

## What Philosophy Ought to Do

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Philosophy is unique. There is no other academic discipline that has laboured for so long under such a massive misconception as to what its basic task ought to be.

The proper basic task of philosophy is to keep alive awareness of what our most fundamental, important, urgent problems are, what our best attempts are at solving them, and what the relative merits and demerits of these attempts are. A basic task is to articulate, and improve the articulation of, our fundamental problems, and make clear that there are answers to these problems implicit in much of what we do and think – implicit in science, politics, economic activity, art, the law, education and so on – these answers often being inadequate and having adverse consequences for life and thought in various ways as a result.

Philosophy should also try to help *improve* our attempted solutions to our fundamental problems, by imaginatively proposing and critically assessing possible solutions, all the time making clear, where relevant, that different possible solutions have different implications for diverse aspects of life. As a result of improving our attempted solutions to our fundamental problems we may thereby contribute to the improvement of our lives, and help us make progress towards a good world.

Even though these are the proper, fundamental tasks for philosophy, it hardly needs to be said that none of these tasks can be said to be the exclusive domain of philosophy or academic philosophers. Quite the contrary, a central task of philosophy is to stimulate as many people as possible to think about fundamental problems imaginatively and critically - that is, *rationally*. Philosophy is not to be characterized, or delineated from other disciplines in terms of *who does it*, but rather in terms of *the fundamental character of the problems being tackled*, and perhaps *the value of the contribution in question*.

What, then, are our fundamental problems? Our most fundamental problem of all, encompassing all others, can be put quite simply like this:

*How can our human world, and the world of sentient life more generally, imbued with the experiential, consciousness, free will, meaning and value, exist and best flourish embedded as it is in the physical universe?*

Some will reject the idea that the ultimate reality behind the natural world is physical in character. For example, there are those who hold that the ultimate reality is God. In order not to exclude such views in an *a priori* fashion, as it were, we need a broader formulation of the above problem:

*How can our human world ... exist and best flourish embedded as it is in the real world?*

I interpret the first formulation of this problem in such a way that it encompasses all of academic thought, from theoretical physics, mathematics and cosmology, via the biological and technological sciences, to social inquiry and the humanities. It also encompasses all practical problems of living - problems facing individuals, groups, institutions, societies,

nations, and humanity as a whole. The key idea of this conception of philosophy is that philosophy is concerned to help solve rationally our most *fundamental* problems.

The moment it is accepted that philosophy has, as its basic task, to tackle fundamental problems, it is clear that philosophy education must be transformed. Instead of learning philosophy via the history of philosophy, rather one needs to plunge, from the outset, into the fundamental problem as it confronts us today, relevant background knowledge in physics, biology, climate science, social inquiry and the humanities, politics, economics and international affairs being acquired as one goes along. That the history of philosophy is the wrong way to learn philosophy becomes all the more obvious granted the points to be made below – namely, that much of philosophy in the past has been alienated from concern with our fundamental problems.

But what exactly does "fundamental" mean here? We can perhaps say that problem  $P_1$  is more fundamental than  $P_2$  if solving  $P_1$  also, at least in principle, solves  $P_2$ , but not vice versa. This suffers from the disadvantage that " $P_1$  is more fundamental than  $P_2$ " in this sense might just mean that  $P_1$  is more general. Can we distinguish "more fundamental" from "more general" - the former being stronger? It can be done like this.  $P_1$  is more fundamental than  $P_2$  if the solution to  $P_1$  solves  $P_2$ , but not vice versa, and the solution to  $P_1$  is unified or coherent in some significant, substantial sense of these terms, and not just a jumble of disconnected items. An example of a unified or coherent solution is a unified physical theory that solves a range of problems in physics.

Granted this conception of the basic task of philosophy, it at once becomes clear that philosophy in the university has, as an elementary obligation, to ensure that sustained thinking about our fundamental problems and how to solve them goes on in an influential way within academic inquiry. This is, indeed, a basic requirement for academic inquiry to be rational. Four elementary, almost banal, rules of reason are:

- (1) Articulate, and seek to improve the articulation of, the basic problem to be solved.
- (2) Propose and critically assess possible solutions.
- (3) If the basic problem to be solved proves intractable, specialize. Break the basic problem up into subordinate problems. Tackle analogous, easier-to-solve problems, in an attempt to work gradually to the solution to the basic problem to be solved.
- (4) But if one engages in specialized problem-solving in this way, make sure that specialized and basic problem-solving interact, so that each influences the other (since otherwise specialized problem-solving is likely to become unrelated to the basic problems we seek to solve).

Sustained thinking about what we may call "global" problems - global intellectually, and global in the sense of encompassing the earth and humanity as a whole - must go on in universities in a way that influences, and is influenced by, more specialized research if rules (1), (2) and (4) are to be put into practice, and academic inquiry is to meet elementary requirements for rationality. Philosophy as sustained thinking about our fundamental problems and how to solve them must be an integral, influential part of academia if academia as a whole is to be rational. A quite basic task for philosophy, then, is to ensure, as a bare minimum, that universities are organized in such a way that each university has a big,

prestigious Seminar or Symposium, open to all at the university from undergraduate to vice-chancellor, which meets regularly to explore global problems in a sustained way, and in a way that is capable of influencing, and being influenced by, more specialized research.

From what I have said so far, one would expect such global seminars to be commonplace in universities around the world. I know of no university anywhere that has such a global seminar (although attempts have been made, recently, in a few universities to introduce sustained inter-disciplinary research into global problems: see, for example, the [Grand Challenges Programme](#) at my own university, UCL).

Academic philosophy has failed dismally to create such a global seminar in the university. Even worse, it has made no attempt to do so. Worse still, academic philosophy has failed almost entirely to take on the task I have indicated above - the task of keeping alive awareness of what our most fundamental problems are (as a bare minimum).

Academic philosophy today does not even recognize, as a fundamental problem of the discipline: *What kind of inquiry can best help us realize what is of value in life?* or, to quote the title of an article of mine *What kind of inquiry can best help us create a good world?*

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