

The Marketing of Philosophy

Preliminary Report

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A guest essay for the blog of Bernardo Kastrup

There is much talk in the profession these days of finding ways to improve the marketing of philosophy as an academic discipline. The philosophy department is under attack from almost all sides for its ongoing inability to reach a conclusion on any important philosophical question and some prominent scientists publicly doubt the value of studying it. In the US at least the teaching of philosophy is coming to be seen as inessential to a credible university curriculum and departments are closing.

A commercial enterprise finding itself in this position would initiate a marketing review as a matter of urgency, probably bringing in external consultants armed with a fresh eye and no stake in maintaining the status quo. It is interesting to wonder what their report might look like.

Marketing is often confused with selling but would normally refer to a broader range of activity. Confusion on this point afflicts many suggested approaches to promoting philosophy as an academic discipline for rarely are they more than proposals for selling the current product by dumbing it down, repackaging it, making it cheaper or increasing the advertising budget. This is disrespectful to the customer. It is being assumed that the customer is at fault for not seeing what a wonderful product the company is selling, and this is a naïve and well-known recipe for failure. In the way it pre-judges, makes assumptions and fails to look at the complete picture it is unphilosophical.

Marketing in a full sense would begin with the design of the product. If the product is poor then it will require much effort, a large budget and considerable copywriting sophistry to sell it. A great product, by contrast, will be relatively easy and cheap to sell and customers will keep coming back. It is not always easy to change a product when it loses its appeal and sometimes a manufacturer has no option but to continue to promote it at any cost right to the bitter end, but few companies have total inertia and philosophy is not one of them. A company with a marketing focus will be continually re-designing its products and services in order to minimise the cost of selling them and ensure that products evolve and do not become ossified relics of their former glory.

Is university philosophy a great product? Clearly not, given the widely acknowledged difficulty of selling it and the current efforts within the profession to find new and more effective ways of doing so. The question then arises of whether the product has to be this way and must be sold at any cost or whether it can be improved. The first question to be asked would be that of whether this is a problem affecting the whole industry or just a particular brand.

This latter question is rarely addressed in the Academy. The only successful alternative to the current university product belongs to the Perennial philosophy and the current strategy is not to investigate but shun it. The study of it is not encouraged for this might lead customers to take it seriously. The success of this strategy is that over time a myth has arisen that there is no competitor product and as a consequence it is poorly known. It is assumed by almost all professional philosophers in our universities at this time that philosophy is no more or less than what universities currently sell and that it cannot be improved. No improvement would be necessary, it is assumed, since the customer has no choice as to what to buy.

A consultant would be duty-bound to point out that this is not marketing but commercial suicide. It is also a betrayal of philosophy. A corporate culture exclusively focussed on selling the traditional product has blinkered the company's vision and acts as a major obstacle to the creation and implementation of a well thought-out and effective marketing plan, one for which product design would be at the core and not promotion and selling. The consequence is a product that has not evolved in centuries that is becoming increasingly difficult to sell even to highly intelligent and interested students of science and religion.

A marketing plan would normally start with the needs and wants of existing and potential customers. Fortunately no market research is required. They want to know how the world works, whether life has any purpose or meaning, what happens to them when they die, whether they have freewill, whether God exists, whether space and time are real, whether materialism is true, how they should interpret quantum mechanics, whether it matters how they behave and if so how they should, how they can find happiness, how they can make sense of their own consciousness and so on. The list is a long one. Does the current product meet their wants and needs? No. So how can it be sold effectively? Only by arguing that although the company's product cannot provide these benefits it is better than nothing. This requires maintaining the pretence that there is no alternative product. It requires that the customer be misled not just at the time of

purchase but on an ongoing basis and it ensures that the product never improves.

Must the company suffer increasingly from cut-backs and closures or might the situation be turned around? If it can be turned around then it could only be by making the product more attractive. This will only become possible if the organisational culture of the company is re-oriented away from promotion and selling towards a process of product-improvement. Here university philosophy may have much to learn from industry.

