstrong. The most influential French philosopher would have to be Derrida—or again, if one is concerned with moral philosophy, perhaps Levinas. The most influential German philosopher is, I guess, Habermas.

Now, you might well disagree with some of these judgements, but I don't think that it will change the picture much. The most striking thing about this collection of philosophers is the fact that, without exception, every one had a different philosophical

agenda and a different pursuit: anti-realism, modality and necessity, distributive justice, combinatorial metaphysics, deconstruction, responsibility to the other, reason and its social context. In a word, diversity and fragmentation.

It could be suggested that this picture is simply a result of the fact that we are as yet too close to the period to have any sense of perspective. We do not yet know who can be ignored. (After all, there were many philosophers earlier in the century who were influential, but whom I have not mentioned, since they are not so central to the main story: Moore, Popper and Austin, to name but three.) To some extent, I am sure that this is true; but I think that the picture of fragmentation is not simply an artifact of the lack of perspective. The fragmentation is witnessed not only by the fact that so many of these philosophers had such diverse interests, but by the number of new philosophical areas and topics that blossomed in that period.

Here are, I think, the most notable. For a start we have seen a renaissance of moral philosophy. For example, in pure ethics, the revival of virtue ethics is clear. We have also seen the development of the whole new area of applied and professional ethics (including environmental ethics). The striking developments in logic concern the development of many non-classical logics: intuitionist, quantum, relevant, paraconsistent. (The history of logic this century itself shows the same pattern of optimism and collapse; but that is another story.) Three other areas of development would also have to be taken up by anyone writing a serious history of philosophy at the end of the century. One of these is feminist philosophy; another is cognitive science: the fruitful inter-meshing of philosophy, psychology, computer science and other disciplines. (It is here that the question of representation has taken refuge.) Both of these areas have already had a significant impact on the philosophical curriculum. The third area is Asian philosophy. This is now being taught and studied in the West in a way that would have been unthinkable fifty years ago.

A final index of the fragmentation of philosophy concerns the two major encyclopedias published in the last 50 years. The Macmillan Encyclopedia of 1967, edited by Edwards, and the Routledge Encyclopedia of 1998, edited by Craig. The first of these was published at the end of the period of optimism, and still reflects that optimism—mainly from an analytic perspective, it

must be said. The Routledge Encyclopedia, by contrast, is a child of the fragmentation, taking up concerns that would never have found a serious place in the Macmillan Encyclopedia; but, for this very reason, lacking the focus of that Encyclopedia. As Ray Monk, reviewing the Routledge Encyclopedia in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (Sept. 11th, 1998), put it:

The encyclopedia fails to provide any coherent view of its subject. If philosophy lost its nimbus in the heyday of the analytic tradition, it now seems to have lost its centre. Where Edwards's work presented a clear and strong single vision of the discipline, the view here is refracted through the lenses of a plethora of widely divergent specialisms.

If it was to reflect the state of the discipline, it could hardly do otherwise.

## VIII

*Philosophy Now.* What I have tried to demonstrate is that the collapse of the philosophical optimism of the first part of the 20th Century led, at the end, to a position of diversity and fragmentation. This is where we now find ourselves. I am not saying that this is either a good thing or a bad thing. Just that it is a thing. Clearly, such fragmentation can be disconcerting. It makes it harder to philosophise if there are no consensual starting points. On the other hand, such a situation can be exhilarating and tremendously fruitful. This is the very time for new ideas to blossom.

Let me make just a couple more comments on the current state of philosophy. The first concerns the division between analytic and continental philosophy. Many see this as a fundamental division in our profession. That there is a division of sorts is certainly true. I have myself commented on the different traditions growing out of Frege and Husserl. But in many ways, I think that the division is a relatively superficial one, no doubt exaggerated by differences of style and territorial disputes.

As we have seen, the two traditions grew out of the same set of concerns. And though they might come at answers from different directions, their problems have been much the same: at the core of both is the question of representation. How, and in what way,

does language/mind represent the world? And within their traditions, certain philosophers play much the same role on each side of the divide: Frege and Husserl, the foundational figures; Heidegger and Wittgenstein, who established the major problematics—as well as turning against them; Kuhn and Foucault, who historicised epistemology; Quine and Derrida, who took the positions to their ultimate points of collapse. These are not two different traditions so much as parallel rail tracks, going from and to the same places.

