

A hundred flowers

Graham Priest

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Abstract The paper discusses where philosophy is going at the moment. Various current trends are singled out for comment. It then moves to the question of where it ought to be going. After a brief discussion of what this question means, it concludes that no guidance can be given except that each philosopher should pursue what they think to be important.

Keywords philosophy of mind · applied ethics · postmodernism · non-classical logic · Asian philosophy · philosophical importance · Wittgenstein · Heidegger · owl of Minerva

Letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend is the policy for promoting the progress of the arts and the sciences.

Mao Zedong

Most philosophers keep their philosophical eyes firmly fixed on the present: how to finish the paper, book, or lecture notes on which they are currently working. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. But most philosophers I know do ruminate over the future of philosophy occasionally—usually over a bottle of wine—and wonder where it is or ought to be going. What follows are some reflections on the ques-

tion—though the reader will have to provide his or her own bottle of wine. There are, in fact, two questions here. One is purely descriptive. Where, as a matter of fact, *is* philosophy going: what will it be like in 10 years, 100 years, 1000 years? The other is a normative question: where *ought* philosophy to be going? Philosophers, after all, are as human as anyone else, and do stupid things. Maybe they will take philosophy down the wrong track. Neither question is easy or straightforward. Let us start with the first, the descriptive one. I will return to the normative one later.

Into the future

There is no way one can read off the future of philosophy from its present, or even its present and its past. This is because, in dynamical terms, philosophy is an open system. There are certainly present tendencies, but these can be, and often are, disrupted by events of a quite different kind. The events may be *internal* to philosophy, such as the inception of a major new philosophical position. Or they may be *external*, such as important new political or scientific events with philosophical implications. But whatever they are, they are unpredictable. And the further we go into the future, the more there will be, and the more their consequences will ramify.

Take philosophy in the 20th century for example. Someone who, in 1900, looked at the state of philosophy could have had no idea of the events that would disturb its trajectories at that time. First, there were events internal to philosophy, such as the publication of the *Tractatus* and *Sein und Zeit*, or the development

G. Priest (✉)
University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
e-mail: g.priest@unimelb.edu.au

G. Priest
University of St Andrews, St Andrews, Fife KY16 9AJ,
Scotland

of the semantics for modal logics, with its machinery of worlds and essences. Major non-philosophical events that had philosophical impact included the advent of the computing machine (in the philosophy of mind), quantum theory (in metaphysics and the philosophy of science), the rise and fall of the Soviet Union (in political philosophy), the development of the whole area of bio-medical engineering (in ethics). None of these things could have been foreseen in 1900. No doubt philosophy in the 21st century will be affected in similar ways.

The open nature of philosophical development means that predicting what philosophy will be like in 1000 years' time—if, indeed, there is anybody around to do philosophy in 1000 years' time—is *sheer* speculation. One may perhaps say a little more about philosophy in 100 years' time (assuming—not a very safe assumption—that no major ecological, economic, or military disaster overtakes the human race in that period). These things are pretty banal, but we might as well start with them. For hundreds of years, philosophers have been discussing logic, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and political philosophy, aesthetics. *That* fact is unlikely to change suddenly—though what will be being discussed in these areas in 100 years' time is another matter.

Another thing that philosophers have done for a long time is discuss the history of philosophy: the views of their predecessors. This, I think, is also unlikely to change suddenly.¹ Whose views will be discussed in 100 years is less clear. Philosophers tend to come into and go out of fashion. The old faithfuls who have stood the test of time—Plato, Aristotle, Leibniz, Hume, Kant—at least, are pretty sure bets.

Which 20th century philosophers will be discussed in 100 years' time? Here we leave any safe ground. If I had to guess, I would put my money on two: Wittgenstein and Heidegger. What philosophers who have stood the test of time have in common are two things. First, their vision of the world is an engaging one, despite the fact—maybe in virtue of the fact—that it may be pretty bizarre. Second, the view has a profundity, or perhaps obscurity, that succeeding generations of philosophers can return to again and again, finding new things in it. For what it is worth, I think that Wittgenstein and Heidegger are the two philosophers of the 20th century whose work best satisfies these conditions.

¹ Why the history of philosophy seems so much more important to philosophy than the history of science is to science, is an interesting question. But I shall not pursue it here.

Present tendencies

Let us return from speculation to slightly firmer ground. One can make certain limited projections into the short-term future of philosophy if one understands where it is now, its present tendencies, and how robust these are. It seems to me that philosophy is presently in a relatively fragmented and diverse state (certainly compared with the way it was 50 years ago). There are many different paradigms, research programmes, “hot” areas.² These have a momentum which will propel them for some time, though not necessarily for a long-time. It is impossible to discuss all of these here, but let me single out four very different ones for *very* fallible comment.

