

IS PHILOSOPHY A GUIDE TO LIFE?
(On the Problematic Nature of "Applied Philosophy")

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1. Philosophy--the Problematic Guide

Philosophers traditionally see the task of philosophy as providing rational guidance to thought and action--as answering "the big questions" about the world, ourselves, and our place in its scheme of things. But does philosophy provide such answers? The motto of Phi Beta Kappa, America's oldest academic confraternity, is the proud dictum "Philosophy is the guide of life" (philosophia biou kybernetes). But is this claim defensible? Does philosophy indeed provide a satisfactory guide to decision and action in the practical affairs of life?

It is all too clear that capital-P Philosophy affords no useful guidance for the governance of our affairs. Philosophy at large has no theses, lessons, teachings--only possible problems and conflicting solutions. It is a domain of clashing contentions without consolidated results. And no one bears more eloquent testimony to this than the philosophers themselves.

Descartes, the founding father of modern philosophy, complained as follows:

I shall not say anything about philosophy, but that, seeing that it has been cultivated for many centuries by the best minds that have ever lived, and that nevertheless no single thing is to be found in it which is not subject of dispute, and in consequence which is not dubious, I had not enough presumption to hope to fare better there than other men had done. And also, considering how many conflicting opinions there may be regarding the self-same matter, all supported by learned

people, while there can never be more than one which is true, I esteemed as well-nigh false all that only went so far as being probable.¹

In the 18th century, David Hume deplored philosophy's chaotic lack of consensus in these terms:

[W]ant of coherence in the parts, and of evidence in the whole, these are everywhere to be met with in the systems of the most eminent philosophers, and seem to have drawn disgrace upon philosophy itself...[E]ven the rabble without doors may judge from the noise...within. There is nothing which is not the subject of debate, and in which men of learning are not of contrary opinions. The most trivial question escapes not our controversy, and in the most momentous we are not able to give any certain decision. Disputes are multiplied, as if every thing was uncertain; and these disputes are managed with the greatest warmth, as if every thing was certain. Amidst all this bustle 'tis not reason, which carries the prize, but eloquence; and no man needs ever despair of gaining proselytes to the most extravagant hypothesis, who has art enough to represent it in any favourable colours....From hence in my opinion arises that common prejudice against metaphysical reasonings of all kinds, even amongst those, who profess themselves scholars....²

A century later, Wilhelm Dilthey wrote (in 1867) that: [Many think that] the development of philosophy encompasses through all those various systems a succession of systems which approaches a single perfected system in unending approximation. However in reality every age manifests the strife of all these systems among one another. This includes the present age, which shows no sign that this strife of systems is diminishing.³

And he noted that, in consequence of this, the tendency of the time was:

to treat the systems of these great philosophers as a series of delusions, akin to a bad dream

which, on awaking, one had best forget altogether.⁴

In the late 1920s, Moritz Schlick gave expression to a similarly discouraging view:

But it is just the ablest thinkers who most rarely have believed that the results of earlier philosophizing, including that of the classical models, remain unshakable. This is shown by the fact that basically every new system starts again from the beginning, and that every thinker seeks his own foundation and does not wish to stand on the shoulders of his predecessors....This peculiar fate of philosophy has been so often described and bemoaned that it is indeed pointless to discuss it at all. Silent scepticism and resignation seem to be the only appropriate attitudes. Two thousand years of experience seem to teach that efforts to put an end to the chaos of systems and to change the fate of philosophy can no longer be taken seriously.⁵

Philosophy, Croce maintained, gives rise to those inconclusive and interminable arguments which are so frequent with professional philosophers that they seem to have become a natural element in their lives, where they come and go...in vain, always agitated here and there and everywhere, but always at the same stage of development.⁶

The litany of dismay echoes through the ages, complaints regarding unsettled issues, undecisive controversy, unending disputes and unachieved consensus. For two and a half millennia, philosophers have grappled with "the big issues" of man and his place in the scheme of things without resolving anything. We look in vain for one consolidated and generally conceded item of philosophical "knowledge"--one "philosophical fact" on which the community has reached a settled consensus.

Down the centuries, philosophers have been dismayed about the inability of their discipline to lay to rest the disagreement of the past and to reach fixed and

settled conclusions. They have often cast envious sidelong glances at the sciences, with their demonstrated capacity to solve the problems and settle the controversies of the field and yield a continually increasing number of established findings that reflect a general consensus.

