

The unexamined philosophy is not worth doing: An introduction to *New Directions in Metaphilosophy*

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Recently there has been an increasing interest in metaphilosophy. The aim of philosophy has been examined, and the development of philosophy has been scrutinised. With the development of new approaches and methods, new problems arise. This paper introduces a collection that revisits some of the metaphilosophical issues, including philosophical progress and the aim of philosophy. The collection sheds new light on some old approaches, such as naturalism and ordinary language philosophy. It also explores new philosophical methods (such as digital philosophy of science, conceptual engineering, and the practice-based approach to logic) and their prospects.

KEYWORDS

metaphilosophy, philosophical methodology, philosophical methods

ὁ δὲ ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ (... and that the unexamined life is not worth living).
—Plato, *Apology*, 38a5–6

1 | INTRODUCTION

One of the most distinctive features of philosophy is self-reflection. Philosophers are not only concerned with metaphysical, epistemological, conceptual, ethical, and aesthetic issues of things around us, they also pay serious attention to the nature, value, methods, and development of philosophy itself. This kind of study of philosophy is often called

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metaphilosophy.¹ For the past two decades, there has been an increasing interest in metaphilosophical issues. The aim of philosophy has been examined. For example, Paul Horwich (2012) develops a Wittgensteinian approach to criticising the traditional conception of theoretical philosophy (or in his term “T-Philosophy”) with the aim of construction and defence of important philosophical theories, while Helen Beebe argues that the view that philosophy aims at knowledge should be abandoned and replaced with a more modest aim: that of finding “equilibria” that “can withstand examination” (2018, 1). The development of philosophy has also been scrutinised. In particular, whether philosophy makes progress has been widely debated (e.g., Williamson 2006; Dietrich 2011; Chalmers 2015; Stoljar 2017). In addition, new problems arise with the development of new approaches and methods. Should analytic metaphysics be replaced by naturalised metaphysics (Ladyman et al. 2007)? What is the prospect of digital philosophy of science (Pence and Ramsey 2018)? Is conceptual engineering a worthwhile philosophical method (Deutsch forthcoming)? The present collection of essays revisits some of these metaphilosophical debates and examines and explores new philosophical methods and their prospects.

2 | DEFENDING PHILOSOPHY

The value of philosophy as an academic discipline or a way of inquiry has been persistently challenged in history, from ancient Greece to today. A recent example is that a well-known Cambridge physicist publicly declared: “Philosophy is dead.” For him, “philosophers have not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly, physics. Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge” (Hawking and Mlodinow 2010, 5). Such a naïve argument against philosophy is not difficult to demolish, from a philosopher’s point of view. That said, there are nonetheless some serious objections to philosophy.

A persistent objection to philosophy focuses on one of its central branches: metaphysics. Metaphysics has faced serious challenges throughout its history. Rudolf Carnap (1931), for example, famously argued that statements of metaphysics are meaningless and thus metaphysics should be eliminated. In this collection, Timothy Williamson in “Metametaphysics and Semantics” defends metaphysics against a challenge from intensional semantics, which can be traced back to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The problem, in a nutshell, is that metaphysical claims are either trivially true or trivially false, in so far as metaphysics is concerned with the necessary nature and structure of reality. If this is so, it seems incompatible with the stated aim of metaphysics—to find out how the world is. Williamson argues that neither the attempt to solve Wittgenstein’s problem by reinterpreting non-contingent claims as contingent metalinguistic claims nor the attempt to solve Wittgenstein’s problem by invoking Fregean semantics works. He points out that the nature of the problem is about necessarily equivalent propositions rather than necessary or impossible propositions. Thus, Williamson suggests that in order to solve the problem, we must recognise that the form of our representations plays an ineliminable cognitive role that is reducible to their content.

Another typical objection to philosophy arises from a widespread view that philosophy makes little progress. Sceptics often contrast philosophy with science. Few would doubt that science has in general been progressing for the past few centuries, though it is still under debate

¹It is also sometimes called “philosophy of philosophy” (Williamson 2007), “philosophical methods” (Daly 2015), and “philosophical methodology” (D’Oro and Overgaard 2017). It should be noted that these terminological variances to some extent reflect the different views on the nature of metaphilosophical inquiries. For example, Williamson rejects the word “metaphilosophy,” because he contends that “the investigation of philosophical methodology cannot and should not be philosophically neutral” (2007, 5).

whether scientific progress should be characterised as accumulation of knowledge (Bird 2007), approximation of truth (Niiniluoto 2014), increased usefulness of practice (Shan 2019), or better understanding (Dellsén 2021). By contrast, it is not an easy task to defend the view that philosophy has progressed greatly. To many, the significance and value of philosophy is undermined if little progress in philosophy has been made in history. In “Philosophy Doesn’t Need a Concept of Progress,” I defend philosophy by revisiting the notion of philosophical progress. First, I identify two criteria of an ideal concept of philosophical progress: “philosophical” progress should be a comparative notion and a useful tool to help us have a good understanding of the history of philosophy. I then argue that our accounts of philosophical progress fail to provide such an ideal concept. Furthermore, I argue that not only do we not have a good concept of philosophical progress, we do not need a concept of philosophical progress. That said, I highlight that the elimination of the concept of philosophical progress does not undermine the significance or value of philosophy. I maintain that there have been many philosophical successes in history. Accordingly, I argue that an important task for philosophers is to develop a good account of philosophical success.