The academic study of philosophical questions brings well-known benefits regardless of its success, but are these fringe-benefits incidental or what customers really want? Are they enough to generate healthy sales forecasts? Are they enough to fill courses and attract investment and grants? It seems they are not even enough to convince many scientists or university administrators that philosophy is a worthwhile activity. What most potential customers want from philosophy is answers, conclusions, results, tangible and quantifiable benefits that would include a better understanding of themselves and their world. The product currently on offer is not what customers want but what they settle for because they have been told they must. This is surely marketing madness. The walls of academia are coming down and even a casual browse around Youtube would be enough to establish the ineffectiveness of the philosophy department's product and the low opinion of it held by many scientists and senior academics. Tellingly, those with the lowest opinion of the efficacy of philosophy are often professors of philosophy, for it is they who are most affected by the failure of the current product.

A vital ingredient for any marketing review would be a close examination of the products and services of competitors. For the modern Academy the main competitor would be the school of practice and thought known as the Perennial philosophy, yet it appears that at this time little is known about this competitor. If there is an alternative to its own product in the same market then a commercial company would usually know it as well as their own, and for anyone involved with marketing this would be a matter of professional competence. Yet ask most professional philosophers of the Academy to explain this competitor product and their lack of knowledge is likely to become immediately clear.

What does the competitor product offer? What would the philosophy of the writers of the ancient Upanishads, the Buddha, Lao Tsu, Al-Halaj, Rumi, Eckhart, de Cusa, the Gymnosophists, Druids, Advaitans and Nondualists be able to claim in its marketing brochure that the Academy cannot claim for its

own product? That it provides answers to questions and solutions to problems and has a strong and global customer base, a myriad of ecstatic customers and thirty centuries of positive customer-feedback including endorsements from countless well-known celebrities. That it has proven reliability, is unbreakable and remarkably cheap to teach while offering something for everyone from the dabbler to the professional expert and committed practitioner. Unlike the traditional 'Western' or northern European product - which accompanies and supports a religious world-view rejected by its competitor for having become as naïve and misleading as the philosophy that supports it – this is a product only very occasionally criticised by physicists, who rarely know anything about it, and that is often endorsed by them where it is studied.

Its brochure could, without demonstrably breaking the Trade Descriptions Act, claim that it offers an interpretation of quantum mechanics, an explanation for consciousness, a way of avoiding philosophical 'hard' problems and solving metaphysics, a 'hands-on' method for increasing happiness in life and reducing fear of death and overcoming it, an ethical scheme that is forgiving, clearly-defined and practical at all times and a description of reality that reaches beyond time and space to enshrine love and compassion as cosmic principles. It offers a vast multi-lingual literature characterised by its rigour, elegance, beauty, simplicity, helpfulness, reliability, humour and honest motivation.

Such a competitor might seem a dangerous threat. Even if it we assume it is unable to deliver on all its claims it is able to present itself as a very attractive product, and that it has maintained these claims over centuries indicates that it would be difficult to prove it does not deliver. Yet, as the cliché goes, every threat is an opportunity. This competitor has captured a large market share and its student numbers continue to rise. To compete for these students the company would only need to jump on the bandwagon and copy, steal or improve on its competitor's product. The work of establishing a market has been done, the entire theoretical edifice is in place and the blueprints for the product are in the public domain.

A consultant in this situation would be bound to advise the company to examine this competitor product in great detail. A formal analysis of strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats may be anticipated to conclude that the main and urgent priority for the marketing department should be product research. Market research would be unnecessary since enough is known about what customers want. The research focus would have to be placed on backwards-engineering this competitor product in order to steal its best features and cash-in on its appealing brand-image and global market. This research

would later inform product design and eventually, once the bugs are ironed out, the promotion and selling of a new and improved product, this last step now made cheap and easy by having a product that can openly claim to meet customer needs and wants.

If the company's in-house research into this competing product leads to the creation of a set of corporately-approved texts, interpretations, commentaries and other introductory teaching materials that can be trusted *within the company* as authoritative and which are capable of being comprehended by strictly 'scholastic' philosophy students at undergraduate level then this may be a highly profitable product that could be offered by most existing philosophy departments. As a wildly different product from the traditional fare it would attract attention and might even prove popular with many of the competitor's existing customers as a way of studying the theory behind their practice.