What seems to me to be the most significant difference between the two traditions is, in fact, one that is not frequently remarked upon. (It was drawn to my attention by Ashley Woodward.) This is that philosophers in the continental tradition have always had an eye on socio-political questions in a way that thinkers in the analytic tradition have not. There is a political dimension to Heidegger, Sartre, Foucault and Derrida, that is entirely absent from Wittgenstein, Kuhn, Quine and Kripke.

Finally, notice that I have not mentioned the word ‘postmodernism’ till now. I think that I have omitted nothing significant. To the extent that this is a philosophical view, there is nothing new about it: the attacks on truth, knowledge, and meaning, are all to be found in the Presocratics. The first relativists about truth were Greek (think of Protagoras); the first skeptics about knowledge were Greek (think of Pyrrho); the first people to deny meaning were Greek (think of Cratylus). Indeed, the sophist Gorgias is reputed to have said: there is no truth; but even if there were, you could not know it; and even if you could, you could not express it. And as far as I can see, many of the arguments that are now advanced for postmodern themes are no great improvement on those of the Greeks.

In fact, in many ways, I think that postmodernism is more of an aesthetic than a philosophy—as is witnessed by the fact that it is generally taken much more seriously in departments of literature, fine arts, architecture, etc., than of philosophy. In many ways, postmodernism is more of a reaction to the optimistic modernism of early twentieth century art, than to modern, that is, post-medieval, philosophy. Notably, virtually none of the philosophers often cited as postmodernists by non-philosophers, have accepted this label. And many (though not all) outside the profession who do claim the title manifest little knowledge of the history of philosophy, as well as a disconcerting philosophical naiveté. True, the

contemporary state of philosophy is, I have argued, fragmented. And this might be invoked to confirm the fragmentation beloved of postmodernists. But philosophical consequences cannot be wrung from sociological facts without a lot of hard work of a kind which, in this case, I have not seen attempted.

## IX

*The Future.* So much for the past and the present. Finally, we come to the future. As I have already said, the long-term future is, of course, completely imponderable. But what of the immediate future? What is going to grow out of this state of disarray? For example, what problem, if any, will dominate the 21st Century in the way that the problem of representation dominated the 20th? Here, as I said, I speculate—but one is allowed to speculate once every century.

I would not place a great deal of store in anyone's view of the matter, but if I had to guess, my guess would be as follows. First, philosophy does not come from nowhere. If you had known where to look, the emergence of 20th-century philosophy was visible at the end of the 19th. Similarly, if one knows where to look, the emergence of 21st-century philosophy is probably somewhere now. But where?

Philosophy does not take place in a cultural and economic vacuum. As Fred D'Agostino commented to me, the three phases of philosophy that I diagnosed in the 20th Century—optimism, destruction and fragmentation—seem to correspond closely to the economic stages that our profession underwent during that same time: first institutionalisation, next professionalisation, and finally commercialisation. More importantly for the present issue, Marx claimed that the group that has economic dominance also has cultural dominance. In this, he was quite right. For example, the world's dominant economy for the last forty years has been that of the US; and just think of the global impact of Hollywood, McDonald's, CNN and so on. The point is not restricted to popular culture. There is no doubt that the US is now the centre of gravity of the Western philosophical world. Even when the philosophical views at issue come from elsewhere, as did logical positivism and deconstructionism, the US has appropriated them. One reason for this is that it can afford to

buy good philosophers from elsewhere, either temporarily or permanently. And of course, good philosophers will want to go where other good philosophers are.

So where will the economic centre of power be in the twenty-first century? Asia. China and India between them account for nearly half of the world's population. And China, at least, has the potential to develop very fast economically. Once the economies of these countries are fully capitalised, they will swamp the rest of the world, in the way that the US has in the second half of the twentieth century.

So what will play a major role in philosophy in the twenty-first century? My guess: Asian philosophy. As I have already observed, the roots of this are already present. Many Western philosophers are beginning to read Eastern philosophy, such as Confucianism and Buddhism, and take it very seriously.

What they are finding there are rich philosophical traditions, with problems similar enough to those in the West to be recognisable, but with approaches to them that are different enough to be illuminating, often in a very striking fashion. Asian philosophers have, of course, been engaging with Western philosophy, for similar reasons, for a long time. I speculate that the 21st Century will see, for the first time, the true globalisation of philosophy. Whether that will exacerbate the fragmentation of philosophy, or whether it will allow the development of exciting new syntheses, or whether something entirely different will emerge, only time will tell. With the developments in modern bio-medical technology, it is just possible that some of those now studying philosophy will still be around at the end of the century to find out.<sup>1</sup>

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