In “T-Philosophy,” Chris Daly addresses an objection to the aim of philosophy by arguing against Horwich’s criticism of T-Philosophy. Following the late Wittgenstein, Horwich identifies four defective ingredients of T-Philosophy: (1) the illusion that theoretical progress can be made by disambiguating what appear to be unified concepts; (2) irrational distortions that arise from transferring considerations of simplicity from science to philosophy; (3) the absence of epistemic constraints needed to deliver knowledge (of theoretical philosophy); and (4) the questionable value of believing philosophical theories (Horwich 2012, 34–35). In “T-Philosophy,” Daly argues that these claims are ill grounded. He also critically examines, as a case study, Horwich’s contention that the problem of our knowledge of numbers can be dissolved on the grounds that the problem is based on a misguided analogy with our knowledge of physical objects. Daly concludes that T-Philosophy (or the traditional conception of philosophy as a theoretical enterprise) is viable.

3 | HOW TO DO PHILOSOPHY

Philosophical methods have been another focus of metaphilosophy. Since the first half of the twentieth century, there has been a tendency to ally philosophy more closely with science. For example, W. V. Quine famously argues that epistemology should be naturalised in the way that it is “contained in natural science, as a chapter of psychology” (1969, 83). Recently there have also been various attempts to naturalise metaphysics. Although there is a consensus that naturalised metaphysics differs from traditional analytic metaphysics in its scientific input, it is far from clear in what way science informs metaphysical inquiry (e.g., Ney 2012; Chakravartty 2013; Morganti and Tahko 2017). In “On the Continuity of Metaphysics with Science: Some Scepticism and Some Suggestions,” Jack Ritchie identifies three broad (possibly overlapping) ways of naturalising metaphysics: (1) metaphysics and science use the same methods; (2) metaphysics is an attempt to synthesise theories of the natural sciences and common-sense knowledge; and (3) fundamental physics provides the best way to purpose metaphysics. Ritchie argues that a reflective metaphysician ought to reject all these three ways of doing naturalized metaphysics if metaphysics is regarded as a truth-seeking enterprise. He argues for a call to reconstruct the aim of metaphysics. By our doing so, all three ways of naturalised metaphysics can be worthwhile for the purpose of exploring scientific theories, articulating the connections between concepts, or metaphor mongering.

Ordinary language, the once popular method that uses features of certain words in ordinary or non-philosophical contexts as an aid to doing philosophy, is no longer fashionable. But in “In Defence of Ordinary Language Philosophy,” Herman Cappelen and Matthew McKeever

argue that ordinary concepts are central to much of philosophy. They respond to some anti-ordinary language arguments put forward by David Chalmers and contrast their view with Williamson's instrumentalist view on ordinary language. Cappelen and McKeever conclude that ordinary language is not only a tool for seeing the world better but also determines what it is we look at and tells us things about what we look at.

Under the influence of digital humanities, a digital approach to the philosophy of science has recently been developed (Pence and Ramsey 2018; Lean, Rivelli, and Pence forthcoming). Typically, it is argued that digital methods can be used for testing philosophical hypotheses and discovering new philosophical hypotheses. There is, however, an obvious tension between these two. One cannot simultaneously use the same data to propose a hypothesis and test the same hypothesis. In "Testing and Discovery: Responding to Challenges to Digital Philosophy of Science," Charles Pence tries to resolve this tension. He argues that if we focus exclusively either on hypothesis formation or on hypothesis testing, then we undermine some of the real power of digital philosophy. Instead, Pence argues for a more nuanced way to keep hold of the advantages of both hypothesis testing and hypothesis discovery. Illustrated by two interdisciplinary case studies, his argument is that we should reject the binary view of mutually exclusive testing and discovery and should instead investigate the relationship between our background data or philosophical views and the empirical generalizations that we might draw from the data. Finally, Pence identifies three challenges for philosophers and considers avenues for future work that will allow us to better justify our use of these methods.

