PHILOSOPHY AS CONCEPTUAL THERAPY

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The author’s version that is made available here includes typographical corrections and is supplemented with internet-searchable keywords and an addendum of references to some of the author’s other publications that further develop this topic.

The paper that follows is the author’s early, idealistically hopeful perspective advocating the teachability of philosophically important reasoning skills. Its youthful enthusiasm has been tempered somewhat by the author’s later research, but the paper may nonetheless help to inspire continuing research relating to this area of study.

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ABSTRACT

The author distinguishes between the “information-oriented” approach of conservative, traditional philosophy, and an approach to philosophy as “conceptual therapy.” The former emphasizes scholarship, textual explication and criticism, and, in general, a knowledge of the views of traditional thinkers. Philosophy as conceptual therapy, on the other hand, seeks an improvement of intellectual skills, and fosters a therapy for concepts and, by inference, a therapy for thinkers. The major concern of the paper is to argue that the traditional information-oriented approach to philosophy does not help its students effectively to develop intellectual skills, and that a conception of philosophy as conceptual therapy can provide a valuable contribution to the teaching and to the subject-matter of philosophy.

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There are two fundamentally distinct approaches to philosophy. There is the approach to philosophy which dominates most undergraduate and graduate classes, and this is the approach to philosophy as an historical tradition in relation to which the student studies the views of great thinkers, their influences upon one another, the relations between their ideas and systems. We might call this the “information-oriented approach” since perhaps the foremost interest of the historian of philosophy is in being well-informed about philosophy. The well-informed scholar assiduously compares texts, examines translations critically, and probably knows several languages in order to reach the root meanings of concepts and words. He is likely to be sympathetic with certain of the views of philosophers with which he is well-acquainted, and seeks to provide those views with responsible and careful criticism.

On the other hand, there is a second approach to philosophy which in contrast to the “information-oriented approach” seeks to make use of philosophy so as to improve human intelligence. Its principal concern is with thinking well; its interest is in what we might call ‘conceptual therapy’. It begins with the assumption that no one thinks as well as he might, and believes thinking better is a worthwhile goal. This orientation toward philosophy as a discipline that is above all a self-discipline has a long tradition, going back as far as its counterpart, the study of the views of others. Philosophy as conceptual therapy recalls the values professed by Socrates, when Western philosophy was in its infancy, and, more recently, by Wittgenstein and Ryle.

Both the information-oriented approach and the conception of philosophy as conceptual therapy are of value. There is no need to regard the two approaches as hostile to one another. For the best thinkers, the two approaches are complementary; in lesser men, one-sidedness is the rule, and with this narrowed perspective come undesirable limitations.

Perhaps the worst handicap of the information-oriented historian of philosophy is that he frequently is incompetent to judge the relative merit of incompatible systems and ideas. He may be an exceptional
scholar, but he tends to be unable to evaluate the worth of the theories he investigates. He is, in short, not a scientist: He is in the position of one who finds Babylonian cosmology and the theories of Copernicus and Einstein on a par, and cannot settle the question which is a more adequate account of physical reality—although he, like anyone else, is free in this connection to express what is only his personal opinion.

[3] The conceptual therapist, on the other hand, when he is ignorant of the views of others, is similarly limited. His principal handicap is historical incompetence, and by this I mean no more than his proneness to repeat failures of the past. As a thinker, the conceptual therapist is inclined to sharpen and re-sharpen his finely honed tools, but lacking the substance of lessons learned over the centuries, a knowledge of what Robert Hutchins has called ‘the Great Conversation’, his approach is empty of the rich meanings of that long tradition.

Our current attitude toward education fosters almost exclusively the first approach: An educated man is above all informed. He knows that the French revolution brought about certain changes, he knows that DNA encodes hereditary characteristics, he knows that Bach wrote x-number of cantatas, and generally knows that about a lot of things.

But the well-educated man unfortunately has not learned to think much better than his peer who never went to college: Their IQs remain as close or as far apart as they ever were, and so educators have come to feel that intelligence is a fixed quantity, and that it does not improve with training. Of course, since the training in our schools is almost exclusively devoted to acquisition of information about facts, techniques, and past efforts, there is little reason why a man’s intelligence should improve! You may fill a mind, on the one hand, with culture and sophisticated scholarship, or with television commercials and football games, on the other, and the outcome for intelligence [4] as expressed by an intelligence quotient remains pretty much the same. A man may know a great deal of information—about the history of music or about the records of the past twenty world series—yet be comparatively mediocre in terms of IQ.

