

What Is to Be Done?

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[Final version published in *Topoi* 25 (2006), 129–131]

To: *Professor Ermanno Bencivenga, the Editor in Chief, Topoi*

Re: *Philosophy: What is to be done?*

Dear Ermanno,

Many thanks for inviting me to contribute an essay to the forthcoming issue of *Topoi* devoted to “Philosophy: What is to be done?”. Regrettably, I don’t think I have much to say on this topic, so I’m afraid I am going to have to decline. I hope you will accept my apologies. Indeed, the more I mull over it, the more I seem to find good reasons, besides my lack of imagination, why I could not in all honesty accept your invitation.

I take it that you are not interested in a purely descriptive or predictive assessment of the prospects of philosophy. If you were, I am sure your list of invitees would not have been restricted to a few insiders. We might learn a lot from what others have to say about our work and about its place in our society. In any event, on that score I would definitely have little to say to your readers. To me it just seems that philosophy is doing all right, and unless my sense of discernment is grossly mistaken, it also seems to me that things are going to be all right for a while. More than ever before, today philosophy includes a variety of methods and substantive positions that go beyond the spur of fashion and reach out beneficially into a number of neighboring disciplines. There are more philosophers and philosophy students today than ever before, more publications, more conferences, more opportunities for all of us to interact with the natural, the social, the cognitive scientists. Of course quantity is no measure of quality—and numbers may be misleading, too. But wouldn’t it be worse if the trend pointed in the opposite direction?

I often hear people complain: Where are the Platos, the Descartes, the Kants, the Quines of contemporary philosophy? I don’t know where they are, or even whether there are any, but to me that doesn’t mean much and I don’t

see any point in speculating. As with other fields of study, it might even be a good thing if it turned out that the practice of philosophy no longer needs to depend on the leadership of a few luminaries. Of course I agree with your Leopardi here: “Knowledge is not like wealth, which may be divided or amassed together and always comes to the same sum.” But this is not to say that genuine progress requires the inventiveness of a few individual minds. It seems to me that a good team or community working together may contribute truly ground-breaking ideas, too, in philosophy as elsewhere.

I often hear colleagues complain: We are just a bunch of professionals caught up in our academic rigmarole. We produce works of interest to nobody but one another, we are swamped with papers to finish, books to review, submissions to referee, tenure struggles, committees, reports, applications, deadlines of all sorts. I agree that there is a lot to feel frustrated about when it comes to our daily activities. But this is not something peculiar to philosophy, is it? This is what the life of scholars and scientists has become across the board and everybody has to come to terms with it, philosophers as much as historians or molecular biologists. If there is a problem with this state of affairs, it is a problem for everyone and I am sorry to say I don’t have any big ideas to offer towards a general assessment, at least not in the form of a journal article.

More importantly, I often hear people complain that philosophers have lost contact with the real world, their writings being disconcertingly remote from the grand old questions with which they are supposed to deal. “Philosophy ain’t what it used to be.” But then, again, has it ever been? Already Aristophanes accused Socrates of “hairsplitting twaddle”. And didn’t Justinian close the Academy because he thought that philosophy had turned into a vehicle of pedantic subtleties? Didn’t Roger Bacon feel disgust from the quibbling casuistries of the Schoolmen, criticizing the philosophical methods of his days throughout his *Compendium*? Didn’t the young Schelling protest that philosophy as a whole had become “a business of the learned”, Mill that it was falling into distastefulness and disrepute because “great events had ceased to inspire great ideas”, Nietzsche that philosophy had degenerated into a “boring academic pursuit”, Dewey that it would recover itself only when it ceased to be “a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers” and became “a method for dealing with the problems of men”? Surely philosophy and philosophers have always been in danger of getting lost in their own superfluousness, and yet they have managed to produce good things, sometimes as a reaction to, sometimes as an implementation of that very seeming super-

fluosness. The present-day picture doesn't strike me as any worse than before. On the contrary, it seems to me that the sort of technicalities to which many contemporary philosophers direct their efforts are no more abstract or abstruse than those that paved the way of our discipline throughout the centuries: it may not be clear to all why we need to philosophize about the meaning of proper names, the metaphysical status of finkish dispositions, or the possibility of martian pain, and it would be good if once in a while we took stock and described the forest that lies behind these individual trees, but neither was it clear to our ancestors why philosophers would worry about the reality of *haecceitates* or fight over the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin.

But never mind all this. As I said, I take it that you are not especially interested in the descriptive or predictive reading of your question. It is the normative reading that must interest you: not what is going on but what is to be done, literally. Also in this regard, however, I'm afraid that I would not have much to say.

