

**Contextualization and Reconstruction in Mainstream Philosophy:
Defending the Relevance and significance of
Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism¹**

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[Philosophers] demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing something, are supposed to be lacking.... There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective 'knowing.'²

Introduction

Philosophers have traditionally viewed philosophy as a distinctively universal enterprise fully committed to methodological and theoretical detachment. Among other things, this conception of philosophy, as the aim to avoid occupying any limited or distorted perspective, is really a desire to obtain a perspectiveless perspective, which is, ironically, the perspective from eternity. For those philosophers desirous of achieving the perspective from eternity, they in turn dedicate themselves to becoming dead to the world. When the philosopher dies to the world, he/she, in transcending the limitations of temporality and materiality, are reborn as innocent spectators, as it were, spectators located outside the illusionary world of human affairs.

Unlike philosophers who have a penchant for endorsing the idea of a philosophy as a view from nowhere, I confess a preference for the view of philosophy as an historically motivated and informed discursive practice. Indeed, it would not strain credulity to conceive of philosophy as an existential textuality—a collection of texts variously permeated with the conditions of human existence.

At the same time, ironically from a different perspective, I declare an unforgiving condemnation of those efforts dedicated to the repudiation of normativity. I find wanting ill-advised efforts to pursue reductive strategies that render philosophy nothing more than descriptive exercises imprisoned within myopic particularities. Not surprisingly, the primary concerns of the following essay center on metaphilosophical questions regarding the nature

of philosophy, the historiography of philosophy, and, to a lesser extent, philosophical method. The case is made for the relevance of philosophy, while underscoring philosophy's embeddedness within what James famously calls, the "stream of experience." This last assertion requires more detailed fleshing out.

The challenge is to pursue sober philosophy from within the finite and situated perspective of human beings, which is not the same thing as demanding unreflective parochialism. Rather, by eschewing fantasies of externality, meaning, exile outside the human perspective, the opportunity is available to ground philosophical practice within the stream of human experience—within sociality. Perhaps another way of framing this point is to alternatively conceive of philosophy as remaining within the world. But, unlike the misleading tendency to view the world as a spatial container, or as a collection of objects, or as an aggregate of meaningless facts, I would prefer the sense of the world as meaning a womb of affectivity or as a network of affective meanings.

A philosophy intimately connected, as well as embedded in the world construed as constituted by structures of affectivity, suggests that philosophy can more effectively probe the significance and implications of the fact that human beings are always involved in the tangled, although not incoherent, task of creating themselves. This self-creating project is, accordingly, sustained by human beings in so far as they interpret and impose meaning/significance on their being-in-the-world/situationality.

Again, philosophical practice intoxicated with the desire for methodological detachment is unable to register the complexity and incalculability of human experience. Hence, philosophy so conceived is a dead philosophy and not a philosophy of life. Philosophy captivated with the perspective of eternity is philosophy complicit with transgressions against existence. To desire exile to the realm of the supersensuous is not true liberation but, rather, a flight from contingency, which is, at best, a repudiation of the very basis of there being philosophical consciousness.

The general outline of my remarks is as follows: I start with concerns about contextualization which are inclusive of some critical reactions to the trope of crisis within philosophy, and an overview of the recent history of mainstream philosophy. Next, I consider the question of analysis and the nature of analytic philosophy, focusing on how these issues have contributed to a less than ideal situation in mainstream philosophy. Finally, I comment on prospects for philosophy while emphasizing the idea of pluralism. In

conjunction with this concern, I connect the notion of the relevance of philosophy with certain developments in critical philosophy of race.

My primary concern in this essay is not to unnecessarily insult philosophers by engaging in any unsavory pejorative activity. Rather, I want to register some observations regarding mainstream philosophy with the intent of underscoring the disciplinary relevance of philosophy, and the disciplinary history of philosophy itself.

Philosophy as crisis

It is not unreasonable to suggest that most, if not all, keynote addresses delivered to audiences of professional philosophers, in one way or another, ravenously exploit the metaphor of “crisis.” Although the crisis metaphor is probably more cliché than original insight by now, there is something about it that predictably captures the institutional, as well as disciplinary peculiarities of philosophy.

Let me quickly interject that many professional philosophers are most probably inclined to resent sternly efforts to link metaphors with philosophy, preferring instead to amplify the idea of philosophy as driven by arguments. What seems to be missing from the enthusiastic appeal to argumentation is an appreciation of the fact that, as Rorty indicates, “It is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements that determine most of our philosophical convictions.”³ Not only is it the case that metaphors are core constituents of philosophical convictions, they also map our very conceptions of philosophy. Here, what is of greater significance is the degree to which metaphors garnish existential urgency in structuring our very mode of being in the world.

If Lakoff and Johnson are correct in their contention “that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, [and that] the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor[.]”⁴ then it should not come as a surprise to learn that the act of declaring a crisis situation in philosophy emerges from the various ripples of disturbances that have inundated the world of philosophy. From among the many texts concerned with the crisis turn in philosophy, let us quickly consider two recent texts by John McCumber.

