Useless, Useful Theoretical Philosophy

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The word "philosophy" comes from the Greek language and literally means "love of wisdom." However, "wisdom" here does not necessarily mean primarily possessing a large amount of knowledge.

Socrates is considered to be a kind of founding figure of Western philosophy. According to the story, the Oracle of Delphi declared Socrates the wisest man on Earth. However, Socrates did not present himself as an expert in all fields, but on the contrary always strongly emphasized his own ignorance. He interpreted his own alleged wisdom to be in the fact that he understood his own ignorance so well.

The Australian-American philosopher John Norton has commented on philosophers and wisdom as follows: "There is no assurance that a lover of wisdom has any, just as an anglophile is not assured to have an Englishman locked in the basement."

Even for a philosopher, wisdom can therefore be a distant object of unhappy one-way love.

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Outsiders have variant, often less than truthful, ideas about what philosophy actually is.

The history of philosophy is its own valuable area of research, and it is more typical for philosophy than many empirical special sciences to have also a dialogue with its own history. However, philosophy is not—contrary to the popular image—only or even primarily about learning what some long-dead great thinker said. The object and goal of philosophy are also not profound-looking witty and catchy phrases that make popular motivational quotes or internet memes.

Already a couple of decades ago, I wrote the following in the introduction to my book *Humanities and Philosophy*:

> In everyday language, the word "philosophy" often means any opinions and views. It is frequently assumed that philosophy is a matter of more or less subjective taste and that everyone is relatively free to choose a view that pleases them among the existing philosophies. Philosophy as a discipline is then understood as a sort of supermarket of opinions, from which everyone can choose a viewpoint that pleases their taste. My own understanding of philosophy is very different. In philosophy, examinations are, of course, more general and its conclusions have more uncertainty than in the special sciences, but even in philosophy appropriate justifications and arguments can be presented for or against different points of view. An intellectually honest person should not accept any position on light grounds.

This still describes my own understanding of philosophy very well.

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In philosophy, a distinction is often made between theoretical philosophy and practical philosophy. The distinction can be traced back to Aristotle's categories of natural philosophy and moral philosophy. Theoretical philosophy typically includes at least metaphysics, epistemology, i.e., the theory of knowledge, and logic, as well as newer entrants such as the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mind, and the philosophy of science. The central subfields of practical philosophy, on the other hand, are ethics and social and political philosophy.

However, there is no absolute qualitative difference between them, but the different subfields of philosophy are related to each other in multiple ways. For example, metaethics, which has developed in the last few decades into its own important subfield in ethics, mainly uses the tools of theoretical philosophy, especially of the philosophy of language.

My own work in philosophy is, in any case, very clearly focused on theoretical philosophy. When I talk about philosophy in the following, my emphasis is accordingly often on theoretical philosophy in particular—though I by no means intend to belittle the value of practical philosophy.

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Businessman Yrjö Laakkonen, who owns a car dealership group, recently discussed in a newspaper interview the idea of donating money to the University of Eastern Finland. Laakkonen was at least not ready to make a donation without some kind of earmark. He declared that he himself would cut out, for example, philosophy and research training. The clear majority should be trained in "the proper professions," Laakkonen outlined.

Philosophy has also been discussed on the Internet discussion board Vauva.fi, known as a medium of people's deep-seated feelings. "Visitor" expressed as their view: "In my opinion, philosophy is completely useless chatter. It … actually just distorts the realm of thought. Fairy tales from start to finish."

Is the use of reason based on intellectual curiosity for its own sake, such as theoretical philosophy, really completely useless and pointless? It certainly is, if the matter is looked at, for example, only from the point of view of technical innovations that can be immediately commercialized or information that directly supports political decision-making. However, the benefit can be understood much more broadly. Of course, then it is also more difficult to assess precisely.

Scientific basic research is also, in the short term, useless. For example, the studies that culminated in Einstein's special and general relativity were considered in their own time completely useless theoretical frittering. They even involved in philosophical reflection in the form of thought experiments. However, a significant part of modern technology—for example, all electronics and nuclear technology and especially, for example, laser technology and GPS—is essentially based on the theory of relativity. Its countless significant applications were just not foreseeable in advance.