Philosophy as such--the enterprise as a whole, in the richly discordant diversity of its intramural conflicts and disagreements--obviously does not provide a guide to life. At this level of comprehensive generality, our questions get not one answer, but a babel of conflicting answers from which no useful guidance can be extracted. If we are to apply philosophy we must have a particular philosophy to apply. But there just is no body of established and agreed theory in philosophy that one can "apply" in the way in which we can (say) apply physics or biochemistry. Just what are the implications of this circumstance?

2. The Problem of "Applied Philosophy"

Applied philosophy (as it has come to be called) has to do with the implementation of philosophical ideas, methods, and beliefs in resolving the cognitive, normative, and practical issues we face in everyday situations in "the real world."

The key point that has to be borne in mind here when one speaks of "applying" philosophy is that there are different sorts of applications. In particular, there are personal applications to one's own concerns and in the specific context of one's own life, and there are also public applications to the governance of society's affairs. The former is relatively straightforward. Once one has a philosophy--has taken one's personal position on philosophical issues--one can usefully put it to work in making one's decisions and conducting one's affairs. But the issue of applying philosophy in the public domain raises more substantial difficulties.

For only insofar as we have an agreed-upon and

shared "public philosophy" can we make use of philosophy as a basis for problem solving in the public forum. And it is at just this point that we encounter a decisive roadblock. Living in a pluralistic, diversified, and ideologically balkanized society, we lack that agreed unity of doctrinal consensus which alone could give us a philosophy that we could apply unproblematically in the arena of public policy. At the level of social concerns, the very idea of "applied philosophy" is in difficulty because there is no communally available philosophy to apply.

3. One's Own Philosophy as Guide

At the outset of his Meditations, Descartes expressed the intention that, until his own philosophy was full-formed, he would continue to guide his conduct of life's affairs by the "extraphilosophical" resources of common sense and established custom. And this is surely a sensible course. For as Descartes clearly saw, philosophy-at-large can provide no guidance--for this one must await the development of one's own philosophy. Until we have formed our own framework of values and have thought through its implications, we had best cling to the security of the tried and tested, and let ourselves be guided by custom's familiar and established ways. Until one's own philosophical position is available, one can expect no useful guidance from philosophy as such.

Not the discipline as a whole but only the products of one's own particular mode of practicing it can possibly afford us helpful direction and informative answers. Neither in matters of thought nor in matters of action can philosophy-at-large tell us what is to be done--only the particular substantive positions that we ourselves accept can possibly do so. Only at this particularistic level can we achieve a definite position regarding the right and the good, the beautiful and the sublime, the significant and the important. Such lessons are clearly bound up with the specific teachings of the particular philosophy one

happens to espouse. It is from one's own philosophy, and not from philosophy per se, that guidance for our thought and action is to be extracted.

Philosophy per se only provides a catalogue of possibilities, a collection of blueprints. But a blueprint does not afford us a habitation: to have a dwelling place we must have some particular structure. Philosophy-in-general cannot answer our questions, only whatever particular philosophy we ourselves accept can.

Questions we can indeed get from capital-P Philosophy--that is, from the enterprise at large. But if it is answers that we want (and it surely ought to be!), then we can only obtain them from our own philosophy. To obtain answers to our questions we must work them out on some basis with which we ourselves can come to terms. If we want to put philosophy to work we must first develop a philosophy to apply. Thereafter, there is no problem. Once we have a philosophy in place, we can draw upon it for counsel.

4. What Philosophy Per Se Can Contribute

So much then for the contribution of our own philosophy. But what of philosophy per se? Given that the enterprise as a whole does not and cannot achieve any stable resolution of the substantive issues, can we obtain any useful lessons from it?

We can indeed. Even the position-detached study of philosophy as a whole can provide a powerful stimulus to thoughtful reflection and a great aid to us in working out our own positions. The study of philosophy is "consciousness raising"--it makes us aware of problems and issues and sensitizes us to the bearing of various sorts of considerations. Its utility, however, is not as a road map which tells us what turns to make along life's journey, but as an intellectual stimulus towards cultivating those resources of reason and thoughtful reflection by which an intelligent person can tackle the problems he or she faces. The lessons

of philosophy-at-large are not substantive but only methodological. But of course, it stops well short of yielding substantive answers to philosophical questions. Answers are something we cannot obtain from philosophy at large--they come only from our philosophy.