1. For a decade or so now, the philosophy of mind has been dominated by computational metaphors (whether one is for them or against them): functionalism, modularity, cognition as computation. There is no sign of this domination coming to an end, but I would not be surprised to see it replaced by more biological metaphors as bio-technology develops, and we start to have success in growing intelligent devices rather than assembling them.
2. In ethics, about 15 years ago, philosophers rediscovered the fact that they actually have important things to say about ethical issues (as opposed to meta-ethical issues)—hence the burgeoning of the inappropriately named “applied ethics.” No doubt some of this is faddish—such as the oxymoronic business ethics. But the subject is with us for the long haul, I think, driven especially, no doubt, by developments in bio-medical technology.
3. Undoubtedly, ideas falling under the epithet “postmodernism” have had a big impact on philosophy over the last 20 years, especially on philosophers with more literary inclinations. This may last a little longer, but I think that the writing is already on the wall for it. Even in literature departments it is becoming clear that this seam of philosophy does not run deep, and is close to being mined out—if it has not, indeed, already been over-mined. (This is not, I hasten to add, a judgment about “continental philosophy,” as my remarks about Heidegger should, I hope, make clear.)
4. The development of modern logic had an enormous impact on philosophy in the 20th century.

² I have argued this in Priest (2003) so I will not repeat the considerations here.

This still continues, but the nature of the impact has metamorphosed over the last 30 years. The techniques of logic that have become increasingly important in metaphysics and the philosophy of language are those of so-called non-classical logic: worlds (possible and impossible), truth-value gaps and gluts, logics for vague predicates, and so on. At any rate, the philosophically relevant techniques of modern logic would appear to be a seam that is far from being mined out. I expect it to be worked for the foreseeable future.

Asian philosophies

If I had to pick which current tendency will assume the greatest significance in Western philosophy in the years to come, it would be none of these, however. The study of Asian philosophies is now being taken seriously in Western philosophy departments in a way that would have been unthinkable just 15 years ago. This, I think, will be more important than anything I have mentioned so far. The reasons for thinking so are twofold.

First, external. Until a couple of hundred years ago, Western (= European based) and Eastern (= Indian or Chinese based) societies and cultures developed in ways that were relatively isolated from each other. Their philosophical traditions, in particular, developed with little influence from each other. This changed with the period of Western capitalist expansion and imperialism. Large parts of the East were colonised, and the rest had to come to terms with the military and economic might of the West. The impact of the West on the East was substantial. In particular, philosophers in Eastern countries became acquainted with and started to come to terms with Western thought. Thus, in many universities in East Asia one can now find departments of Western philosophy.

Since the West was the dominant power, the influence in the other direction was relatively limited. Western philosophers needed to know little about Eastern philosophies. The situation is now changing—indeed, reversing. Japan has already capitalised; China is doing so rapidly; and India may not be too far behind. This will give the East an economic might which will impact on the West. It already does. Western societies will become acquainted, and start to come to terms, with Eastern ways. In particular, Western philosophers will have to engage with Eastern philosophies.

Second, internal. It was not uncommon in years past to hear Western philosophers express the view that

Eastern philosophy was not *really* philosophy: it was religion, oracular, mysticism. (It must be said that most of the philosophers who expressed such views were unlikely to have read any Eastern philosophers; nor would they have made the same pronouncements about medieval Christian philosophy.) Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. Eastern philosophies contain rich traditions of metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, the philosophy of mind, political philosophy. There are ideas, arguments, debates, of a sophistication comparable to anything in the West. Of course, they appear in languages and traditions that are unfamiliar to Western philosophers. But the same is true, it should be pointed out, of ancient Greek philosophy to a modern philosopher who has read only 20th-century philosophy.

When Western philosophers do learn to operate in the context of these languages and traditions, they will find that many of the problems with which Eastern philosophies grapple are problems with which they are thoroughly familiar: the nature of the mind, god, how to run the state, the nature of knowledge, ethical issues. Eastern philosophies are no mere carbon-copy of Western philosophies, however. There are many views and arguments within these generally familiar areas which are not to be found in Western traditions. Coming to terms with these will, I think, be enormously stimulating for Western philosophers in the foreseeable future.

Let me give a couple of examples to illustrate the similarities and differences between Eastern and Western philosophies. Eastern philosophies have been just as concerned with the nature of the self as have Western philosophies. The standard view of the matter in Buddhist philosophy is that there is no enduring self. A person is simply a bundle of aggregates (some mental and some physical) that are conventionally identified for a certain time. There are obvious similarities with Hume's view of the self here. For Hume, a person is just a bundle of thoughts: there is no underlying "self" that holds them together. So much for a similarity.

Now for a difference. The Buddhist view of the self is embedded in a much more radical view. It is not just that there is no substantial self; there are no substances of *any* kind. Everything is empty of self-being, and is what it is only in relationship to other things. This was a provocative and controversial view in Eastern philosophy. Western philosophers have met nothing quite like it before, I think. It will be just as provocative and controversial for them.

Let us turn from metaphysics to political philosophy, and particularly the view of the state to be found in

Confucian and Neo-Confucian philosophy. Start with the family in Confucian thought. Within a family there are a number of hierarchical relationships: husband to wife, parent to child, older brother to younger brother. The subordinate member of each pair owes the other respect, obedience, duty. The dominant member of each pair, on the other hand, is required to look after the well being of the weaker and more ignorant party. The family is constituted by these bonds of reciprocal relationships. In Confucian thought, the state is the family writ large. There is, again, a network of hierarchical power relations, with the emperor at the top. The correctly functioning society is one where people fulfill the duties and requirements of their social roles smoothly and obediently.