As a more recent example, one can mention how medicine was able to develop unforeseeably quickly vaccine against the coronavirus, which may have saved even millions of lives. This was essentially based on the basic research on the nature of messenger RNA that had already been done. At that time, there was no idea about the application that was realized for pathogens like the coronavirus. In the background, there was also more than two centuries of diverse basic research, on the basis of which the vaccine was quickly built.

However, my favorite example is the following: The ancient Greeks set out to thoroughly study conic sections in geometry. They had no use in the practical applications of geometry, but these were purely theoretical considerations. Almost two millennia later, however, modern astronomers such as Kepler ended up looking at the trajectories of bodies under the influence of gravity, for example planets, essentially using these conic sections. This, in turn, was of crucial importance for the development of modern physics as a whole. And of course, the latter has had a huge number of applications. Sometimes the journey from theoretical basic research to important application can indeed take time, and it can be completely impossible to predict in advance.

At the end of the 19th century, the prominent Austrian physicist Ludwig Boltzmann said: "Nothing is more practical than a good theory!"

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Just like in scientific basic research, in theoretical philosophy, a specific intended application and benefit is not the primary goal. The benefit is also very difficult to predict.

Of the ancient philosophers, Aristotle in particular sought to build a theory of logical reasoning. His account remained almost unchanged as the dominant theory of logic for more than two millennia.

In the 1870s, the German philosopher Gottlob Frege critically reflected on the details of Kant's theory of knowledge. This led him to develop, as an aid to his ideas, the whole of modern formal logic, which replaced Aristotle's theory.

Based on that, the English polymath Alan Turing ended up in the 1930s in his own reflections on the philosophy of mathematics to examine the decidability of the logic developed by Frege and the definition of the entire concept of decidability. As part of that, he developed a philosophical thought experiment with a universal decision machine that can be given different programs and executes them mechanically.

The slightly later development of concrete computers was essentially based on this purely theoretical philosophical background work of Frege and Turing. Few planned applied research projects are as useful as what their theoretical philosophical musings ultimately turned out to be. It is hard to even imagine today's world without information technology.

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Plato and Aristotle founded their own schools of philosophy: Plato's Academy and the Lykeion, founded by Aristotle after studying for a long time in the former (from which our word "lyceum" comes). They have been the root of the whole idea of university and have often been considered the first universities. They have grown into a worldwide network of universities.

For a long time, no sharp distinction was made between philosophy and science. Natural science—or natural philosophy, as it was called for a long time even in modern times—was understood as a part of philosophy. Many special sciences, from physics to psychology, have indeed been born within philosophy; they have become independent as their own disciplines only later, when their characteristic theories and methods became established.

Philosophy can also have important contributions to an independent discipline. For example: The approach called behaviorism had a strong influence on the development of psychology as an independent scientific discipline. But while it certainly advanced psychology in its time, it was also a harmfully limiting doctrine. Among other things, the biting criticism of it by philosophers in the 1950s had a central effect on its rejection, which in turn enabled progress of psychology. This also had its own important role for the development of the research fields of cognitive science and artificial intelligence.

If we look at philosophy as having given us universities, science, and even computers, we can ask whether anything has been more useful to humankind than philosophy.

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Even within philosophy, it is very difficult to predict and plan the philosophical significance and effectiveness of research.

The American philosopher Saul Kripke, who died in 2022, is known, at least in academic philosophy, as one of the most prominent philosophers of our time.

In his most important studies in the 1960s, Kripke started from a seemingly dry and boring and, at first glance, somewhat marginal theoretical topic in the philosophy of language: the reference of proper names. He also studied modal logic, which deals with the concepts of necessity and possibility. However, through a careful analysis of these themes, he identified the problematic nature of certain background assumptions that were widely prevalent in philosophy. In the end, Kripke's conclusions had a shocking effect on metaphysics, epistemology, the philosophy of language, and the philosophy of mind, and their multiple effects can be seen even in ethics and social and political philosophy. A real revolution in philosophy resulted from a research topic that seemed insignificant in the eyes of many.

If Kripke's research had been evaluated in the early stages by multidisciplinary evaluation panels that are fashionable in science policy today, it would undoubtedly have been judged as uninteresting and unimportant, and at least it would not have been funded.

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But what exactly is philosophy? What does it do? The talk about "love of wisdom" sounds lofty, but it still doesn't say much.