5. Can One "Apply" Philosophy in the Public Domain?

Strictly speaking, then, there is but one way in which to full-bloodedly "apply" philosophy--namely by first developing a philosophical position of one's own, and then proceeding to put it to work in resolving issues. It is obvious enough that in order to apply a philosophy one must first have a philosophy to apply. And this leads to difficulties in the public domain because we lack a public philosophy. We lack a consensus position accepted by "the public at large" as basis for its deliberations.

But things are not quite as bad as they seem. Those theoretical subtleties and carefully crafted distinctions which preoccupy the philosopher may just not make much difference in real-life. In many cases, the result of applying one particular parochial philosophy to the exclusion of others will not matter all that much because the issues are not sensitive to detail. Analytical care and common sense may alone suffice to enable us to arrive at a definite resolution--subtle doctrinal differentiations become immaterial. The applications require rough-cut solutions and those greater refinements of detail over which philosophical doctrines quarrel do not matter. (Philosophical disagreements arise when we push our concepts hard and in various applied settings in the real world we need not push them that hard.) Philosophical clarification may not be necessary a outrance--once a bit of it is introduced, the practical issues may become sufficiently clear for effective resolution. The details of our substantive position just don't enter in, so that it makes no difference that others may not agree with it. Unfortunately, however, such cases are rare

indeed. In most cases it will matter a great deal just exactly where we stand doctrinally.

However, there remains that other, less committed way of "applying" philosophy where what is at issue is not the substance (results, findings) of philosophical inquiry, but its methods. In this methodological setting, we treat problems at arm's length rather than taking a committed position regarding their resolution. We delineate the issues, clarify the problems, pinpoint what questions must be decided, and examine what sorts of considerations must be taken into account. What is at issue here is a matter of problem-clarification, something which, useful though it is, stops well short of problem-resolution.

There can be little question that this sort of "applied philosophy" can be practiced carefully in the domain of public policy. Indeed, instances of this sort of "application" of philosophy to public policy issues by way of elucidation nowadays surround us on all sides. Let us take brief note of a few examples.

6. Some Examples of "Applied Philosophy" in the Public Domain

Environmental ethics affords a wide spectrum of illustrations. One such relates to the issue of safeguarding and preserving our natural environment. In this connection, philosophers have stressed the different interests that various constituencies are bound to have in the matter, including constituencies that cannot participate in current deliberations regarding these matters because they do not yet exist--to wit, future generations. The allocation of obligation and responsibility becomes a problematic issue here. Environmental protection may impose economic and social burdens on the present generation--ones that significantly lessen its level of well-being--in the interest of safeguarding assets and resources for future generations. How are such costs and benefits to be reckoned here--and the burdens allocated? The in-

formed philosopher's scrutiny of these matters can greatly clarify the issues involved and pinpoint the factors that must be taken into account.

In legal philosophy, the question of confidentiality affords an example. To what extent should the client-attorney relation be one of sacred confidentiality? To what extent should the interests of third parties be protected by attorneys against potentially criminal wrongdoing by their clients? This becomes a matter of weighing the claims to client-attorney confidentiality of some against the rights of others to reasonable security in life, limb, and property. Here again, philosophical scrutiny can greatly illuminate the problem and identify factors which an adequate handling of such issues must take into appropriate account.

Medical ethics is yet another major area of application where philosophical deliberation can help to facilitate the rational resolutions of conflicts. The ethical ramification of the use of placebos is just one example. They pose the policy issue of weighing an individual's right to be adequately informed (to give "informed consent" to treatment) against the loss of the potential benefit to be derived from the use of a placebo and the doctor's obligation to provide therapeutically appropriate care. Here too we have a policy issue that poses a conflict of considerations which philosophically informed scrutiny can do much to clarify.

Again, the domain of "critical thinking" that has leapt into prominence in philosophy teaching over the past decade affords yet another rich field of examples. This venture dedicates itself to the critical analysis of reasoning in support of decisions regarding personal and social actions with a view to unmasking invalid appeals in the rhetoric of persuasion and propaganda. The philosophically informed logician and epistemologist can do much to illuminate the issues here. Consider only one somewhat amusing instance. An editor of the Soviet journal Science and Life informed his audience in the early days of space

rocketry that "the fact that satellites and space rockets have not detected the All-Highest, angels, and so on, bears testimony against religious convictions and strengthens disbelief in God."⁷ It is clear that a bit of philosophical analysis would do much to shake the appeal of such an argument.