The marketing brochure might now look too good to be true. A large number of people young and old may be expected to want to come to university to learn about this astonishing description of the world; how it would connect-up with physics, consciousness studies, psychology, theology and other areas of knowledge; what it would mean for their daily lives; how it would explain origins, freewill, matter, mind and so forth; what it predicts will happen to us when we die and what may have happened to our deceased loved ones; what makes this philosophy unfalsifiable such that it can safely be called 'Perennial' not only for its ancient origins but as a hostage to fortune. There might be queues around the block.

This world-view is easy to sell for its mysteriousness and weirdness; for its magical and seemingly endless literature; for its claim that life and death may be transcended; for its air of peace and tranquillity; for its opposition to the status quo; for its immediate connection with hearts and minds; for its encouragement of joy and happiness and for its claim that within each of us the universe is enfolded. Whatever else it is this competitor philosophy is not boring, unengaging or unchallenging. Whether it is true would be another matter but students should not be allowed to pass their first year exams unable to make a well-informed judgement, for this would be the USP of the course and what makes it a new product. And then, the cherry on the cake, the practices normally associated with a theoretical study of this philosophy are reported to be assisted in the early stages by the ingestion of mind-altering substances. There seems to be no downside, a perfect product for a healthy student market.

At under-graduate level a scholastic approach to teaching the Perennial philosophy would only be practical if it remains almost entirely theoretical. In this case it need not be a replacement for existing courses but just an extension, an acknowledgement that there is more to philosophy than in the past has usually been taught to students. Later development might extend courses into post-graduate studies but there would be a limit to the level at which a university can provide advanced study. At a post-graduate level one would expect students to be doing practical work on their own or guided by an expert teacher off-campus in addition to their theoretical studies and scholarly research. If an undergraduate course covers the theory properly then subsequent courses would have to be almost entirely practical in order to be worth taking.

Driven by a new and resolute marketing focus there would begin a natural and ongoing process of improving the explanation of the Perennial Philosophy taught to undergraduates, and this didactic goal could provide a focus for post-graduate research. Hesse's evolutionary 'Glass Bead Game' might provide a model for this communal enterprise. At present there is much confusion and nothing like a consensus on how to translate and convey the teachings of the Perennial philosophy into the language and concepts used by the Academy or even on whether it would be a good idea to do so, but the Academy itself has all the skills and resources required to change this situation. It has the motivation of growing criticism, falling sales and an increasing rate of professional redundancies.

University philosophy has no global marketing department or ability to act in a directed way, so a list of marketing recommendations would be useless to it. One practical and probably uncontentious approach, and perhaps as much as would be necessary in the long-term to turn the situation around, would be the establishment of a grant-awarding body charged with encouraging and promoting the study of the philosophy of the Upanishads and its equivalents with a strong emphasis on the clarification and reliable communication of this doctrine within an academic context. This would be a process of getting to know the enemy and its product, the first step towards designing a new product that may be expected to attract punters at little cost for a long time to come. This would not be a duplication of existing work but a shot in the arm for an area of research and literature that is currently under-motivated and under-populated and could be much improved by some targeted encouragement. The competitor's product is so poorly known at present that most teaching professionals would struggle to say what is wrong with it, and this alone might be sufficient justification for the investment. It would also be doing a service for philosophers everywhere.

Given the promises that this strategy would allow the department to make to prospective students it is predictable that demand will be high if the ‘nondual’ philosophy of the mystical traditions were to be offered as an area of undergraduate study, but prior to research it should not be assumed it is perfect and cannot be improved. Perhaps it will be found that it cannot deliver on its marketing claims. Until this is determined there is the risk of introducing a new product only to see it immediately made redundant by an even better one. It would be important, therefore, that throughout the product design process the mission statement for the company remains the same as ever. The pursuit of a rational intellectual understanding of the universe, consciousness, time, origins, knowledge, God, ethics and so forth that can confidently and effectively be communicated to students will not be over until there is a professional consensus that it is over. Perhaps the answers and explanations given in the Upanishadic tradition can be shown to be incorrect and the company’s research process eventually destroys the credibility of its competitor. In marketing terms this would be a fabulous outcome and well worth the time and effort, although not as profitable as seeing it survive the testing and allow the creation of a more attractive product to sell.