We owe John McCumber considerable thanks for his work on the effects of the McCarthy Era on the discipline of philosophy in the United States. He does not paint a very flattering picture of American philosophy and its less than thoughtful response to

McCarthyism. Regardless, he insists that American philosophy has not freed itself from its complacent reconciliation with McCarthyism. McCumber offers the following description of his *Time in The Ditch: American Philosophy and the McCarthy Era*:

[A]merican philosophy continues to suffer from the wounds inflicted during the McCarthy era as documented in the public record. . . . The data will suggest that the ongoing trauma takes the form of a discipline that is, internally, more tightly controlled by its establishment than are other disciplines in the humanities. Externally, American philosophy is traumatized in that it is far more isolated from other academic discourses, and from American culture in general, than it ought to be.⁵

Ironically, despite all the protest by mainstream American philosophers in support of the apolitical and culturally-transcendent nature of philosophy, philosophy as the view from nowhere, McCumber documents the way in which McCarthyism determined not only the goals of mainstream philosophy, but also the very definition of philosophy itself.

Accordingly, he states:

The McCarthy era, it turns out, imposed an important restriction on just what kind of goal philosophers can pursue. It limited them to the pursuit of true sentences (or propositions, or statements).⁶

Philosophy, as popularly believed, is the critical pursuit of “the timelessness of sentential or propositional truth. . . .”⁷ And just as family secrets and social isolation are characteristic of dysfunctional families, McCumber claims that American philosophy is similarly plagued by an “ongoing and *general* absence of reflection on the discipline [and] philosophy’s self-imposed isolation from other fields.”⁸ The twin liabilities of secrecy and alienation are no doubt partly emergent from the conviction that mainstream philosophy “tak[es] place within a single timeless moment.”⁹

McCumber, in his recent *On Philosophy: Notes From a Crisis*, argues that philosophy is in “crisis” precisely “because it [philosophy] is undergoing a number of separations at once: separations of philosophers from the wider culture, from each other, and from philosophy itself.”¹⁰ Ultimately, McCumber laments philosophy’s inability to join in solidarity with liminal groups seeking some degree of existential credibility, epistemic credibility and, testimonial justice. Here he states that,

[r]eflection on the identities and experiences of women, people of color, and the wholly disparate groups I can only, and apologetically, call ‘nonheterosexuals’ remains for too ghettoized today. Indeed, ... David Hibert point(ed) out that the newly released National Research Council rankings of philosophy departments show that the mere presence of women and minorities in a philosophy department, whatever their field, goes with a lowering of its reputation.”¹¹

McCumber, standing on the strength of his thesis about the influence of the McCarthy Era on American philosophy, maintains “that the collapse of American philosophy was the result not of an influx of women and African Americans into the universities but to external politics....”¹² This is indeed bad news about the institutional condition of philosophy within higher education. Administrators are becoming more and more convinced about the irrelevance of philosophy. But, for obvious reasons, I do not think that they are right.

In light of the challenging portrait McCumber paints of mainstream philosophy, certain questions emerge. For example, what if we were to consider whether or not philosophy has, unfortunately, voluntarily entered a decadent state or is currently in the midst of immanent institutional collapse?

Such a state, a state of crisis in mainstream philosophy, is both unfortunate and unnecessary, for it restricts the scope and relevance of philosophy at a time when philosophy is desperately needed to defend and rehabilitate some of our core normative ideals. I intend for the preceding remarks, which I hope are not too negative in tone and content, to provide a context for reflection on some aspects of the disciplinary history of mainstream philosophy.

Philosophy and History of Philosophy

Although philosophers in the mainstream tradition normally repudiate the history of philosophy, it is ironic to observe the extent to which there is a certain covert historical narrative propelling its metaphilosophical rhetoric. The status of mainstream philosophy is premised upon a crude whiggism: it is an attitude that, despite marginalizing the history of philosophy as distinct from philosophy itself, nevertheless, interprets the history of philosophy from the viewpoint of the present—philosophically speaking, from the perspective of mainstream philosophy itself. The Whig historians “saw their own beliefs,

practices and institutions as the goals for all previous beliefs, practices and institutions[,] ... where the task was reconstructing the progressive march of history focusing on those past developments which anticipated the present.”¹³ Like the Whig historians, mainstream philosophers are similarly theoretically invested in “notions of the homogeneity and linearity” of the history of philosophy. We should also note that the Whiggist orientation of mainstream philosophy at times takes on the semblance of a crude triumphalism.

Accordingly, as the default victors of philosophy, mainstream philosophers maintain that “there [is] nothing, or nothing much, to be salvaged from” the history of philosophy.¹⁴

Reichenbach, while favoring segregating history of philosophy from philosophy proper, writes: “I do not wish to belittle the history of philosophy; but one should always remember that it is history, and not philosophy.... There is more error than truth in traditional philosophy.”¹⁵

Present mainstream philosophers actualize what philosophers traditionally have wanted to accomplish. According to the mainstream view of things, the problem is as follows: philosophers in the past lacked the appropriate resources and methods which would have facilitated their success. Real philosophy, philosophy as conceptual analysis, requires, among other things, the formal power of modern symbolic logic and rigorous methods of linguistic analysis. Here we witness the fullest expression of the conception of philosophy, as seen through the lens of analytic philosophy, as defined by argumentative rigor, and conceptual and linguistic clarity.