On the one hand, it seems to me that on this reading, your question calls primarily for a practical answer—I would even say a political answer. Surely one thing that must be done is to guarantee the survival of our discipline in the face of the budget cuts that threaten higher education world-wide. These are times when support and recognition go hand in hand with material success, and it goes without saying that the humanities do not fare well on this score. However, precisely because of this, it seems to me that the issue goes far beyond philosophy and concerns the overall place of culture, education, and research in this society of ours. I guess I could write up something to inform your readers about how I feel concerning these important issues, as a citizen if not as a philosopher. But *à quoi bon*, Ermanno? I am sure the readers of *Topoi* already share the same sort of concerns. I am sure they all agree that philosophy, if not the humanities at large, are as important as molecular biology or computer science. So, if indeed something is to be done to secure the survival of our discipline along with all others—to make sure that the rather optimistic picture I mentioned above does not dissolve under the pressure of stubborn market-oriented policies—I honestly don't think I can play Lenin with your readers and I would rather feel compelled to try and get my hands dirty in real politics.

I understand you might disagree. Isn't it precisely in this connection that it matters a lot how philosophy is perceived outside our small and self-referential academic world? Isn't it precisely in view of such general concerns

that we should do everything possible to dispel the impression of unenlightening superfluousness that our work might suggest? If so, then we should try to figure out some good strategies together before embarking in any sort of political action on its behalf, and what better opportunity than a whole journal issue devoted to this task? I do welcome this opportunity. I just cannot imagine myself contributing anything more than a modest plea for intellectual honesty. Let's not play any games and let's not try to be smart when we are not; any other, more specific "strategy" would strike me as intolerable. For instance, one might think that we ought to make an effort to *justify* philosophy by re-directing our activities towards those problems that appear to be of greater practical concern, focusing on (say) applied ethics and political philosophy rather than metaphysics or epistemology. I would oppose that. As much as I yearn for a world in which questions of great practical concern are center stage, and in which everybody has equal opportunities to address such questions and contribute to their solutions, I think we would betray our profession if we reconfigured its boundaries on such grounds. It is precisely by exposing the unexpected ramifications of our ethical and political beliefs, including their metaphysical and epistemological ramifications, that philosophy can contribute something original, whatever it takes. (Sometimes it is also by drawing our attention to problems that are *not* of great practical concern—or not obviously so—that philosophy can contribute something truly destabilizing.) Alternatively, one might think that we ought to make an effort at least to *explain* what philosophy is about: by presenting it in more accessible fashion, by doing away with technicalities, by skipping the arguments and going straight to the conclusions. I would oppose that, too. As much as I yearn for a society in which everybody can enjoy the pleasure and the pain of philosophical practice, it seems to me that a good philosopher is not one who can simplify what is complex, but one who can uncover the dazzling, extraordinary complexity that hides behind the simple things of everyday life, the intricate space of possibilities that lies beyond the given. Sometimes we can do that with our students, and to the extent that they learn not to take anything for granted and to be intellectually adventurous, to that extent we feel that we have managed to convey the right message. Surely we don't want to adopt a different strategy when it comes to conveying the message to the rest of the world. We just have to do it. We just have to be good at our job.

So, insofar as the question, What is to be done?, calls for a political answer, I would have little to say besides the obvious. On the other hand, perhaps you are interested in a truly philosophical answer? Not what is to be

done *for* philosophy, but *in* philosophy? If so, then I would have to confess a certain embarrassment. For it seems to me that any such answer would be at odds with the general conception of philosophy that inspired *Topoi* throughout these years and that I deeply share—a conception of philosophy that disdains any ideology and abstains from any rigid guidelines, and that favors the possible over the necessary, the practice over the doctrine, the example over the commandment. Of course, philosophically I have my wishes. For example, I wish the linguistic turn were finally over. I wish we stopped doing metaphysics as though the character of reality could be read off our representations of it. I wish that research in logic freed itself from the system imprisonment that characterized its development over the last decades. I wish that my favorite views on a number of specific topics—that constitution is identity, that there is no worldly indeterminacy, that we are liable for what we do even if we couldn't do otherwise, and so on and so forth—were taken more seriously than their competitors. But these wishes are the sort of thing that inspire my daily practice as a philosopher. Part of my job, as I understand it, is precisely to try and get clear about such matters, sharing with others the reasons and arguments that I find most compelling, or the doubts and worries that I find most disturbing. The wish list as such means nothing and I am sure you agree that your readers would have no interest in it. More than that: I am sure you agree that drawing up a list of to-do's and not-to-do's would not be a good way to honor the "philosophy" of *Topoi*.

To put it differently, it seems to me that the question to answer philosophically is not: What is to be done? but rather: What can be done? And that's the sort of question that all of us address every day as we try to pursue our profession. I wish I could *say* what that involves. But as far as I am concerned, Ermanno, I am afraid that's one of those things that I can only hope to be able to show, and only very partly so.

With renewed apologies, and many thanks again for your understanding,

Achille