A necessary first step would be to reach a corporate consensus on what this other philosophy actually is, what it claims and how it explains things. This must be presented in an accessible language appropriate for use within the Academy. This would require the creation of an officially approved and trustworthy body of literature and its dissemination internally. A philosophical view can be taught without making a commitment to its truth or falsity, but if front-line staff are going to be able to tell customers about a great new product then they will have to know it is one and must be able to explain what makes it so.

Curriculum changes need not be considered. If these come about they should be self-motivating evolutionary changes that individual departments or philosophers choose voluntarily to make when given the opportunity. The first corporate-wide issue to be addressed would be the current lack of consensus as to what the competitor is selling, how to interpret its ambiguous and self-contradictory language and how it solves metaphysical problems and so forth. Within the Academy at this time there is no agreement on how to interpret or translate the ‘nondual’ or neutral philosophy of the Buddha, Lao Tzu and their peers and barely even a recognition that it is an identifiable doctrine open to analysis, testing and comparison with the alternatives. To many Academy members it must appear that this other philosophical tradition is a myriad of different voices and nothing at all like a choir. This uncertainty about the

competitor's product would have to be cleared up before it can be offered as a new attraction. The Academy has spent many years, (Heidegger would say twenty centuries, for he blamed the early Greeks after Socrates for abandoning the idea of unity on which depends the Perennial philosophy) trying to undermine the credibility of its competitor and internally seems to have been entirely successful. Ever since Plato corporate Western religion and philosophy have worked hand in hand in this endeavour, and if the Academy is to now to endorse this product as worthy of serious study then for the sake of its own credibility it will have to be able to show that there are good reasons for this change of tune.

Such an approach might seem to prioritise sales over philosophical progress but the two goals are mutually self-supporting, as they must be for an effective marketing approach. As long as the company retains a marketing focus it will be an honest search for the best possible product to offer to its customers and thus an honest search for Wisdom, Knowledge and Truth. It cannot be predicted how or whether the competing product can be improved and so a new field of research and teaching practice will be opened up. If it turns to have terminal flaws then nothing has been lost and much gained. The Academy will then be able to offer courses explaining what is wrong with the Perennial philosophy and such a course ought to be popular and is surely long overdue. If no flaws are discovered then it would not be a mere business decision to offer courses to students but a professional duty.

The recommendation of this report, which is tongue-in-cheek but addresses a serious issue, is the establishment of a grant-awarding body supporting work that fosters within the profession a better theoretical understanding of metaphysics and the philosophy of the Upanishads, with the long-term goal of creating an internally-approved canon of explanatory literature that can be trusted by undergraduate students and their teachers to be well-informed and safe to include on their reading-lists, one that is comprehensive and deals with all the necessary philosophical issues whilst also making the appropriate connections to scientific consciousness studies, physics, evolutionary biology, psychology and so forth and which, crucially, is designed for students who have not yet chosen to undertake experimental work in the mountains of Tibet but just want to study philosophy as a theoretical problem.

This will not be a reproduction of the existing literature, which for the most part is targeted at practitioners rather than philosophers and in this respect may already be more extensive than it needs to be. Rather, it will be a reliable and clear translation and interpretation of that literature into an appropriate language

that does not depend on non-ordinary experience (or mind altering substances!) for comprehension at the required level. Much authoritative and useful literature already exists but identifying and organising it requires expertise, and for scholars of philosophy there are still significant gaps.

A rigorous corporate approach to the creation of teaching material would capitalise on the existing analytical and communication strengths of the company and create a well-defined new subject for study. If the marketing claims of its competitor prove to be genuine or cannot be falsified and its product can be honestly promoted and sold, then its introduction into the curriculum will make possible a discipline that cannot be criticised by physicists, university administrators, students or anyone else for its irrelevance, ineffectiveness or, one would anticipate, its unprofitability.