Since we should not allow ourselves to be uncritically taken in by the triumphalist rhetoric of mainstream philosophy, let us quickly review some of the critical developments in its recent disciplinary history

The Crisis of Analysis

Some philosophers would certainly subscribe to the view that “A high degree of historical awareness [or historical consciousness] is one of the symptoms of a disciplinary crisis.”¹⁶ Similarly, as Rorty writes, “the gap between ‘analytic’ and ‘non-analytic’ philosophy nowadays coincides pretty closely with the division between philosophers who are not interested in historico-metaphilosophical reflections on their own activity and philosophers who are.”¹⁷ Cohen and Dascal also observe that, “the philosophical community today is marked by the absence of agreement about its own

purpose and identity. Any way one tries to approach the issue of what philosophy is or should be, one immediately stumbles upon fundamental disagreements.”¹⁸ Instead of limiting my discussion to general developments, I want to focus in greater details on the internal disagreement among mainstream philosophers concerning the very concept of analysis, a debate that weakens the institutionalized, linear narrative of historical progress.

Hacker, in acknowledging the difficult challenge of assembling a coherent and consistent conception of analytic philosophy, identifies certain philosophers, commonly recognized as the leading architects of analytic philosophy, as some of its leading subverters. To this end, Hacker states “Quine...was the primary subverter of analytic philosophy.”¹⁹ Accordingly, Hacker resorts to history to articulate his settled conception of analytical philosophy. He maintains that, “It is...as a dynamic historical movement that analytic philosophy is best understood.”²⁰

Hylton has also provided some intriguing insights regarding the rhetoric of analysis within analytic philosophy. Hylton isolates two themes as constituting the idea of analysis: clarity and an emphasis on modern logic. These two themes bolster the idea of analytic philosophy as grounded on a “paradigm of analysis that draws on elementary mathematical logic.”²¹ Hylton, like Hacker, is skeptical regarding the proposition that there is a generally agreed upon notion of analysis that sustains the idea of analytic philosophy. Hylton writes:

We started with the idea that some sort of unity might be given to the idea of analytic philosophy by thinking about philosophical analysis.

Careful examination, however, tends to undermine the idea that there is a single notion of philosophical analysis which can play this role.²²

Hylton acknowledges Russell’s bold conception of the relation between philosophy and analysis. According to Russell, “That all sound philosophy should begin with an analysis of propositions is a truth too evident, perhaps, to demand a proof.”²³ Further elaborating on Russell’s position, Hylton concludes:

So at least according to Russell..., philosophy consists of analysis.

Analysis, in turn, is largely concerned with logical forms, though also with classifying the various constituents of propositions.²⁴

This conception of analysis furnished by Russell, however, proved to be philosophically troubling and, in some sense, flirts with absurdity. Hylton informs us

that Wittgenstein:

In particular, in spite of the rest of the [*Tractatus*], its final remarks... amounts to a rejection of what I called the realist conception of philosophical analysis: the idea that philosophical analysis uncovers structures which exist quite independently of us, and which underlie our discourse and make it possible.²⁵

Consistent with this interpretation of Wittgenstein is the view of the *Tractatus* as a self-consuming artifact; a text whose very condition of possibility becomes its very impossibility.

Despite the effortless or uncritical declarations of analytical philosophy as defined by an irrevocable commitment to clarity and analysis, scholarly investigation of the metaphilosophical status of analytical philosophy has produced radically different narratives not always consistent with the status quo. These narratives do not focus exclusively on the disciplinary nature of philosophy but tend to question the institutional nature of the term “analytic philosophy.” Brian Leiter writes:

[I]t is time to pronounce the ‘bogyman’ of analytic philosophy laid to rest.... Given the methodological and substantive pluralism of Anglophone philosophy, ‘analytic’ philosophy survives, if at all, as a certain style that emphasizes ‘logic’, ‘rigor’, and ‘argument’....²⁶

And finally, Aaron Preston, in his *Analytic Philosophy: The History of an Illusion*, (2007) chronicles the illusion that sustained the belief of a stable consensus about the nature of analytic philosophy. Preston writes:

The proposal [of unity of method] is the heart of what I call *the illusionist thesis*, or simply illusionism.... Illusionism accepts that the [traditional conception of analytic philosophy] does not correspond, and never has corresponded, to anything in reality. Consequently it posits that, insofar as it has ever seemed to anyone that it did, that ‘seeming’ was an illusion. And yet illusionism also insists that it *did* seem that way to many—indeed, to many self-proclaimed analysts—during the early and middle years of the analytic movement. Consequently it posits that the illusion itself must be counted part of the movement’s history.²⁷

Again, the purpose of the preceding discussion was not to engage in short-sighted condemnation of analytic philosophy. Rather, the point of the discussion was to invite critical reflection on the dominant narrative about the efficacy of analysis. Of course, the lack of consensus about the nature of analysis and, more specifically, analytic philosophy did not prevent philosophers from pursuing various programs of analysis. So, even if there was no general agreement about what constituted analysis, questions remain as to whether or not the various projects of analysis produced favorable results.

There are some possible lessons resulting from the contestability concerning the nature of analysis, philosophical methods, and the nature of philosophical problems. Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is perhaps the best record of what philosophers can extract from the fragmentation of the paradigm of analytic philosophy. Indeed, Rorty has recorded a number of claims that challenge some of the assumptions of mainstream philosophy. First, he rejects the idea of philosophical problems as being perennial and absolute, a view which would enable linear interpretations of the history of philosophy. Furthermore, this view also gives comfort to the idea that modern symbolic logic has enabled philosophers to deconstruct pseudoproblems and solved problems that were previously unsolvable because philosophers were blindly misled by the faulty grammatical structure of natural language. Rorty historicizes philosophy to the extent that he maintains that "a 'philosophical problem' was a product of the unconscious adoption of assumptions built into the vocabulary in which the problem was stated—assumptions which were to be questioned before the problem itself was taken seriously."²⁸

