Why I Think Research in Non-Applied, Non-Interdisciplinary, Non-Historical Philosophy is Worthwhile

Bryan Frances

On occasion, someone will ask you why you're a philosopher and not a scientist or some other, more obviously respectable, intellectual. Or a high and mighty philosopher will dismiss all of philosophy with the exception of the history of philosophy. Others will restrict philosophy's importance to applied philosophy or philosophy with obvious interdisciplinary features. Or someone from a different discipline might be respectful of the philosophical profession but in need of an explanation of why research in philosophy that is not applied, is not interdisciplinary, and does not fall under the heading of the history of philosophy is thought to be important. A university dean or other university official or professor might have just that question.

I suspect that there is a way to justify the modest claim that much of the research done in non-applied, non-interdisciplinary, non-historical philosophy is worthwhile as a community endeavor because it consists of work on real and worthwhile problems. (By 'non-historical' all I mean is that it isn't history of philosophy; so "non-historical philosophy" includes philosophy explicitly informed by the history of philosophy.) Oddly enough, we need not delve into the problems or any other philosophy in order to offer the justification.

The key step is to point out that there are certain *genuine* puzzles regarding *fundamentally important* notions that only philosophers work on and about which scientists don't seem able to solve or often disposed to even address. The reason these puzzles are fundamentally important lies in their subject matter (e.g., truth, justice, consciousness, knowledge); the reason they are genuine is that they can be put in the form of a small number of individually highly plausible yet apparently jointly inconsistent claims. Since they seem jointly inconsistent, I want to say that they can't all be true; since each is highly plausible, I want to say that each is true; but of course I can't say both things once I see the incompatibility between them. Any minimally adequate response to the puzzle must do either of two things:

- Identify the claims in the puzzle that aren't true, explain why they aren't true, articulate the truths we have been confusing them with (if there are any), and explain how it is that we made those mistakes.

- Explain how contrary to what anyone thought the claims are all true and do not conflict with one another. In this case the solution must greatly clarify the claims so we can see that they don't really conflict.

For instance, the gist of the problem posed by philosophical skepticism can be captured in this way.

1. If there are conflicting and competing hypotheses P and Q, and you're aware of them both as well as their conflict, then in order to know that P is correct, one has to have some evidence, of some or other kind, that rules out Q.
2. The brain-in-a-vat hypothesis ("For many years I have been nothing but a brain in a vat being fed electrical signals so as to produce the illusion of living a normal life") and the hands hypothesis ("I have hands") conflict and compete.
3. I'm aware of the brain-in-vat hypothesis and the hands hypothesis; I'm aware that they conflict and compete. (This isn't true of everyone of course, but it is true of people who have taken some college-level philosophy.)
4. I don't have any evidence of any kind that rules out the brain-in-vat hypothesis. (It apparently follows from (1)-(4) that I don't know that I have hands.)
5. I know that I have hands.

It certainly appears as though (1)-(5) are jointly inconsistent. And after some reflection (in a philosophy class, say), one will see that each claim is pretty plausible. Of course, the skeptical problem could be put in this form with a slightly different set of claims, but it's the form that we're interested in here. If one thinks that the natures of knowledge and evidence are important topics, as one should if one is intellectually alive, then one will see the value in the philosophical investigation of the problem of skepticism, as it can be presented as a set of conflicting yet highly reasonable claims about knowledge and evidence.

Here is another example, from metaphysics. Suppose 'human trunk' meant the torso and the head. Suppose further that we lived in a community in which 'trunk' had a useful role in linguistic behavior. So 'trunk' in this society is like 'arm' in our society. (E.g., perhaps in this society people lose their arms and legs unfortunately often, so 'trunk' is really useful and used frequently.) At 1pm you have an entirely intact and normal body; at 2pm your arms and legs are removed in an accident but you are kept alive and fully conscious (with plenty of morphine). Once your arms and legs are removed they are annihilated in a nuclear explosion. Call your 1pm trunk 'Trunk'; call your 1pm body 'Body'; call your right foot 'Foot.' Here is a set of apparently jointly inconsistent yet individually highly plausible claims.

6. At 1pm Body exists and has Foot as a part.
7. At 1pm Trunk exists but does not have Foot as a part.
8. If (6) & (7) are true, then at 1pm Body ≠ Trunk (they can't be the same thing, since at 1pm one has a part the other lacks).

9. If Body ≠ Trunk at 1pm, then Body ≠ Trunk at 2pm (compare: the fact that Twain = Clemens at one time guarantees that Twain = Clemens at any earlier time).
10. At 2pm Body = Trunk (as they are perfectly materially coincident at that time: made of the exact same stuff in the exact same place at the exact same time).

It may be a bit harder to digest this series of claims, but eventually one can see why each is plausible. If one thinks that it's worthwhile to understand the notion of a physical object and the logical notion parthood (even if one fails to find either *personally* interesting), then one should see the value in puzzling over (6)-(10).

