What Philosophy Can Do
Gary Gutting
New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015, hardcover, 320 pages, $27.95 (USD),
ISBN: 978-0-393-24227-0

If Gutting's *What Philosophy Can Do* feels a bit didactic at times, that's because it's supposed to be. As a work of public philosophy, it seeks not only to explain what philosophy is, but also to demonstrate what philosophy can do for society—i.e., why it is important for people other than academic philosophers. The fundamental question that animates the book is one that any undergraduate philosophy major should wrestle with: what is philosophy and what is its significance not only historically, but also for our society today? Ultimately Gutting's book is a work of metaphilosophy. The book is divided into ten chapters, nine of which consider various polarizing issues that exist within society (political disagreement, the nature and limits of science, the nature of religion and of its relationship with science, the nature capitalism and its relationship with work and education, the nature of art, and the moral permissibility of abortion) and the last of which articulates the metaphilosophy that has animated Gutting's discussion of the first-order issues in the first nine chapters. As Gutting notes in the introduction, the book itself derives from a number of shorter pieces he has written for the *New York Times*' philosophy blog, The Stone.

Philosophy has not been without its detractors, many of which, in recent years, have been scientists of some public notoriety (Hawking, deGrasse Tyson, Krauss, Harris, etc.). One way of articulating Gutting's metaphilosophy is by seeing the mistaken assumption that many of these criticisms of philosophy share. That mistaken assumption is that the goal of philosophy is to come up with definitive, agreed-upon answers to perennial philosophical questions (e.g., questions about the soul, free will, justice, morality, etc.). Indeed, if the goal of the philosophical enterprise really were to come such a body of knowledge, we should agree with the detractors that philosophy hasn't much to show for itself. But this would be to hold philosophy to the wrong standard, according to Gutting. It is one of Gutting's central contentions that there are some claims that are our starting points and that cannot (and need not) be supported by rational argument. He calls these unsupported axioms "convictions" (p. 16). Since people can plausibly start with different convictions, the positions that can rationally be defended will be plural, not singular. That doesn't mean that anything goes—far from it. Rather, it means that the goal of philosophy isn't to find the One Right Answer, but instead to articulate the different possible positions flowing from various different sets of convictions ("pictures") (p. 18). Gutting calls this articulation of one's convictions "intellectual maintenance" and claims that it prototypically consists of two parts: responding to objections to our convictions and clarifying what our convictions entail and what other convictions they're consistent/inconsistent with (p. 258). In a pluralistic society in which there are many different sets of convictions, intellectual maintenance is important because it is one means by which we maintain our identity (p. 267). One might wish that

Gutting would make this line of reasoning a bit more explicit, but as I see it the basic idea is that one's deeply held beliefs and values (convictions) are central to one's identity, thus being able to maintain these beliefs and values is crucial for maintaining our identities. But philosophical thinking is the means by which we maintain these beliefs—i.e., articulate their consistency and defend them against attack.

If the goal of philosophy is the articulation of the *relationship between* ideas rather than of a set of true, agreed-upon categorical statements regarding perennial philosophical questions, then those who criticize philosophy for failing attain the latter are attacking a straw man. But according to Gutting, this project of articulating relationships between ideas "is more than a series of disparate interventions to help with isolated intellectual problems" (p. 259). There is a way we can bring unity to modern disagreements between mutually inconsistent views of the world. Gutting uses Wilfrid Sellars's distinction between the "manifest image" and the "scientific image" to explain this unity. Whereas the manifest image understands human beings from perspective according to which consciousness, perception, and thought are explanatorily basic, the scientific image understands human beings from a perspective according to which electrons and quarks, not human beings, are basic. Whereas an older tradition of philosophy concerned itself with articulating answers to questions from within the manifest image, the emergence the scientific image has raised a new question: what is the *relationship between* the manifest and scientific image of human beings? This new task of philosophy conforms to Gutting's view of philosophy as answering questions of relationships between ideas. Importantly, this isn't something that science itself can do. Consider, for example, free will. Neuroscientists are welcome to operationalize terms like "decision" and "autonomous action" in whichever way they like, but since these concepts are connected to our ordinary concepts, they can't simply claim that their experiments refute/support our ordinary concepts related to free will. In understanding how the scientist's empirical evidence (and associated operationalized concepts) relate to our ordinary concepts, we must have an account of the relationship between our ordinary (manifest image) concepts and the scientific ones. And this isn't itself a scientific issue. Rather, it requires a more "meta-" discipline that considers the relationships between ideas, and that discipline is philosophy. In general, "once science takes on ideas that have deep and complex roots in our manifest-image thinking…then the resources of philosophy reflection on these concepts becomes relevant" (p. 264). This new (i.e., since the emergence of science) project of philosophy thus involves articulating that scientific and manifest images in addition to "constructing the best combined vision of the two images, resulting in a complete picture of what it means to be a human being in a scientific world" (p. 267).

Gutting's book tries to walk a line between a textbook and an original work. This is tough to do, but I think he does it reasonably well. As I see it, the best use of this text would be in a senior capstone course in philosophy, although some of the chapters could be used to supplement topics in numerous different bread-and-

butter type philosophy courses. In the rest of this review, I'll briefly consider some of first-order issues that constitute the bulk of the book. I'll be specifically concerned to highlight issues that relate to his metaphilosophy or that I think would be interesting to discuss in an undergraduate philosophy course.