Second, Rorty claims that an anti-foundationalist approach to philosophy entails productive insights regarding knowledge, language and philosophy itself. Citing Dewey, Wittgenstein and Heidegger, Rorty writes:

If we have a Deweyan conception of knowledge, as what we are justified in believing, then we will not imagine that there are enduring constraints on what can count as knowledge, since we will see 'justification' as a social phenomenon rather than a transaction between 'the knowing subject' and 'reality.' If we have a Wittgensteinian notion of language as tool rather than mirror, we will not look for necessary conditions of the possibility of linguistic representation. If we have a Heideggerian conception of philosophy, we will see the attempt to make the nature of the knowing

subject a source of necessary truths as one more self-deceptive attempt to substitute a 'technical' and determinate question for that openness to strangeness which initially tempted us to begin thinking.²⁹

Ultimately, Rorty settles for an edifying conception of philosophy. According to this edifying conception of philosophy, the task of philosophy is not to furnish a priori justification for our practices, customs and intuitions. Rather, the edifying approach construes philosophy as tasked with facilitating the kind of maturity that would accommodate our shedding beliefs, attitudes, practices, etc., that are instrumentally ineffective. As consistent with his support for an edifying conception of philosophy, Rorty states that a philosophy which is edifying will help "society as a whole, break free from outworn vocabularies and attitudes, rather than to provide 'grounding' for the intuitions and customs of the present."³⁰

From Crisis to Pluralism

In the midst of the current contestability about the nature of philosophy and the requisite status of analysis, I do not think that philosophers must passively resign themselves to unimpressive metaphilosophical debates or prematurely declare the demise of philosophy. Neither should they waste their time in meaningless controversies about who is and who is not doing real philosophy. Since we live in an age of unbounded pluralism, we should follow the example of the pragmatists and advocate an imaginative reconstruction of philosophy. The pragmatists favored a reconstruction of philosophy in order to make philosophy more compatible with natural science, but our reconstruction should be along the lines of making philosophy compatible with the tantalizing and intoxicating radical pluralism that infuses just about every conceivable aspect of human sociality. Of course, we must also acknowledge the various forms of pluralisms attendant to our multiple disciplinary research traditions. Accordingly, like the early pragmatists who lost favor with a priori philosophy in its most general sense, the urgent existential challenge is to pursue a critical working through of the significance and importance of the very conditions of possibility constitutive of our existence. Philosophers should resist embracing the Cartesian picture of human existence as a solitary consciousness stranded in cosmic exile, a consciousness alienated from the contingencies of material being. This picture of things unproductively burdens philosophy with all sorts of ontological separations and segregations.

Sober reconstruction in philosophy, however, can facilitate genuine philosophical rehabilitation by more fully embracing the sociality of human enterprises, endeavors and undertakings. Such a development would represent a critical awareness of William James' contention that "The trail of the human serpent is...over everything." Indeed, the great Charles Peirce reminds us that:

No general description of the mode of advance of human knowledge can be just which leaves out of account the social aspect of knowledge. That is of its very essence.... Bohemians, like me, whose work is done in solitude, are apt to forget that not only is a man as a whole little better than a brute in solitude, but also that everything that bears any important meaning to him must receive its interpretation from social considerations.³¹

Consistent with Peirce's observations, David Hull writes: "The chief weakness of the logical empiricist analysis of science has been the emphasis of its advocates on inference to the near exclusion of everything else about science, especially its temporal and social dimensions."³²

It is probably the case that the history of twentieth century philosophy would have been radically different if the logical positivists had paid greater attention to the history of philosophy and the history of science. Among other things, there would not have been any need for them to distance themselves from what has come to be called continental philosophy. They most likely would not have subscribed to excessively narrow views about the irrelevance of the history of philosophy and the history of science if they had taken the time to engage in the appropriate kind of "historical philosophizing". And, most certainly, they would not have naively misidentified and prematurely condemned metaphysics but, rather, would have developed critical appreciation for the role of root metaphors in facilitating metaphysical speculation. Instead of recommending the surgical use of logic to eliminate metaphysical through the clarification of thought, they would have alternatively advocated for the importance of metaphorology within philosophy. As Peirce reminds us:

Metaphysics has been said contemptuously to be a fabric of metaphors. But not only metaphysics, but the logical and [phenomenological] concepts need to be clothed in such garments. For a pure idea without metaphor or other significant clothing is like an onion without a peel.³³

And then there is the nagging issue of not treating “concepts as gifts,” but understanding how philosophers “make and create them.”³⁴ But appreciating this difference would have required that the logical positivists were conscious of the performative contradiction of condemning metaphysics while implicitly subscribing to a metaphysical position of analytical atomism: the project of analyzing propositions, concepts and sense experience by reducing them down to their simplest elements.

Let us briefly examine an example of philosophy that takes history of philosophy and history of science seriously. Hasok Chang, both in his reconstruction of the history of the Chemical Revolution and his work in the philosophy of chemistry, has provided an antidote to the infatuation with a priori analysis. Chang’s alternative point of departure is to pursue a naturalization of the philosophy of science. That is, grounding philosophy of science within the history of science. In championing a naturalization of the philosophy of science, he also recommends complementary science. Here, Chang correctly argues that history of science should creatively inform the philosophy of science. While advocating that we center epistemic practices and epistemic objects, Chang also recommends pluralism instead of the monism traditionally associated with a priori philosophy of science. His support of pluralism is a recommendation for the flourishing of different theories, methodologies, epistemologies and research agendas within the practice of science and not the search for the one absolutely true method, theory, etc. In short, Chang champions the “practice turn,”³⁵ the move away from a synchronic view of science as “a timeless logic-centered” structure of true statements to a diachronic, meaning “history-and practice-approach”³⁶ to science.