This view is, of course, radically different from the relatively egalitarian and atomistic view to be found in contemporary “liberal democratic” political philosophy. It is even somewhat abhorrent to it. It was, incidentally, abhorrent to many Chinese philosophers too—especially the Daoists, who criticised the view mercilessly. But views with some similarity are certainly to be found in the history of Western political philosophy. For both Aristotle and Bradley, for example, society comprises hierarchically ordered roles, and people have duties in virtue of their occupation of such roles.

But again there are profound differences. Centrally important to Confucian thought is the idea that people and their society are embedded in a natural world which itself functions because of opposites and the reciprocal relationships between them (yin and yang). Natural harmony is achieved when these opposites are in balance. The functioning of the state is just a special case of this. One may therefore attempt to justify Confucian political philosophy not just with political arguments, but also with metaphysical arguments. Seeing the social order as a part of a natural order of this kind is a perspective that is not familiar to Western political philosophers (but which might yet appeal to the emerging ecological consciousness in the West?).

So what *should* we be doing?

So much for the question of where philosophy is going. Now to the question of where it ought to be going. Here we hit a philosophical problem. What exactly does the question mean? Obligations apply to persons, or at least agents—which may include organisations as well as persons. They do not apply to academic subjects of inquiry or academic disciplines. It might, I suppose, be suggested that academic philosophy, at

least, is an organisation, and ask what obligations it has. But academic philosophy is not really an organisation. It has no central authority or decision-making structure. It is simply a group of loosely connected people with different institutional affiliations and a family resemblance of interests.

Maybe, then, we have to interpret the question as asking what individual philosophers ought to be doing? Well, all people have obligations—moral, legal, political. In this respect, philosophers are no different from anybody else. And it is not clear that being a philosopher imposes any *further* obligations on them.

Maybe it makes more sense to interpret the obligations as hypothetical rather than categorical. *If* one is a philosopher, what should one be doing? In other words, what ought a philosopher *qua* philosopher to be doing? If one wants to be a philosopher one should be looking at philosophical issues, theorising about them, analysing possible answers, and so on. But that is too easy. It is clearly not the case that all philosophical issues are of equal importance. So we may take our question to be: which are the important issues that philosophers ought to be tackling.³

We are now getting somewhere with the question; but we have not arrived yet. Philosophers should tackle important issues. But important for whom? What is important for one person may quite unimportant for another. Can we find a notion of importance that is not subjective in this way? The answer, I think, is “yes.” Consider the following pairs:

1. The invention/discovery of the theory of forms versus Plato’s analysis of perception in the *Theaetetus*;
2. The invention/discovery of transcendental idealism versus the idea that Newtonian mechanics is synthetic a priori;
3. The invention/discovery of the quantifier versus the notation of the *Begriffsschrift*.

It would seem clear that, in each case, the first member of the pair was more important than the second. In each case, the former came to have a systematic impact on wide areas of philosophy, whilst the other did not.⁴

³ We might also ask: which issues are *philosophical* issues? This is another question I will raise just to set aside.

⁴ This raises the question of what it is about important ideas that allows them to make the impact they do. Arguably, at least, one might attribute this to some sort of intrinsic profundity—in which case, it is entirely possible that an idea can have such profundity but not make an impact (maybe because it never received sufficient public airing). This is, I think, a particularly hard issue, and one that we may, fortunately, bypass here.

Neither is this a distinction between “big-picture” ideas and small “technical details.” Big-picture ideas can certainly have a major impact; but they can equally be barren. Small technical issues may not look initially as though they will have a big impact, but they can unravel and develop in the most unexpected way.

Our question, then, has turned out to be this: which of the ideas around at the moment are ones which will have a profound impact on the discipline? If we knew this, we might well advise philosophers to work on these.

It is surely absurd to suppose that the question has exactly one answer. Ideas of the kind in question—if there are any around at all at the moment—are likely to be many: in ethics, in logic, in the philosophy of mind. More importantly, the question is entirely impossible to answer. Here, the owl of Minerva certainly flies at dusk. When an idea appears, it is impossible to tell how robust it is, what implications it will eventually have. Thus, for all that could be told about them at the time of their inception, each of the three more important ideas that I just mentioned *could*

have been an idea that was shallow or badly flawed, and which died a quick death. The less successful ideas, by contrast, *could* have taken off with profound implications in all directions. The history of ideas is littered with things that appeared for a time to be important, but which died; and with things which appeared to be of little significance at the time, but grew in significance out of all reasonable expectation.

In other words, if we are looking for philosophical guidance about what to do now, there is none to be found. The only advice that one might give philosophers is “let a thousand flowers bloom.” Let each philosopher follow what they think is important. Some of them might just turn out to be right.

Reference

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