But enough of examples. The cases we have adduced are more than enough for our present aim--which is to draw attention to the essentially methodological nature of these "applications" of philosophy. They are all concerned with matters of method rather than substance. They serve to assure that the deliberations at issue are sensibly managed--that they are adequately developed and achieve technical merit--but not that they must assert themselves in any particular substantive direction.

To be sure, we can unproblematically deploy such methodological applications of philosophy in the public arena. But in the unavoidable absence of consensus on substantive issues, these methodological, commitment-free applications are seldom sufficient to provide an actual solution to the problems at hand.

7. The Limited Utility of Methodological Applications

This methodological mode of applied philosophy has the merit of not presupposing that the substantive issues have been settled in an agreed way. But for this very reason it is a resource of rather limited utility. For such "applications" do not resolve the issues, but merely assure that whatever solution we ultimately adopt will be of high quality in point of technical articulation. As our deliberations indicate, what is at issue with this methodological mode of applied philosophy is not problem-resolution, but rather that crucial preliminary of problem-clarification.

Such a procedure can indeed enable us to achieve technical adequacy in our deliberations. It can ensure that we pay due attention to such matters as defining

the issues, bringing to explicit recognition things that must be taken into account, pinpointing relevant considerations, avoiding confusions, identifying factors that must be distinguished, clarifying connections between seemingly disjoint considerations, drawing attention to ramifications and complexities that must not be lost sight of, etc. All the analytical and synthetic tools of philosophizing can be brought to bear, leading us to pay heed to the various pieces of the puzzle and coordinate them in their holistic unity. But all this methodological care only means that we have followed our route carefully; it does not mean that we arrive at the proper destination. These methodological resources only assure that whatever solution we can secure through use of other (substantive) resources is well worked out and cogently presented. They cannot determine the nature of our problem-resolutions, but only that they are competently substantiated. Accordingly, their utility, though real, is limited. Precisely because they are not substantive they do not enable us to resolve the real issues themselves, which are almost always of substantive bearing. (Care of process and procedure does not guarantee adequacy of result. Great care and effort can be used to build up a house of cards.)

This methodologically oriented "applied philosophy" is a mode of cognitive accounting, as it were. It insists on methodological rigor in keeping the books--on clarity, consistency, and coherent integration. But when all is said and done this does not take us very far. For accountants as such do not get involved in substance--the figures they juggle enter into their deliberations for external sciences. They do not make decisions; they assure that those who do make the decisions are able to see exactly what the upshot is in terms of the assets and liabilities they engender. Substance must come ab extra--not from methodology but from commitment.

And this commitment should be provided by the client and not the applied philosopher himself. For when the applied philosopher projects his own views into the

problem-solving process he does not simplify matters for anybody. He simply increases by one the number of agents who have to be accommodated. His presence impedes rather than facilitates problem-solving.

And there is further cause for concern here. Precious little in his strictly philosophical training equips the "applied philosopher" who is seeking to assist practical people deal with practical issues. Doctrines, claims, theses, and theories are either acceptable or not--there is little one can do to blend them together or average them out or otherwise take half-measures with them. But this is not so where actions rather than beliefs are concerned, and where we have to deal not with doctrines or theories but with programs or policies for doing things. Here negotiation and bargaining, mixed strategies and halfway-house compromises are the order of the day. In the real world, the best realizable resolution of issues is often a village of halfway houses. The matter is one of practical politics rather than ideology; of splitting differences rather than unifying finely wrought and coherent doctrines. And this theoretical untidiness of real-world arrangements is something for which the philosopher's theoretical training often leaves him ill equipped. It is something that renders the Platonic ideal of a politician-philosopher particularly difficult to achieve.

In pursuit of his goal of theoretical precision, the philosopher embarks on a course of elaboration and sophistication that soon outruns the patience of the practical decision-maker. For practical concerns are always directed at realistic considerations. The issues here pivot about what will (or will probably) happen. However, the philosopher's concern is more theoretical. He is concerned with what might happen. He is constantly subject to a professional inclination to let sophistication enter to what others see as the point of sophistry. He must constantly suppress an inclination to introduce a theoretical complexity that outruns the practical needs of the situation and

exhausts the patience of the practical man. The distinctions to whose significance "in principle" and the factors of whose bearing "in theory" the philosopher feels compelled to draw attention can all too easily strike the nonphilosopher as unnecessary sophistries. Unaccustomed to dealing with abstract matters and hypothetical possibilities, and unworried by theoretical complexities that lie outside the range of pressing prospects, the nonphilosopher is repelled by the "logic chopping" of the philosopher and is deeply dubious about his ability to render any useful service.