The Relevance of Philosophy

As previously mentioned, I firmly embrace the idea of the relevance of philosophy, without having to transform philosophy into a form of advocacy or a study of the presence of the present- the demand that philosophers should view their role as inspiring social movements. Similarly, I do not think that any exclusive empirical discipline justifiably qualifies to replace philosophy.

At the same time, I have no patience with the view of philosophy as the view from nowhere; I consider this, along with John Dewey, as a bad faith approach to philosophy precisely because it is unfaithful to philosophy’s role as an indisputable human practice

emergent from our efforts to cope and adjust to an unpredictable and hostile physical environment.

However, in advocating for the relevance of philosophy, I want to briefly indicate how philosophy can contribute to one of the most intractable problems of modern society: the problem of race. My simple point is that we need to make sure that philosophy is relevant and that it is not sidetracked by irrelevant questions, while ignoring or suppressing relevant questions. The kind of relevant and urgent questions that should attract the attention of philosophers are the socio-cultural-historical questions emergent from the conflict of perspectives that characterize the imperfections of finite beings existing within a temporal plane of uncertainty. Here, I follow Bergson's lead. Bergson writes:

I consider an amateur in philosophy, the one who accepts the terms of an ordinary problem as they come, and holds the problem as definitively posed, merely choosing between apparent solutions which necessarily precede his choice.... But philosophizing for real should mean at once creating the position of a problem and creating the solution.... I consider a philosopher the one who creates the necessarily unique solution of the problem which he has posed anew by the very effort of trying to solve it.³⁷

Indeed, philosophers need not view themselves as the self-appointed guardians of reason, whose primary responsibility is to facilitate the liberation of human beings from the oppressive fog of conceptual confusion and cognitive impairment. Instead of pursuing transcendental conditions of the possibility of various phenomena, philosophers should investigate the implications of false theories, the absurd consequences of embracing defective concepts, etc. Such an activity, much like forensic pathology, would obviously be intimately informed by historical understanding or, should I say historical philosophizing. Here the emphasis would not be on discovering the "Truth" or carving nature at its joints, but on understanding what works for us human beings as we pursue epistemic goals consistent with our physical existence.

Instead of pursuing the practical activity of understanding what works and what does not, philosophers have been involved in a different kind of activity. Consider the current situation where the phlogiston model of ontological elimination is dominant among some philosophers. Exploiting an analogy between the concept of race and the concept of phlogiston, they argue that since the concept of race, like the concept of phlogiston, does

not refer to any entity in the world, then we should eliminate it. Philosophers of chemistry, such as Hasok Chang, caution against the seduction of the willingness by philosophers to engage in acts of ontological genocide. While denouncing semantic and ontological violence, Chang urges greater imaginative receptivity and openness to pluralism. As he writes:

[I] think there has been an unwarranted and unproductive tendency toward elimination... The frequency of elimination has more to do with scientists' predilections than anything about the nature of nature, or anything inevitable about the course of scientific development.³⁸

Chang invites philosophers to devote more critical attention to the holistic and ecological environment of scientific practice. However, despite the call by some philosophers to move beyond the penchant for ontological violence, the practice remains popular with philosophers.

With regard to race, certain philosophers have recently decided to replicate the traditional metaphysical debate between realists and antirealists within the philosophy of race, pursuing what has come to be called the new metaphysics of race. The basic analytic thrust of this debate is that we must first resolve the issue of the existence of races prior to critically attending to the socio-political issues associated with race. Here, it is urged that the socio-political issues associated with race are secondary to primary philosophical concerns regarding meaning and reference: we must first get the semantics and ontology of race right; after engaging in this formal philosophical task, we can then turn our attention to philosophically insignificant issues, or let the simpleminded social scientist do this kind of intellectual grunt work.

Certain philosophers have rightly considered this new metaphysics of race to be an unfruitful research program. David Ludwig has argued that: (1) the ontology of race is underdetermined by empirical evidence provided by the facts of human biological diversity; and (2) nonempirical factors, such as, theories of reference, methods of conceptual, linguistic or logical analysis, are unable to decide definitively the issue of the underdetermination of the ontology of race because there are equally acceptable candidates for the meaning of race.

Metaontological debates concerning the ontology of race, then, are doubly underdetermined by both the available empirical evidence and the way in which one chooses to define the concept of race. The critical point here, with regard to the issue of the nonsubstantive nature of metaontological debates, is that there are equally diverse ways of

structuring one's ontological stance. These rival grammars of ontology preclude there being any substantive philosophical issue to be dissolved. Indeed, rival ontologists can always acknowledge that their ontological rivals are speaking a different language with regard to his/her ontology. And since they do speak in different languages and do recognize each other as so speaking, there is no point of ontological exile that would facilitate a neutral ontological debate. Eli Hirsch has made the case that a debate or dispute is merely verbal if "[e]ach side can plausibly interpret the other side as speaking a language in which the latter's asserted sentences are true."³⁹ The ontological debate about race qualifies indeed as a verbal dispute.