Conceptual engineering is another new method, and it has attracted much recent attention in philosophy. Nevertheless, there are also doubts about the significance of conceptual engineering; some argue that it is unjustified that conceptual engineering is getting so much attention. In "Attentional Progress by Conceptual Engineering," however, Eve Kitsik defends conceptual engineering as a worthwhile philosophical method. She argues that conceptual engineering can contribute to philosophical progress by shifting philosophers' attention to more important questions or by making salient the phenomena that are relevant for addressing the old umbrella philosophical questions.

Inspired by the practice turn in the philosophy of science, Ben Martin argues in "The Philosophy of Logical Practice" for the need to embrace a new practice-based approach to the epistemology of logic, which aims to rectify the failures of past accounts. According to this approach, we should begin by looking in detail at the actual practice of logicians and then extract methodological principles from this practice, gradually building up a detailed account of logic's epistemology. Martin argues that there are two main benefits of his philosophy of logical practice: making progress on established questions and exploring new fruitful areas. He concludes that philosophers of logic ought to recognise the significance of building this understanding of the field of logicians' actual practice.

In "One Philosopher's Modus Ponens Is Another's Modus Tollens: Pantomemes and Nisowir," Jon Williamson revisits two widely used rules of inferences: *modus ponens* and *modus tollens*. He begins with introducing a serious problem for argumentation: one person's *modus ponens* is often another's *modus tollens*. He argues that appeals to intuition, evidence, or truth fail to solve such a problem. Williamson develops two new strategies: an appeal to normal informal standards of what is reasonable and an argument by interpretation. The method of explication features prominently in both strategies. By illustrating the problem and the two strategies with examples of arguments in formal epistemology, Williamson suggests that at least one of the strategies can help to defend against philosophical scepticism by shifting the burden of proof to the sceptic.

In "Linking Perspectives: A Role for Poetry in Philosophical Inquiry," Karen Simecek explores a new way of doing philosophy. She argues that reading lyric poetry can play a substantive role in philosophy by helping the philosopher understand how to forge connections

with the perspectives of others. Simecek indicates that the rejection of the thesis that poetry can play an important role in philosophical inquiry is based on a limited understanding of the practice of philosophy, which construes philosophy as merely a truth-seeking enterprise. Following Robert Nozick, David Lewis, and Helen Beebe, she argues for a broad conception of the aim of philosophy. Through her discussion of Lucretius's *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) and Robert Gray's "The Drift of Things," she shows how poetry cultivates the intellectual virtues essential to a philosophy that aims not at truth but at uncovering equilibria and collective understanding.

4 | DOING PHILOSOPHY

The ultimate aim of metaphilosophy is to help philosophers to do good philosophy rather than bad philosophy. Thus, following my practical spirit (Shan 2020, 5), I contend that the best way to defend philosophy is not only to show how to do good philosophy methodologically but also to do it in practice. Accordingly, in metaphilosophy, not only should we examine philosophy from a general methodological point of view, we should also examine the use of philosophical methods in concrete cases. Two essays in this section are examples of such an approach.

In "Grounding Interventionism: Conceptual and Epistemological Challenges," Amanda Bryant examines the prospect of importing conceptual and formal resources of causal interventionism into the metaphysics of grounding. Bryant critically examines several formulations of grounding interventionism. She argues that the available epistemological options for causal interventionism and grounding interventionism are insufficiently powerful, and so concludes that grounding interventionism requires firmer epistemological foundations.

In "Impossible Worlds and the Safety of Philosophical Beliefs," Zack Garrett and Zachariah Wrublewski examine the modal conditions of knowledge. They identify a serious problem regarding beliefs that are necessarily true: if necessary truths are truth in all possible worlds, then such beliefs can be safe even when the bases for the beliefs are epistemically problematic. Garrett and Wrublewski argue that incorporating impossible worlds into the evaluation of beliefs solves the problem. They also highlight an implication of making reference to impossible worlds: that some philosophical beliefs are unsafe. That said, they still maintain that philosophical progress (in terms of the accumulation of safe beliefs or the achievement of reflective equilibrium) is possible.

5 | SUMMARY

In sum, this collection consists of three parts. The essays in the first part defend the significance and value of philosophy. In my essay, I suggest that the value of philosophy does not have to be assessed in terms of progress. Williamson defends metaphysics against a challenge from semantic intensionalism. Daly argues against Horwich's criticisms of T-Philosophy and defends the view that philosophy can devise theories that unify and explain puzzling phenomena. The essays in the second part examine and explore a variety of philosophical methods: naturalistic metaphysics, ordinary language philosophy, digital philosophy of science, conceptual engineering, the practice-based approach to logic, and the role of poetry in philosophical inquiries. The essays in the third part examine two particular approaches to the issues of grounding and the safety of philosophical beliefs, respectively. These essays thus shed new light on some important metaphilosophical issues. It is clear, however, that the topics covered in this collection are just the tip of the iceberg in the realm of metaphilosophy. Much more work is left to be done.

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