In chapter 1, after laying out some basic concepts about the nature of argument and after arguing that unargued-for assumptions (convictions) are at the root of every argument, Gutting considers the epistemic problem of disagreement between epistemic peers. In the case of disagreement between me and an epistemic peer (roughly, a person who I see as equally well-informed an reasonable as I am), should I give up my belief (or at least back off the strength with which I hold it) or cling to it? The former seems like it would lead towards skepticism, but it would also perhaps put into jeopardy our personal integrity and identity. Insofar as what's at stake in a debate is a conviction, and if my deepest convictions are an integral part of my identity, then there are pragmatic reasons that I should stick to my convictions rather than abandon them when in disagreement with an epistemic peer (p. 26). However, when the issue is not one of personal integrity, I should perhaps be willing to back off my claim in the face of disagreements with epistemic peers (p. 28). Engaging in argument is valuable because it can actually bring self-understanding regarding what my convictions are and how deeply I hold them (p. 27).

In chapters 2-3, Gutting considers the nature and limits of science. In particular, he considers a number of things that science cannot by itself answer, including consciousness, morality, and the origin of the universe. In every case his conclusion is that "the scientific challenge to philosophy ultimately rests on philosophical assumptions" (p. 87). I think Gutting is right about this, but I wish he would have more clearly articulated the relationship between philosophy and science in these chapters. At one point, while considering the implication of brain science for the question of free will, Gutting says,

> "It may well be that philosophers will never arrive at a full understanding of what, in all possible circumstances, it means for choices to be free. But working with brain scientists, they may learn enough to decide whether the choices we make in ordinary circumstances are free. Science and philosophy together may reach a solution to the problem of free will that neither alone could achieve" (pp. 68-69).

Here, I think Gutting has missed an opportunity to apply (and perhaps misapplied) his metaphilosophy. It is not the task of philosophy to come with the one, correct view of "free will." Rather, it is the task of philosophy to articulate different conceptions of free will and then to trace out the conceptual connections between those conceptions, the science, and other convictions and commitments. It may well be that a libertarian account of causation (such as Chisholm's agent causation view) does not sit comfortably with our what the brain science seems to be indicating. If so, I would count this as a philosophy's contribution to our

understanding of free will, regardless of whether philosophers ever come to agree on "what, in all possible circumstances, it means for choices to be free."

In chapters 4-5 Gutting considers the existence of god and religious belief, criticizing the arguments of the so-called "new atheists" as too facile. (I agree with him on Dawkins and Harris, but not Dennett, who he lumps into this group, but never explicitly criticizes.) On the other side, while Gutting thinks that many of the theistic arguments are still standing in the "wake" of the new atheists, this pushes the theist towards ever more rarefied conceptions of a divine being. The god of the philosophers is not really anything close to the god of religious experience and practice. The problem of evil can be answered, but only by reference to god's omniscience, which raises the possibility that human beings themselves are simply a means in an end of god's plan, not the end itself. Once a greater good and god's omniscience is invoked, "we…have no way of knowing whether [human misery] is an unavoidable step in the soul-making process of a super-race whose eventual achievements would make our ultimate loss acceptable to God" (p. 124). Gutting defends a kind of religious agnosticism, according to which we can uphold the moral and aesthetic elements of religion while rejecting the metaphysical elements. Indeed, we should reject the metaphysical claims religions make since "do not meet ordinary (common-sense or scientific) standards for establishing a body of knowledge" (p. 135). Philosophers such as William Alston and Alvin Plantinga (whose work Gutting knows well) would disagree here. At the very least, this would be a point of departure for further philosophical dialogue.

In chapters 6-7 Gutting considers the nature of work, education, and happiness in a capitalistic society. Gutting sees capitalism not so much as bad, as dangerous (borrowing a nice turn of phrase from Foucault) (p. 163). The dangers are to individual happiness and freedom. Gutting's analysis of capitalism turns on the idea that we need to distinguish between what truly makes us happy and what we desire, which is a substantial ethical commitment (conviction?) on his part. True happiness requires fulfilling work, but also leisure and capitalism can threaten both. To neutralize this threat we must set up institutions that function as a check on the tendency of capitalism to push in the direction of a world in which we act to fulfill desires that we have acquired under the influence of advertising—a "WALL-E" world. Hence the need for education. Gutting puts forward a view of the function of education, and of college in particular, that would be interesting for undergraduates to discuss in a philosophy course. Very roughly, he claims that there is the sort of job training education of the sort that supports capitalism (which he sees as the role of primary and secondary education), on the one hand, and there is a kind of education that is not instrumentally tied to job training and skills, but to the promotion of "intellectual culture: a world of ideas dedicated to what we can know scientifically, understand humanistically, or express artistically" (p. 172). The point of college education is to be exposed to this intellectual culture, which the good professor does by "helping students have certain experiences: intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, and even moral experiences of reading, discussing, and writing about classic works," the point of

which is to “make students aware of new possibilities for intellectual and aesthetic fulfillment” (p. 184). The aesthetic value of thinking can act as a counterweight to the aesthetic value of consumption—a balance that is needed in order for people to achieve freedom and happiness a capitalistic society (p. 185).