Urging philosophers to devote greater critical attention to ordinary or commonsense conceptions of race, Ludwig argues:

I have argued that 'race' is too ambiguous and vague to support a general metaphysical debate about the question whether human races exist. . . . Even if we focus more specifically on the question whether races exist, there arguably remain different permissible candidate meanings that imply different ontologies of race. Philosophers should therefore not pretend to have a metaphysically deep solution to the question whether races exist but simply acknowledge that the answer to the question whether races exist depends on how 'race' is specified.⁴⁰

The simple point here is that, instead of pursuing metaphysical questions, there are probably other ways of reframing the race debate.

Denouncing the structural problems characteristic of the realism/antirealism debate as unproductive, Lisa Gannet urges philosophers to focus their attention upon more concrete concerns. Her point is not that philosophers should become more politically engaged, but that philosophers are probably best qualified to critically engage the debates in the public sphere that are often exploited by those lacking in cognitive depth and analytical endurance. Gannet states:

[T]he natural kind approach compromises the critical insight philosophers of science might otherwise contribute to debate in the public sphere and thus risks sustaining an unproductive, even corrosive, standoff between biological race realists and social constructionists.⁴¹

In another context, other philosophers have advocated displacing unproductive philosophical debates. For example, following Sally Haslanger, I also favor a philosophical approach to the issue of race along the line of an ameliorative project. Haslanger describes her ameliorative project as one that raises “normative questions about how we should understand race...”⁴² The emphasis here is not on trying to curve nature at its joints. Rather, the challenge is to think in terms of how best to approach race in order to realistically, productively, meaningfully, and critically engage with the persistent and deeply existential issues connected with race.

The purpose of the preceding discussion was to establish why philosophers need not limit themselves to pursuing narrowly defined philosophical questions. For example, the relevance of philosophy should not be determinately restricted to the network of questions resulting from the series of ontological factures common to the Cartesian paradigm of philosophy.

Please allow me to quickly point out that the kind of structural stasis that I have been discussing is not limited merely to formal ontological concerns. For even if one respects the distinction between ideal and non-ideal political philosophy, it is still instructive to note that mainstream political philosophy tends to marginalize some of the most urgent issues shaping our everyday existence. Rawls in his *A Theory of Justice* with great sophistication and tantalizing philosophical effort “place[d] all concrete social arrangements, and hence all concrete social issues, behind what [he] famously calls the ‘veil of ignorance.’”⁴³

Despite Rawls’ admirable methodological brilliance, ultimately, the structural logic of society as described by him is but an aggregate of individuals thinly connected through acts of mutually beneficial contractual exchanges. Here society is an artificial construction and not the creative achievement of individuals connected through incalculable and dynamic relations of reciprocal dependence.

Although it would be ridiculous to begrudge Rawls for his admirable argumentative skills, I think that it is fair to question why a philosopher would seriously recommend describing people as “moral personalities” in a society where there is a need for sound thinking about the challenging contingencies that are persistent and meaningful in that society. Despite Rawls’ declaration of the parties to the original position returning to society to implement neutral principles of distributive justice, one cannot help but lament the fact that Rawls fails to confront the challenge to fully explain how beings alienated from their

concrete existence, from circumstances of their finitude and the temporal unfolding of themselves as human selves can meaningfully reinsert themselves into the stream of human experience and the dram of human history.

I cannot help fantasizing about how different political philosophy or for that matter philosophy would have been had Rawls taken it upon himself to write a book on race and philosophy, utilizing the resources and insights of existential phenomenology. Instead of unproductively fantasizing about what should have been, I want to briefly review some recent work in Africana philosophy.

The Limits of Liberalism

I want to offer a final instance of why we need to expand the relevance of philosophy beyond the notion of philosophy as analysis. Here, I will briefly comment on the work of Charles Mills. Mills is well known for his work on race within political philosophy, in particular, the silences and erasures of political philosophy with regard to race and racism. Mills is firmly committed to what he has referred to as a form of racial logicism. Unmistakably, Mills views himself as working at the core of analytic political philosophy.

I want to underscore the extent to which Mills' firm commitment to a method of logical analysis seemingly prevents him from confronting, in the most rigorous and critical manner, important issues that remain silent within his work. Mills' original claim is that the social contract tradition in political philosophy has been complicit in the modern project of white supremacy. Consequently, Mills claims that what passes for a generic contract is actually a racial contract, an agreement among Europeans to establish a regime of social, economic and political arrangements to disproportionately benefit themselves. Mills renames the social contract the racial contract and distinguishes between two senses of the racial contract: The "Racial Contract," in quotation marks, indicates when he is talking about the theory of the Racial Contract and, then there is the actual Racial Contract itself.⁴⁴ His idea of the "Racial Contract" is more in keeping with the traditional social contract theory of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Kant.