8. A Danger to "Applied Philosophy"

Such stress on the limits of applied philosophy reflects a danger that is never far removed from its operations. The unproblematic applications of philosophy in the public domain are, as we have seen, confined to the range of methodological issues. It is a matter of problem-clarification which is very different from (though obviously not irrelevant to) problem-resolution. But those who have these problems, the clients of applied philosophy, as it were, do not just want sharpened problems, they want answers. And the danger is that they will operate under the profoundly mistaken impression that those clever philosophers who are so ingenious about analyzing and clarifying the issues can also provide unproblematically acceptable solutions for them.

And just this is, of course, not the case. What applied philosophy can contribute at the level of public policy deliberations is (as we have seen) to clarify and define the issues. But it cannot solve them. Applied philosophers can provide a whole series of useful reminders about points to be distinguished and matters to be borne in mind. What they cannot do (short of a gratuitous injection of their own substantive views on the substantive issues) is to determine how their claims should be resolved in the light of such considerations. For what is needed to resolve the

really knotty issues is not just methodology but substance, not philosophical acuity but a philosophical position. And just exactly this is something which the applied philosopher is not in a position to supply on the basis of value-neutral expertise. It takes a substantive commitment which he cannot--or should not--provide on his client's behalf. He can at best help the client to develop his own position.

The danger here is obvious. For in turning to the applied philosopher as an "expert" in issue-clarification, the client may well expect more than he can get and ask for more than the philosopher (qua conscientious methodologist) can possibly deliver. And at this point there is the unhappy temptation for the philosopher--who is, after all, only human and equipped with the natural human aversion to disappointing expectations--to pass off the wolf of a personal position in the sheep's clothing of unprejudicedly objective expertise.

Yet another danger arises. The applied philosopher is all too frequently torn between the theoretical proprieties of his professional discipline and the demands of his client for rough and ready resolutions. He is always being tempted to let the deliberations rest on a footing that he feels in his heart of hearts to be inadequate.

The philosopher is always concerned with exceptions, with the limits of generality, with what might go wrong even if it rarely does. He has to care for careful distinctions and saving qualifications. And this can cause problems for the practical man. A legislator at one point expressed a yearning for "one armed experts," who would not implicitly say "but on the other hand." In this regard the philosopher is a virtual octopus.

The course of the relationship between the applied philosopher and his clients is thus strewn with thorns.

The professional hazard of the applied philosopher is getting caught up in a frustrating tug of war be-

tween the demands of his professional conscience and the requirements of his client. The first thing the applied philosopher must do qua analyst of complex issues is to come to terms with the limited extent and imperfect nature of the service he can render within the proper limits of the enterprise in which he is engaged. He would do well to subject his own proceedings to the critical scrutiny of his methods, taking for his motto that splendid old precept: "Physician, heal thyself."

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NOTES

1. Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Pt. I; tr. E. S. Haldane and G. N. T. Ross.
2. David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, Introduction.
3. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. V (Stuttgart and Goettingen, 1960), p. 134.
4. Wilhelm Dilthey, *op. cit.*, p. 13. Dilthey remarks that "The anarchy of philosophical systems is one of the most powerful supports from which scepticism draws ever-renewed nourishment. A contradiction arises between the historical realization of their boundless multiplicity and the claims of each to universal validity which supports the sceptical spirit more powerfully than any theoretical argumentation." (p. 75)
5. Moritz Schlick, "The Turning Point in Philosophy" in A. J. Ayer, ed., *Logical Positivism* (Glencoe, 1959), pp. 53-54. Compare also Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Preface to the First Edition, A viii-x; and Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Fixation of Beliefs," *Collected Papers*, Vol. V, ed. C. Hartshorn and P. Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: 1934), sect. 5.383.
6. Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, tr. by S. Sprigge (Chicago, 1970), pp. 147-48.
7. "Russian Writer Says Rockets Cast Doubt on Existence of God," *The New York Times*, Friday, January 23, 1959, p. 3.