The issue of IQ is not itself important here. IQ tests measure certain intellectual skills. Whether IQ tests ought to be used in some situations and not in others is a controversial matter, one which I do not propose to rekindle. My point is that education as we know it has an insignificant impact on intelligence, on general intellectual abilities.\(^2\) It is not

\(^2\) This point has been borne out by numerous studies. See Arthur Whimbey’s excellent and extensive work, *Intelligence Can Be Taught* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1975), and references given in note 1.
hard to discover why this is so: We pay virtually no attention to training intellectual skills, so why should we be surprised if education succeeds only where it is meant to, that is, in the area of producing well-informed graduates? Many of them are also skilled, highly intelligent individuals, but most of the time, they were skilled, intelligent graduates who graduated from high school three to four years before, and they were also students in grammar school with high aptitude scores, etc. In other words, and the evidence supports this, the schools have tended not to be responsible for improvement of a person's intelligence, principally because most educators had come to the conclusion a long time before that intelligence cannot be educated, and must therefore be fixed.

That intelligence cannot be trained follows no more from the fact that our educational practice fails to improve intelligence than does the conclusion “No man can live beyond the age of 150” follow from “Thus far no man has lived to the age of 150.”

[5] Fortunately, recent studies have begun to erode the fixed intelligence hypothesis. Evidence against the hypothesis is encouraging beyond what we reasonably might hope. We are close to being complete novices in this area, so if our primitive attempts to educate intelligence are highly successful, how much more remarkable they must appear!

To return to philosophy. Granting that historical self-consciousness both is necessary and is currently fostered by our concern to bring the philosophical tradition to the awareness of students, the question is raised whether it is important to try to devise ways of training students in conceptual skills fundamental to philosophy. A few philosophers have proposed approaches to philosophical problems which involve a therapy for concepts. Nonetheless the question raised here is not so much whether there have existed a few skilled philosophers who may have served others and themselves as conceptual therapists, but whether it is possible to train students in the skills necessary for them to begin to act as such therapists. There have been gurus and shamans, healers and curanderas for many thousands of years before it occurred to us to train comparatively ordinary individuals to act as psychotherapists and physicians.

But, it may be objected, the skills of philosophy—even of that variety of philosophy oriented toward “conceptual therapy”—are so loosely defined, their identification so open to question, that the explicit teaching of them is highly problematic. Beyond a certain level of compe-

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3 For a review of these findings and for bibliographies of literature in this field, see Whimbey, ibid., and the works cited in note 1.
tence in informal logic, most philosophers [6] may be hard put to point
to specific competences a well-trained, as opposed to a well-informed,
philosopher requires for his work. If this were the case, which I believe
it is not, then philosophers would be advised to remain historians and
critics, whose skills are vague and acquired in an untrustworthy fashion
during a rather long period of apprenticeship. Whether this view re-
ceives our assent or not, it has been a dominant attitude in the field of
philosophy. It is therefore understandable why major contributions by
mathematicians, for example—theirs being a skill-oriented field—are
frequently made by persons still in their youth, while major works have
usually not been produced by philosophers until their riper (i.e., more
advanced) years.

Only comparatively recently has philosophy developed areas of
study characterized first by the need for a set of conceptual skills, and
perhaps only secondarily by the content to which these skills are ap-
plied. Such approaches to philosophy as linguistic analysis, logical
analysis and formal logic proper, certain types of descriptive phenome-
nology and epistemology (particularly in the more systematic context
of philosophy of science)—all contain an essential skill-component.
Each of these areas involves, of course, a history of its literature, and so
each lends itself to the information-oriented approach. This fact not-
withstanding, such areas of study possess a gradually evolving meth-
odological-doctrinal orientation and group of skills which constitute a
positive content as teachable as the content of such [7] skill-based dis-
ciplines as mathematics, physics, psychotherapy, or neurosurgery.

Edmund Husserl, speaking of the failure of traditional philosophy
to achieve the status of science, remarked

Kant was fond of saying that one could not learn phi-
losophy, but only to philosophize. What is that but an
admission of philosophy’s unscientific character? As
far as science, real science, extends, so far can one
teach and learn, and this everywhere in the same
sense.... One cannot learn philosophy, because here
there are no ... insights objectively grasped and
grounded, or to put it another way, because here the
problems, methods, and theories have not been clearly
defined conceptually, their sense has not been fully
clarified.

I do not say that philosophy is an imperfect sci-
ence; I say simply that it is not yet a science at all, that
as science it has not begun.... No reasonable person
will doubt the objective truth or the objectively grounded probability of the wonderful theories of mathematics and the natural sciences. Here there is, by and large, no room for private “opinions”, “notions”, or “points of view”. To the extent that there are such in particular instances, the science in question is not established as such but is in the process of becoming a science and is in general so judged.