In his recent collection of essays, *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism*, Mills transitions from addressing social contract theory to directly confronting liberalism. In this new setting, Mills does not critically engage liberalism as a hegemonic abstraction; instead he posits the existence of a plurality of liberalisms. Indeed, Mills

identifies an abstract philosophical liberalism and a racial liberalism. He writes that, “Abstract Platonized liberalism erases actual liberalism’s racist history, a blinding white Form that, in pretending a colorlessness that it did not and does not achieve, obfuscate more than it illuminates. The problem is not abstraction as such but a problematic mode of idealizing abstraction that abstracts away from social oppression, and in that way both conceals its extent and inhibits the development of the conceptual tools necessary for understanding and dealing with its workings.”⁴⁵ He briefly describes racial liberalism as “a liberalism in which key terms have been written by race and the discursive logic shaped accordingly.”⁴⁶ Mills declares that his major concern is to recognize the “historic racialization of liberalism *so as better to deracialize it*—thereby producing a color-conscious, racially reflexive, anti-racist liberalism on the alert for its own inherited racial distortions.”⁴⁷ Mills suggests that liberalism can best deracialize itself “by recognizing the centrality of a social ontology of race to the modern world and the acknowledgement of a corresponding history of racial exploitation that needs to be registered in liberal categories and addressed as a matter of liberal social justice.”⁴⁸ So, Mills’ objective is not to think beyond liberalism or, rather, outside the structural logic of liberalism. He wants to infuse liberalism with a historically informed awareness of race in order to enable liberalism to better confront the social reality of race.

Despite Mills mentioning of race and history, Mills’ allegiance to a method of philosophical analysis centered on the rigorous evaluation of arguments prevents him from not only recognizing the limitations but, ultimately, breaking free from the assumptions, images, metaphors, concepts, etc., of liberalism. Mills remains within the philosophical imaginary of liberalism. He claims that there is a need to frame racial injustice in “liberal categories,” as well as identifying it “as a matter of liberal social justice.” Choosing from many possible objections to Mills, I will briefly address the conceptual merging of the social ontology of liberalism and the problem of temporality.

Social atomism, meaning radical individualism, is an axiomatic feature of social contract theory. Indeed, it so intimately informs the theoretical fortunes of liberalism that Hobbes could not resist the insight that, we can think of people in the state of nature as if they were “even now sprung out of the earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms come to full maturity, without all kinds of engagement to each other.”⁴⁹ I am hard pressed to see how such an explicit commitment to a social ontology of radical individualism can adequately accommodate problems and issues emergent from a perspective highly dependent upon an

oppositional social ontology of groups or intrinsic collectives. Of course, contra Mills, we must acknowledge that liberalism's commitment to individualism is not an accidental feature but, rather, constitutes a core feature of social contractarian methodologies: "The basic idea is to abstract away everything pertaining to what is to be justified and then show how rational (atomic) individuals, given their interests, would 'contract' into just the set of institutional arrangements that the contractarian wants to defend."⁵⁰ Again, Mills' apparent inability to fully appreciate this structural plank of liberalism renders his project of deracializing liberalism by reclaiming an original liberalism, a nonracial liberalism, hobbled by rudimentary conceptual inadequacies.

Second, the issue of temporality. Clearly atomistic individualism is at the heart and soul of liberalism. Consequently, the liberal account of compensatory justice requires a causal link between the perpetrators of harm and the victims of harm. The perpetrator of injustice is responsible for compensating the victim who has suffered an injustice. Similarly, the victim of the wrong is the party who is entitled to compensation. This model of liberal compensation is dependent upon the timelessness of the present. Being primarily restricted to the tenselessness of the present, two factors are dominant within this model of compensation. It is an individualistic model, and it requires a causal chain or historical link between perpetrator and victim.

We recall that Mills wants to reform liberalism so as to enable it to more effectively address matters of racism and racial justice. But, again, it is increasingly difficult to understand how Mills can use liberalism and its associated philosophical conceptual pageantry to so address these concerns when, for example, in the case of Blacks both the perpetrators and the victims no longer exist. Furthermore, there is no direct historical link between those currently seeking compensations and those who were the actual perpetrators of the sins of slavery. As we all know, no one currently assumes that it his or her responsibility to compensate current Blacks for the wrongs of slavery. Of course, the main point here is that it is extremely difficult to render intelligible, within the structural logic and grammar of liberalism, the case for historical justice, as well as for the notion of group rights. Clearly the social ontology of liberalism recognizes the rights of individuals and not the rights of groups. Individualistic liberalism is incapable of addressing structural historical injustice suffered by groups in the distant past. Its main focus is forever on isolated individuals. A relevant political philosophy, as a form of historical philosophizing, would not

only facilitate an embrace of group rights, but would also preclude the kind of false equivalence that is so often invoked simply because liberalism and its commitment to deduction cannot recognize the importance for a notion of analogical differentiation.

Conclusion

To the extent that I have allowed myself to be seduced by the temptation to direct critical comments at the discipline of philosophy, I have done so with grave admiration and with the deepest affection for philosophy; I take no pleasure in the spirit of resentment or benign indifference. Indeed, my hope is that some future scholar will say of present day philosophers, and those of the not too distant future, what Louis Menand said about the American pragmatists.:

If we strain out the differences, personal and philosophical, they had with one another, we can say that what [philosophers of early 21st century] had in common was not a group of ideas, but a single idea—an idea about ideas. They believed that ideas are produced not by individuals, but by groups of individuals—that ideas are social. They believed that ideas do not develop according to some inner logic of their own, but are entirely dependent, like germs, on human careers and environment. And they believed that since ideas are provisional responses to particular and unreproducible circumstances, situations, their survival depends not on their immutability but on their adaptability.⁵¹

As professional philosophers, we have an ethical responsibility to look after the institution of philosophy. We must give back to philosophy much more than it has given to us. And the best way to give back to philosophy is by affirming a certain philosophical faith and, in the words of John Dewey: assume the responsibility “of conserving, transmitting ... and expanding the [philosophical] heritage ... we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it.”⁵² Doing all of the above requires that American philosophy, in the words of McCumber, embrace “critical examination of its own historical roots and open dialogue with outsiders.”⁵³

Notes

¹ I want to thank the officers and members of the FPA for the invitation to deliver the keynote address of the 2017 annual meeting of the FPA. I also extend a very special thanks to Professor Brook Sadler and the members of the FPA Diversity Committee.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. by W. Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York; Vintage Books, 1967), 119.

³ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980): 12.

⁴ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, "Conceptual Metaphor in Everyday Language," *The Journal of Philosophy* 77. 8 (1980): 454.

⁵ John McCumber, *Time in the Ditch: American Philosophy and the McCarthy Era* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001): xix.

⁶ McCumber, *Time in the Ditch*, xix.

⁷ McCumber, *Time in the Ditch*, xix.

⁸ McCumber, *Time in the Ditch*, 8.

⁹ Quoted in McCumber, *Time in the Ditch*, 12.

¹⁰ John McCumber, *On Philosophy: Notes From A Crisis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013): 3.

¹¹ McCumber, *On Philosophy*, 19.

¹² McCumber, *Time in the Ditch*, 110.

¹³ Quoted in Hasok Chang, "We Have Never Been Whiggish (About Phlogiston)," *Centaurus* 51 (2009): 251

¹⁴ McCumber, *Time in the Ditch*, 81.

¹⁵ Quoted in McCumber, *Time in the Ditch*, 49.

¹⁶ *The Institution of Philosophy: A Discipline in Crisis?* ed. Avner Cohen and Marcelo Dascal (La Salle, IL.: Open Court, 1989): xiv.

¹⁷ Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as Science, as Metaphor, and as Politics," in *The Institution of Philosophy: A Discipline in Crisis?* ed. Avner Cohen and Marcelo Dascal (La Salle, IL.: Open Court, 1989): 24

¹⁸ *The Institution of Philosophy*, ed. Avner Cohen and Marcelo Dascal, xi.

¹⁹ P. M. S. Hacker, "Analytic Philosophy: What, Whence, and Whither?" in *The Story of Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Anat Biletzki and Anat Matar (London: Routledge, 1998): 9.

²⁰ P. M. S. Hacker, "Analytic Philosophy," 15.

²¹ Peter Hylton, "Analysis in Analytic Philosophy," in *The Story of Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Anat Biletzki and Anat Matar (London: Routledge, 1998): 37.

²² Peter Hylton, "Analysis in Analytic Philosophy," 38.

²³ Quoted in Peter Hylton, "Analysis in Analytic Philosophy," 41.

²⁴ Peter Hylton, "Analysis in Analytic Philosophy," 44.

²⁵ Peter Hylton, "Analysis in Analytic Philosophy," 46.

²⁶ Brian Leiter, "Introduction," in *The Future of Philosophy*, ed. Brian Leiter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 11.

²⁷ Aaron Preston, *Analytic Philosophy: The History of an Illusion* (London: Continuum, 2007): 81.

²⁸ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*: xiii.

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- ²⁹ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*: 9.
- ³⁰ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*: 12.
- ³¹ Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers* 2.195, 1902)
- ³² Quoted in McCumber, *Time in the Ditch*, 49.
- ³³ Charles Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings (1894-1914), Volume II* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998): 392.
- ³⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1967): 409.
- ³⁵ Hasok Chang, “Epistemic Activities and Systems of Practice: Units of Analysis in Philosophy of Science After the Practice Turn,” in *Science After the Practice Turn in the Philosophy, History, and Social Studies of Science*, ed. Léna Soler, Sjoerd Zwart, Michael Lynch, and Vincent Israel-Jost (London: Routledge, 2014): 67-79.
- ³⁶ Rein Vihalemm, “Chemistry and the Problem of Pluralism in Science: An Analysis Concerning Philosophical and Scientific Disagreements,” *Foundations of Chemistry* 18 (2016): 91.
- ³⁷ Quoted in Elie During, “‘A History of Problems’: Bergson and the French Epistemological Tradition,” *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 35.1 (2004).
- ³⁸ Hasok Chang, “The Persistence of Epistemic Objects Through Scientific Change,” *Erkenntnis* 75.3 (2011): 426.
- ³⁹ Eli Hirsch, *Quantifier Variance and Realism: Essays in Metaontology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) :221
- ⁴⁰ David Ludwig, “Against the New Metaphysics of Race,” *Philosophy of Science*, 82. 2 (2015): 258.
- ⁴¹ Lisa Gannett, “Questions Asked and Unasked: How by Worrying Less About the ‘Really Real’ Philosophers of Science Might Better Contribute to Debates About Genetics and Race,” *Synthese* 177 (2010): 365.
- ⁴² Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 387.
- ⁴³ McCumber, *Time in the Ditch*, 38-39.
- ⁴⁴ Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca; Cornell University Press, 1997: 3-4.
- ⁴⁵ Charles Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs: A critique of Racial Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): xv.
- ⁴⁶ Charles Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, xv.
- ⁴⁷ Charles Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, xv.
- ⁴⁸ Charles Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, xvii.
- ⁴⁹ Quoted in Jean Hampton, *Political Philosophy* (Boulder, CO.: Westview Press, 1997): 42.
- ⁵⁰ Andrew Levine, *Engaging Political Philosophy: From Hobbes to Rawls* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002): 18.
- ⁵¹ Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001):xi-xii.
- ⁵² John Dewey, *Common Faith. The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Volume 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, Press, 1986: 57-58.
- ⁵³ McCumber, *Time in the Ditch*, 90.
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