In contemporary philosophy, there have been influential radical views on the essence of philosophy. For example, the powerful figure of the so-called linguistic turn in philosophy, Ludwig Wittgenstein, proposed that philosophy does not present any theories or statements that are true or false. According to him, philosophy is instead a clarifying activity; philosophical problems arise from linguistic confusions, and it is the task of philosophy to clarify them. There would thus be an unbridgeable qualitative gap between philosophy and science.

I don't think such a stark view of philosophy is sustainable. It doesn't really match the facts.

In my opinion, a better and truer picture of philosophy is given, for example, by the influential American philosopher Willard van Orman Quine. According to him, common sense, science, and philosophy form a seamless web of knowledge—a continuum where the differences are gradual. According to this picture, philosophy does not differ in essence and quality from science.

A general but, in the opinion of quite a few, good characterization of philosophy was presented by another important contemporary American philosopher, Wilfrid Sellars. He wrote: "The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term."

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The history of philosophy is glorious, but a skeptic might still ask whether philosophy is needed for anything today. Can't developed special sciences better answer many questions today?

However, it is a fact of life that both scientists, opinion influencers, and "ordinary people" still seem to be naturally driven to constantly think about various philosophical questions and also to present their own answers to them. They are typically not the domain of any single special science, nor can they be answered with their methods.

If answering philosophical questions is not done well, it is probably done anyway poorly. Many simple arguments and black-and-white answers to such questions that come easily to mind have already been found to be untenable within systematically practiced philosophy. Philosophical expertise helps, among other things, to avoid making the same mistakes over and over again. That is why it is in our common interest to keep it alive, renew and develop it.

If philosophy is not done well, it will almost certainly be done poorly. For example, in America, Ayn Rand in the last half of the last century, and Jordan Peterson in the recent years, have become hugely popular philosophical thinkers. Their philosophical declarations are not only grandiose but also amateurishly rough and questionable. Even so, they have influenced many, including decision-makers. An even darker example is

the extreme nationalist philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, known in Russia as "Putin's brains."

Populists and hatemongers repeatedly make arguments that are philosophical in nature, albeit of a low quality. A bad philosophy can have significant negative effects on the lives of millions of people. It can even incite genocide.

Clearly, it is important to cultivate a better philosophy as a counterforce to all the bad philosophy that seems to emerge as if by nature again and again.

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There have been many views on the task and nature of philosophy, but it is a historical fact that there has not been any precise boundary and sharp qualitative difference between the different sciences and philosophy:

In addition to observational knowledge, various fields of science have theories of different levels. As we go to a more and more general and abstract level, they slowly start to become more and more philosophical. At the same time, problems may arise that are rather philosophical. When solving such problems, the scholars of the special science in question are no longer always the best experts, but philosophical competence specifically may be needed.

For example, due to the philosophical questions generated by biology, the philosophy of biology has developed in recent decades into an important subfield of the philosophy of science. It both uses philosophy in the direction of biology and influences philosophy by bringing new perspectives to it.

In the construction of a scientific worldview, various questions also arise about the relationships and nature of the parts of reality studied by different disciplines and the various theories about them; coordinating these is not always frictionless. No single scientific discipline or the sum of them can answer such questions. They are essentially philosophical.

Philosophy is, at least in part, research done by analyzing, reasoning, and arguing about the more general questions that arise from such different sciences and the relationships between them, for which there is, at least for now, no answer established by the research of one discipline and the broad consensus of researchers. Philosophy is therefore inherently more uncertain than established scientific knowledge. However, that doesn't mean it's just a matter of taste. Better or worse arguments can be presented for and against different philosophical positions.

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We don't know what philosophy's next own "conic section" or "computer" could be, or where the next revolution within philosophy will start.

That is why it is best to just let philosophy develop freely, like scientific basic research, based on its own internal criteria of relevance—of course, without losing contact with the outside world.

In order to find the right way, you often have to carefully knock around all the strange back streets—even though many may turn out to be dead ends. It is essential to keep philosophy alive. To modify Bolzmann's slogan: nothing is more useful than a good theory.

Theoretical philosophy can therefore be most useful if you are ready to look at the matter more broadly and without prejudices. However, this should not be understood as suggesting that philosophical thinking should be practiced and supported primarily because it has, or at least can have, some concrete benefit.

Philosophical thinking is very natural and characteristic of us humans. It is, among other things, one of the things that make us human and, so to speak, life worth living. Keeping philosophy alive is also keeping humanity alive.