By putting philosophical problems in this "highly plausible, apparently jointly inconsistent, and non-scientific" form there is little room for dismissive responses towards either the problems themselves or the goal of the research effort devoted to solving them. For instance, one cannot complain of our "not having earned the right to speak in that way" or being saddled with either "incoherent statements" or "inadequate concepts". The challenge is always this: which of the several claims isn't true (and now *please* explain why it seems true but is really false or neither true nor false), and alternatively, if they're all true, then how on earth do you explain away their apparent joint inconsistency? There is no way to proceed except by getting philosophically dirty by delving into the details (alternatively: the only way to proceed is to partially *clean* one's philosophical mind by delving into the details!). The recalcitrant philosopher, scientist, or other intellectual who desires to stand above the fray can always claim that the individual claims aren't all plausible, but then she still has to offer an explanation why they aren't true and yet so many intelligent philosophers—some of whom are or were geniuses—take them to be obviously true. Frankly, to say they aren't intuitively true is to make an obviously false sociological claim!

When I say that scientists don't seem to be able to solve the problems of philosophy, I don't mean that they don't have anything useful to contribute. For instance, the theory of relativity seems to be a good and highly relevant contribution to the investigation of certain philosophical problems regarding time. But scientific training often fails to give one the tools one needs to do productive work on philosophical problems. In fact, it sometimes creates an attitude that simply refuses to see philosophical problems—on occasion, even when they are put in the form just described.

There are many philosophical problems that can be put in this "highly plausible, apparently jointly inconsistent, and non-scientific" form. This isn't to say that they are actually put into this form in the typical research article (or even introductory book) that addresses the problem. And it's often difficult to put them in this form. Finally, I'd be surprised if this way of formulating philosophical problems could be applied to all philosophical problems, even the most famous ones. So be it.

Someone could challenge the thesis that any philosophical problem regarding some notion like knowledge or goodness that can be put in this form is worthwhile. He or she might think that an apparently contradictory set of highly intuitive claims about the notion of truth, or justice, or time, or thought, or existence, or beauty, isn't very important. She might do this because she doesn't care about

inconsistency; alternatively, she might not care about the philosophical notions in question. The first defect can often be repaired; the second might be harder to correct. But if one has any serious kind of intellectual life then one won't challenge the premise. I'm addressing only people who appreciate intellectual matters.

For me, philosophy is mostly (but not entirely!) *PAINTS*: problems, arguments, ideas, notions, theories, and solutions. I choose a fundamentally important *notion* (e.g., truth, time, matter, thought, consciousness); I want a *theory* of (or explanatorily illuminating "story" about) that notion; to that end I gather some *ideas* or claims regarding that notion; I often then see that the ideas generate a *problem*, often in the form of a collection of "highly plausible, apparently jointly inconsistent, and non-scientific" claims; I then try to find a *solution* to that problem, a proposal for solving it, thinking that the proposal will help me come up with the desired theory of or story about the philosophical notion in question.

We philosophers would do ourselves a favor if we worked hard to put our favorite philosophical issues into the "highly plausible, apparently jointly inconsistent, and non-scientific" form using nothing but simple, non-technical prose. This can't always be done, but it can be done often enough that we should be able to write 1000-word essays with titles like 'Why Philosophical Research into Vagueness [or Skepticism or Content or Freewill or Moral Facts or Modality or Material Composition or Induction or Confirmation or Reference or Causation or Color or Belief or Evidence or 'The'] is Important'.

Let me be clear on what I'm doing. I'm not saying that philosophy (today or overall) is just PAINTS; I'm not even saying that *most* philosophy is PAINTS (although I do believe that). I'm not saying that the importance of philosophy lies in PAINTS alone. I'm not saying that the most important part of philosophy is PAINTS. I have said nothing about the teaching of philosophy (although I hope that the reader can guess at least a part of what I'd say on that topic). I am saying this: PAINTS is a significant part of philosophy and it shows that research in *non-applied, non-interdisciplinary, non-historical* philosophy is well worth doing as the activity of a community of intellectuals. As long as one thinks that the topics mentioned are important, and one appreciates the logical point about the apparent inconsistency of highly reasonable claims, one should come to see why the philosophical research in question is worthwhile.

Now one might agree that the subject matter and goals of non-applied, non-interdisciplinary, non-historical philosophy are worthwhile, but since philosophers make no progress in meeting their goals, my justification for a group of scholars working in non-applied, non-interdisciplinary, non-historical philosophy falls away. It isn't hard to show that the remark goes too far: philosophers are the ones who call our attention to and rigorously formulate these problems. The fact that there is progress in this kind of philosophizing is harder to show, although it's perfectly obvious to anyone who actually studies philosophy for an extended period of time; I won't attempt it here.

This "highly plausible, apparently jointly inconsistent, and non-scientific" justification of the enterprise of research philosophy is *modest*. All I've shown is that much of the research in philosophy revolves around *genuine and fundamental problems*. But when we put our philosophical problems in the form

described above, we have something close to a *proof* of the worth of those problems; we also have the start of a justification of the philosophical community's research into those problems. This amounts to at least a partial defense of the enterprise of non-applied, non-interdisciplinary, non-historical philosophy, one appropriate for discussion with skeptics and curious bystanders.