The imperfection of philosophy is of an entirely different sort from that of the other sciences just described. It does not have at its disposal a merely incomplete and, in particular instances, imperfect doctrinal system; it simply has none whatever. Each and every question is herein controverted, every position is a matter of individual conviction, of the interpretation given by a school, or a “point of view.”

The concern Husserl expressed some 65 years ago can still inspire controversy, but there has been a change. We are witnessing a growth in the field of philosophy—very gradual to us, but quite rapid in relation to the two millennia of its Western development—which supplements, but does not wish to substitute for, its tradition. Husserl’s hope is no longer [8] just a hope: His recommendation that philosophy become scientific has begun to leave idle academic controversy behind. We need not all of us appreciate or even read the works of, e.g., contemporary analysts, logicians, phenomenologists and epistemologists of science. But the question whether philosophy is possible as conceptual therapy, and the related question whether general intellectual ability can be trained, though they may now provoke sometimes heated discussion in terms of what ought to be the case, we can now begin to answer on the basis of evidence. Whether God and some theologians intended that man should fly, he now most assuredly does. With the weight of evidence available to a new perspective on education, there is good reason to believe that many of the abilities of intelligence, and perhaps all of them, can be systematically developed in normal, healthy individuals by means of suitable training.\footnote{4}


\footnote{5 See note 2.}
This conception of education and of a focus for philosophical work is threatening. At the same time, it constitutes a promise. All change is threatening to stability. If certain areas of philosophy have begun to lend themselves to the sequential norms of competency-based instruction,\(^6\) then tensions may be expected to grow thanks to the human passion for exaggeration. The excessive claim is already made on behalf of non-traditional analysis that it should have sole title to meaningful philosophy. Its proponents lock horns with enthusiasts of the time-honored historical tradition, who claim tradition as the source for richness in ideas and for the eschatological \([9]\) self-consciousness of the evolving human spirit. However well-founded this claim, the scholar-historian is apt, fallaciously, to conclude that his own approach should remain the exclusive paradigm for philosophy well-conceived.

Rigidity in the face of transformation makes one brittle. One is easily broken by change, and one’s imaginative receptivity to growth is retarded. On the other hand, naive over-eagerness on behalf of novelty excites derision and hostility. In the end, when petty passions have cooled, we may find that philosophy is capable of assimilating the perspectives of tradition with those of conceptual therapy, realizing that it has grown in the process.

\(^6\) Calculus and analytical geometry are essential prerequisites to college physics in a sense akin to a need for training in mathematical logic in order to understand and to contribute to much analysis and philosophy of science; but these may be contrasted sharply with the wholly different need to have an historical introduction to philosophy before studying 19th Century philosophy. Prerequisites, just like the approaches they render possible, may be information- or skill-oriented.
OTHER PUBLICATIONS BY THE AUTHOR
VARIOUSLY RELATED TO THE
TOPIC OF THIS PAPER

A freely downloadable collection of publications by the author, including many of the publications listed here, is available from the author’s university research website http://www.willamette.edu/~sbartlet and from PhilPapers https://philpapers.org/s/Steven%20James%20Bartlett.

BOOKS AND MONOGRAPHS


3. *Self-Reference: Reflections on Reflexivity,* edited with Peter Suber, Martinus Nijhoff, 1987; now published by Springer Science. The first of two collections (see #4 below), consisting of invited papers by leading contemporary authors, to be published in the new area of research, the general theory of reflexivity, pioneered by the author.


5. *The Pathology of Man: A Study of Human Evil,* published in 2005 by behavioral science publisher Charles C. Thomas, is the first comprehensive scholarly study of the psychology and epistemology of human aggression and destructiveness. The study includes original research by the author, such as a detailed description of the phenomenology of hatred and the psychology of human stupidity, and an extension and elaboration of the author’s earlier published work dealing with the epistemology of human thought disorders (Part III).

for good mental health. Contains some discussion related to framework-relativity.


8. *Critique of Impure Reason: Horizons of Possibility and Meaning.* An extensive study providing a new understanding of reference, possibility, and meaning, as well as the solution to many major problems of philosophy. Scheduled to be published in August, 2020 as a free downloadable open access eBook. Check the author’s homepage http://www.willamette.edu/~sbartlett.

**ARTICLES**


15. Also available in German: “Wurzeln menschlichen Widerstands gegen Tierrechte: Psychologische und konzeptuelle Blockaden,” German translation of the preceding paper by Gita Y. Arani-May. Electronically published on the following websites in September, 2003: