

The Fundamental Problem of Philosophy: Its Point

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ABSTRACT

The fundamental problem of philosophy is whether doing it has any point, since if it does not have any point, there is no reason to do it. It is suggested that the intrinsic point of doing philosophy is to establish a rational consensus about what the answers to its main questions are. But it seems that this cannot be accomplished because philosophical arguments are bound to be inconclusive. Still, philosophical research generates an increasing number of finer grained distinctions in terms of which we try to conceptualize reality, and this is a sort of progress. But if, as is likely, our arguments do not suffice to decide between these alternatives, our personalities might slip in to do so. Our philosophy will then express our personality. This could provide philosophy with a point for us. If some of our conclusions have practical import, philosophy could have the further point of giving us something by which we can live.

1. WHY PHILOSOPHY FAILS IN THE FUNDAMENTAL RESPECT OF HAVING AN INTRINSIC POINT

In *The Myth of Sisyfos* Albert Camus straightaway claims that suicide is the fundamental problem of philosophy, perhaps even the only really serious philosophical problem. He suggests that the importance of a problem is determined by what actions the problem—or, I suppose, rather an answer to it—commits you to. But we should distinguish the philosophical problem which is most important *for philosophy*, or for us *as philosophers*, from the philosophical problem which is most important for us *all*

things considered, or as regards *all aspects of our lives*. It is the former that is most appropriately called the *fundamental* problem of philosophy, whereas the latter might instead be called the most *important* problem of philosophy.

Accordingly, I propose to explore what is the fundamental problem of philosophy by looking more narrowly at the consequences for philosophy of answering different philosophical problems. I believe that an application of this strategy lands us in the claim that the fundamental philosophical problem is whether (doing) *philosophy has any point*. For philosophy, the consequence of doing philosophy being without any point is as drastic as it can be: apparently, it is that there is no good reason to do philosophy. It might be that, for the business of living, other philosophical problems are more important. For instance, it may be more important whether *life* has a point because if it does not have any point, there would be no reason to prolong life.

It is more important for us whether life has a point than whether philosophy has a point, since if life has some point, but not philosophy, we still have reason to live, whereas if philosophy has some point, but not life, we cannot rationally philosophize, since we have no good reason to live which, of course, is necessary to do philosophy. Notice that even if philosophy has a point, it does not follow that life has a point, only that something in life has a point. Indeed, it seems that part of the point of philosophy could conceivably consist in showing that life does not have any point. If this were so—it will soon emerge that there is reason to doubt that it *is* so—part of the point of philosophy would be self-defeating, since if life comes to an end, so does philosophy. In any case, the question I am asking is whether philosophy has any point.

The fact that the problem about the point of philosophy is itself a *philosophical* problem signals a difference between philosophy and other disciplines, since it is not—at least not entirely—a *mathematical* problem whether mathematics has any point, nor a *medical* problem whether medicine has any point, and so forth—these are rather (at least partly) philosophical problems, like whether life has a point. This fact poses a special difficulty because in order to find out whether philosophy has any point, we have to *philosophize*, thereby boldly risking to do something that turns out to be pointless!

The question about the point of philosophy should be made more precise. Doing philosophy could obviously have a point by serving various *extrinsic* or *external* ends, such as earning your livelihood, getting recognition for your acumen, or getting the sort of fun you could also get from intellectual games and pastimes. But now I am interested in its *intrinsic* point, a goal or end that its distinctive method of

argumentation and conceptual clarification is designed to attain. (What characterizes this method is, as everything else in philosophy, moot.)

What would provide philosophy with such a point? A reply that readily suggests itself is that it could prove what the true answers to its chief problems are; this would appear to be the outcome that employment of its argumentative and clarificatory method is designed for. But it might seem that any old answer would not do given that it is proven true, for suppose that it is proved that the true answer to the philosophical question whether philosophy has any intrinsic point is that it does not have any. Then it would be paradoxical if it could be inferred that philosophy has an intrinsic point from the fact that it has shown that it does not have any such point! Likewise, we might be disinclined to concede that philosophy could show itself to have an intrinsic point by demonstrating that life does not have any point. For, as remarked, this would be self-defeating, since to do philosophy we have to go on living.

Therefore, we might better deny that philosophy can secure its having an intrinsic point by proving the *wrong* kind of true answers to philosophical problems. Presumably, these wrongful answers would be skeptical or negative answers. Possible examples—other than the ones just mentioned—would be if philosophy denied us benevolent gods, immortal souls, free will in the most valuable sense, knowledge of a physical world that exists independently of perception, an intelligible connection between mind and body, objective moral truths, and so on. Perhaps if philosophy were to yield such *disappointing* conclusions all across the board, we would be loath to ascribe any intrinsic point to it, even though it would have delivered true answers to its major problems. Only a minority of us would aim to vindicate for its own sake philosophical truths that we expect to be crushing.

Another possibility is that philosophy fails to have an intrinsic point because it is bound to be *inconclusive*, incapable of producing a rational consensus about the answers to its leading problems. A glance at its inception makes one possible reason for such inconclusiveness discernible. Philosophy began its life around 2500 years ago as speculation about general aspects of the world. Gradually, experiential and other empirical methods were established to deal with some of these aspects. The study of these aspects then dissociated themselves and became more specific disciplines—physics, biology, etc—in their own right, with their established methodologies. Philosophy remained as the tumultuous leftover that was recalcitrant to any agreed, more precise methodology.

A second reason for its inconclusiveness surfaced when it was remarked above

that philosophy is special in that the problem of whether philosophy has any point is itself a philosophical problem. For this indicates that a distinctive feature of philosophy is that *it cannot take anything for granted*. There could be no other discipline to which the investigation of philosophical presuppositions putatively beyond the scope of its self-examination could be delegated. An inquiry into the most fundamental matters is—by definition, it would appear—philosophical, fundamental matters being bound to remain in the contentious leftover. Since philosophy is in this sense bottomless, or goes all the way down, it seems that it will inevitably be inconclusive: even if philosophical arguments are logically valid—and, thus, guarantee true conclusions *if* their premises are true—they will inescapably have some premises whose truth can be denied or doubted because in the end they run out of support. It would appear to be especially likely that people will be tempted to deny or doubt some essential premise or other of an argument that has a disappointing conclusion; for this reason alone, inconclusiveness appears to be a more realistic candidate than a consensus about disappointing conclusions for robbing philosophy of its intrinsic point.

Big philosophical controversies frequently assume the form of there being, on the one hand, a pre-reflective intuition which has a strong hold on us in our commonsensical frame of mind and, on the other hand, weighty philosophical arguments against it. For instance, we have a steadfast intuition that there exists a physical world independent of our sense-impressions; yet there are powerful skeptical arguments challenging the justification of this intuition. We are convinced that many of our inductive extrapolations are reliable, but Hume made us realize that it is hard to see how this conviction can be justified. We like to believe that moral norms can be objectively valid in some sense, though it is not easy to see what this sense can be. We believe that we can be more or less deserving and that we are more responsible for what we cause by our actions than let happen by our omissions, but these beliefs are opposed by strong reasons for doubt. And so on. Attempts can be made to break such-like dialectical impasses by finding further arguments on one side or the other. This is however likely to lead to similar dialectical impasses because, as noted, in philosophy more or less any useful claim can be—and has been—doubted. Eventually arguments will peter out, and it will have to be extraneous factors such as our personalities and how social circumstances impinge on them that determine whether we come down on one side or the other.

I suppose its bottomlessness and attendant methodological disagreements

largely explain why the views of different philosophers often diverge or branch out right from the start into philosophies characteristic of their authors—the philosophy of Spinoza, Kant, etc—while we only rarely have occasion to resort to this manner of speaking in the context of other academic disciplines. When we do—as in the case of Newtonian physics as opposed to the relativistic physics of Einstein—it is because there are disagreements which pertain to the very foundations of the discipline.

Undeniably, there is a fair amount of intersubjective agreement of a *negative* sort among philosophers. To take just one example, even though he tried his utmost to be critical and skeptical, Descartes still claimed to perceive most clearly and distinctly it to be necessarily true that his idea of something more perfect than himself derives from something that is in fact more perfect than himself. There is in all probability unanimity today that this claim is *not* necessarily true—indeed, that it is patently false.

However, such a negative consensus does not bring us one whit closer to unanimity concerning the solution of any philosophical problem of note. With respect to such problems, we find ourselves on paths which go on forking indefinitely, making it harder and harder to decide what turns are the right ones. We draw distinctions that empower us to state theses with ever greater precision, but this process of splitting up theses into several more precise versions also makes it harder to determine which of these competing theses are true, or even closer to the truth. Therefore, growing philosophical precision is not like the more precise measurements of something's weight or length which undoubtedly bring us closer to its real weight or length.

It cannot be denied that greater conceptual precision constitutes progress or development in the discipline of philosophy, but to my mind this is not enough to show that philosophy has any intrinsic point. After all, we can get more and more adept at activities that are pointless, e.g. pastimes that we do just to kill time. If the outcome of our multiplication of distinctions is greater uncertainty and bewilderment about where the truth lies within the space of these distinctions, it seems dubious whether these endeavours could have any intrinsic point for us, whether we could rationally engage in them for their own sake, knowing full well that they will not enable us to close in on the truth.

On the other hand, it might be said that this process of conceptual refinement teaches us to appreciate the complexities of the issues. Even so, what drives us to making ever more distinctions is the idea that they bring us closer to the truth (unless it is that they serve extrinsic ends, such as getting better academic jobs or more rec-

ognition for smartness). So, this appreciation of complexity cannot be the *primary* intrinsic point of doing philosophy that we are looking for, but at most a secondary or subsidiary intrinsic point, which rides on the back of some other intrinsic point. Knowledge of this complexity is rather a by-product of the striving to establish a rational consensus about where the philosophical truth lies.

But even if philosophical disputes are bottomless, their being inconclusive is not anything we could justifiably assume at the outset; it is something that we shall have to work our way towards, by assembling evidence by hard experience of failures to establish agreement. This suggests that up to a point debating a philosophical issue can have a point because there is room for a rational hope of a resolution of it, and as long as this is so, we could legitimately reap benefits in the shape of conceptual clarification and greater understanding of conceptual complexities. But, as the debate continues, a suspicion is liable to grow on us that the arguments are getting too contrived and convoluted for there to be a realistic possibility of them bringing the issue to a close.

Perhaps we can compare the states of the art in contemporary philosophy and in contemporary physics. Contemporary physicists undoubtedly know more about the universe than Newton did, but they are nevertheless also aware that their ignorance about the universe is much greater than he apparently thought his ignorance was. Contemporary physicists are painfully aware of the incompatibility of the two pillars of modern physics, quantum physics and the theory of relativity, of the fact that they know next to nothing about the dark matter and energy which may compose as much as 95% of the universe, of the nature of the Big Bang, and so on. Furthermore, it may be seriously doubted whether they will ever have access to experimental means to make ground-breaking progress, to settle the truth of theories requisite for such progress, for example, to settle what, if any, string theory or multiversum theory is true. Then the point of pursuing research to make more pedestrian progress may be questioned, especially if, as is likely, it will be forbiddingly expensive.

By comparison, philosophical research is exceedingly cheap, and lack of observational data will not be what puts obstacles in its way. The obstacle will rather be that our shared intuitions are not fine-grained enough to decide between ever more precise proposals. This difficulty will increase rather than decrease the number of issues over which there will be disagreement. But with respect to neither physics nor philosophy would the fact that further research might now be pointless because it is

clear that it is degenerating into irresolvable disputes about esoteric matters imply that research in the past has been pointless.

2. PHILOSOPHY AS A MEANS TO SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND AS LIFE-GUIDING

The example of Descartes and the most perfect being is worth bringing up also for the reason that it is a good example of *wishful thinking* in philosophy, of how a claim can appear to be evidently true to philosophers when it is a potent tool in their hands, even though the claim is rather evidently false, and they attempt to adopt a skeptical frame of mind. For Descartes thought he could prove the existence of God—who would then function as a guarantor of the truth of other important beliefs—with the help of the claim that the source of the idea of a being more perfect than himself must lie in something more perfect than himself.

It is worth noting that there is an attitude that can be seen to be a form of wishful thinking about oneself and one's own assets: *the overconfidence bias*, the tendency to be unduly confident about one's own ability to get the facts right, or to perform various practical tasks well. For instance, a majority of drivers believe they drive better than the average, a majority of students believe they are in the top half of their class, a majority of university professors believe they are better researchers and teachers than most of their colleagues. As regards the future, most of us are inclined to think we are capable of achieving a lot more in a certain period of time than it is reasonable to surmise on the basis of what we have achieved in the past—this is the so-called *planning fallacy*. In academia it notoriously manifests itself in many of us regularly overstepping deadlines that we have optimistically laid down.

The overconfidence bias or more generally wishful thinking may account for why philosophers do not normally end up with disappointing conclusions or concessions about inconclusiveness, and why they are inclined to tweak their philosophizing to yield more satisfactory outcomes. For instance, it may explain why skepticism is not a popular position in epistemology and dualism is not in the philosophy of mind, despite the fact that, after centuries of efforts, no attempt to refute skepticism has won more widespread acceptance, and attempts to reduce the mental to the physical have continued to be failures, though they have successively become watered down.

The world comes out as simpler and scientifically more manageable if there is not anything mental which is distinct in kind from everything physical, since if there

is something irreducibly mental, its relation to the physical—in particular, neural states in the brain—appears to be inexplicable. Also, there is the problem of fitting together the mentalistic explanations we provide of our overt behaviour with the mechanistic explanations science delivers of the physical events. In the pre-scientific past, humans often tried to explain natural phenomena in mentalistic terms, as the works of gods or spirits. With the progress of science these animistic explanations have been superseded by mechanistic explanations. Some philosophers seem to want carry on this process to the paradoxical extreme of exorcising or evicting the inquisitive, explanation-seeking mind itself from the world. However, our urge to think in mentalistic terms is unquenchable. It has definitely lost its applicability to inanimate nature, but it will never surrender its applicability to our own behaviour. And it is as vigorous as ever in its enterprise of creating fictive characters in novels, films, computer games, and so on. It is astonishing that, although the earth is now the home to more than seven billion people, we still have not had our fill of people, but eagerly create countless fictive ones in whose company we happily spend a considerable portion of our time.

Wishful thinking, then, is a factor which could step in and clinch cases when the strength of arguments cannot. Another factor is *conformism*: many studies show that we are reluctant to stand out from the people surrounding us but instead prefer to go along with them. There is a disposition that works in the longer term to support conformism, namely *the exposure effect*: as a rule, we get attached to what we have been frequently exposed to, like the social and cultural traditions and fellow-beings with which we have grown up. Obviously, if the majority of the citizens of a society tend to comply with its customs, their behaviour will exhibit considerable amount of conformity. The exposure effect guarantees that the ways of life of a society will be stable and change only slowly.

An important species of conformism is people's inclination to obey those who have managed to ascend to some type of leading positions. This *subordination to leaders or authorities* is yet another factor that may shape our philosophical views. Students are swayed in the direction of their supervisors' views due to their persuasive power or charisma, or because they sense that this is prone to improve their career prospects. Even students who started out in earnest, set on discovering the truth of some philosophical matter, may slide into defending views that are suspiciously similar to the views of their teachers. There is a win-win situation here: the students secure a career, and their teachers that their work and reputation live on.

But in the process the former may be transformed from being philosophers living *for* philosophy to being philosophers living *off* philosophy in Schopenhauer's terminology, just as the latter may once have been. This is a process which could occur even if we are not under the influence of any authority. If no conclusive philosophical arguments are to be found, it would not be surprising if in the course of doing philosophy over many years, the belief that such arguments can be found wear thin and are replaced by a slowly growing conviction that philosophy does not have any primary, intrinsic point. But you have invested so much time and effort in philosophy, and made it your profession, so the sunk cost of giving it up would be insufferable. Thusly, living for philosophy could gradually turn into living off philosophy.

The expression 'living off philosophy', however, is a bit misleading because it suggests doing philosophy to earn your livelihood. This is important enough if you have not inherited wealth like, say, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard. But the expression is meant to cover doing philosophy for all kinds of external ends, including getting recognition and intellectual stimulation of the sort that could be got from games like chess. The phrase 'living for philosophy' means doing philosophy for its own sake, with its primary, intrinsic point in mind, that it could rationally convince us of some worthwhile philosophical insights.

Now, if we get disillusioned about the possibility of establishing a rational philosophical consensus and, thus, cannot pursue it with this point in mind, is there any alternative to doing it only for fun, fame or fortune? If we possess enough independence of mind to be able to resist the lures of conformism and the rewards that might accrue from it then, when truth-supporting arguments fall short, our own personality traits—rather than the personality traits of others via our conformism—may seep in and influence our conclusions. After all, it was probably such traits that determined our choice to do philosophy in the first place, and the original choice of a philosophical orientation or specialization, so they may play a part in settling our philosophical conclusions as well. William James goes a bit further (James, 2004 Ebook):

'Of whatever temperament a professional philosopher is, he tries when philosophizing to sink the fact of his temperament...Yet his temperament really gives him a stronger bias than any of his more strictly objective premises. It loads the evidence for him one way or the other.'

Nietzsche put it characteristically hyperbolically (Nietzsche, 1973, §6):

'every great philosophy has hitherto been: a confession on the part of its author'

The author's personality shines through not only in the philosophies of such 'literary' philosophers as Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard, but also in the philosophy of a highly academic philosopher like Kant, in which you can clearly discern traces of his Pietistic upbringing and obsessive-compulsive turn of mind.

In order to obtain a more detailed imprint of your personality, however, you have to be a rather *well-rounded* philosopher, who works across a fairly wide field of philosophical problems—like the great philosophers of the past—rather than a narrow specialist. It is natural, probably even necessary, for philosophical novices to start out as specialists, and only later to become more well-rounded by broadening their horizons gradually, though some issues will have to remain peripheral, receiving only fleeting attention. Careerwise, it is however likely that you will do better if you remain more of a narrow specialist operating in a network with other specialists in the same field who mutually support each other than if you attempt to become a more independently viable, well-rounded philosopher.

Moreover, as philosophy becomes more and more conceptually intricate by the labour of a growing number of specialized philosophers, it becomes increasingly hard for its practitioners to become well-rounded and counteract a fragmentation of philosophy. At least analytic philosophy is prone to contract or spiral inwards in the sense of developing ever more precise treatments of a set of problems prioritized in networks of philosophers who discuss each others work. This is harmful to analytic philosophy overall both because it is likely to make it irrelevant to people outside these networks and because it hampers philosophical progress by turning a blind eye to problems with the presuppositions shared by members of the networks. But to the insiders who take the presuppositions for granted, precision by a proliferation of technicalities gives an air of scientific objectivity.

If your personality traits influence the upshot of your philosophy and, thus, make it expressive of your personality—could it still have something of an intrinsic point? It could, at least in the sense that activities like art and literature, which are obviously also expressive of their creators' personalities, could have something of an intrinsic point. But philosophy would not then have an *exclusively* intrinsic point as it would have if its method of rational argument had sufficed to force agreement about the solutions to its major problems. For if philosophical argument turns out to be inconclusive, and your personality has to creep in to make you come down on one side

or the other, the point of doing philosophy cannot be *wholly* intrinsic to it. Its point will be dependent on your taking an interest in something external to philosophy, namely in having your personality articulated or revealed by it. Its point is however still *partly* intrinsic to it, since your interest is invested in arriving at a *philosophical* articulation or expression of your personality, in working out philosophical arguments to the point at which you could convince at least yourself. Doing philosophy in order to ‘know thyself’ is a time-honoured task which is sufficient for philosophy to have a point *for you*, given your interest in gaining self-knowledge, though you will not be pursuing philosophy strictly for its own sake.

In antiquity philosophy was supposed to be of help not only in the acquisition of self-knowledge, but also in learning how to live well. For instance, according to Epicurus’s conception of it (Long & Sedley, 1987, vol I, 156):

‘Philosophy is an activity that secures the flourishing [eudaimon] life by arguments and reasoning.’

A more sombre conception of the kind of advice philosophy could supply is the one that Plato puts into the mouth of Socrates in his dialogue *Phaedo*: to philosophize is learning how to die. I shall not try to unravel what Plato might have meant by this arresting assertion, which many have puzzled over. My purpose is just to illustrate that provision of practical advice about how to live has been conceived to be an essential element of philosophy since its inception.

This could be put by saying that, alongside living *for* philosophy and living *off* philosophy, we should place living *by* philosophy, or living in accordance with philosophy. Perhaps symptomatically, Schopenhauer omits to mention the latter option. He has been criticized for failing to comply with the stern precepts of his pessimistic world-view which demanded thorough-going asceticism. His defence for this omission referred to his determinism which he took to rule out behavioural reform. In this respect he stands in unflattering contrast to another determinist, Spinoza, who seemed to have succeeded admirably well in living in accordance with an equally demanding philosophy.

Like the aim that your philosophy be personality-revealing, the aim that it be life-guiding is partly extrinsic and partly intrinsic to philosophy. It is partly extrinsic, since the aim of having a philosophy that you could live by is extrinsic to philosophy, but also partly intrinsic, since it is specifically *philosophical* doctrines that you aim to

live by. If you have both of these aims, you will strive to make your philosophy well-rounded by exploring topics where your findings could have practical implications. You will not specialize exclusively in fields like, say, meaning and reference or causation and conditionals, but will ensure that your philosophical repertoire includes such disciplines as normative ethics. Naturally, the outcome of your pursuit of these life-guiding disciplines will also reflect your personality.

I shall soon turn to ethics, but let me first make clear that what is now designated as ethics or morality does not have monopoly of life-guiding doctrines. For example, in *Reasons and Persons* Derek Parfit (1984, pt III) famously argues that ‘personal identity is not what matters’, that is, that the fact that some person is identical to you cannot rationally justify your being especially concerned about the weal and woe of this person.¹ According to him, what matters is instead the holding of various psychological relations, such as this person sharing your memories, interests, etc. In principle, these are relations that could connect you to somebody to whom you are not identical. Now this doctrine about the insignificance of personal identity is not a distinctively moral doctrine, though it is of moral relevance, since it undermines self-interest which is often in opposition to the morally right course of action. It is not a distinctively moral doctrine, since it harbours implications also for the sphere of *prudence* where what is at stake is only how your own interests are affected. It tells that you should focus on whether what matters in identity is present—like psychological connections—rather than simply on the fact of identity itself.

For another illustration of life-guiding doctrines that are not specifically moral, consider Parfit’s discussion of temporal biases in *Reasons and Persons*, pt. II. One such bias is *the bias towards the near* (future), the fact that we are spontaneously more concerned about good and bad things that we think might happen to us in the near rather than in the more distant future. Another temporal bias is *the bias towards the future*, the fact that we are spontaneously more concerned about good and bad things that will happen to us in the future—especially the near future—than about such things that have happened to us in the past, so that we regret good things having passed, and are relieved when bad things have passed. It could be argued—though Parfit does not do so—that these temporal biases are irrational and that the rational attitude is one of *temporal neutrality*.² In the domain of prudence, this attitude of neutrality means

1. For my take on this issue, see *The Retreat of Reason* (2005, pt. IV), and *Inclusive Ethics* (2017, chap. 3.1).

2. I argue thus in *The Retreat of Reason* (2005, pt. III).

that what happens at some times of your own life does not matter more than what happens at other times simply in virtue of the difference of timing, whilst in its moral form it lays down that the same holds for each and everyone's life.

In ancient Greece, ethics comprised the intrapersonal dimension of prudence alongside the interpersonal dimension of morality. Its chief question was 'How should I live in order to lead a good life?' where 'good' covered what is good for ourselves as well as what is good for others. Nowadays, ethics or morality is rather thought to regulate our conduct only in so far as it impinges on the weal and woe of others, in other words, others for whom things can go well or badly (many would say that this is the category of sentient beings). We are regarded as imprudent or irrational rather than as immoral if we act in manners that are detrimental to our own long-term interest.

Greek and Roman philosophers were much preoccupied with the question of how we could lead good lives in view of the fact that our lives are largely beyond our control, a matter of good or bad luck: at any moment we could be struck down by accidents or injuries which rob us of our fortune, health or even life itself, which we shall eventually lose in any case.³ Philosophical schools competed against each other with different recommendations as to how to come to terms with this precariousness of our existence. For instance, the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius' recommendations featured a version of temporal neutrality: looking at our lives from the point of view of high above which makes them dwindle to insignificance.⁴ The doctrine that your identity does not matter could also be of assistance in muting the anxiety that we might feel because of all the harm that preys on us in every nook and cranny of the world. But whatever the philosophical recommendations, they were not easy to internalize and live by. Thus, many ancient philosophers, not least the Stoics, spent more time on exercises to train themselves to live by their convictions than to argue for their truth.

Turning now to morality, we again encounter doctrines that are demanding and hard to live by. I have maintained that philosophical divides often arise as the result of pre-reflective intuitions being pitted against weighty philosophical arguments. Such arguments challenge doctrines that are firmly entrenched in common-sense morality, for instance, that we have *rights* to our own body and mind, and property that we acquire by their means, that we *deserve* to fare better or worse than we in fact do, and

3. I discuss this issue a bit further in *Inclusive Ethics* (2017, chap. 13).

4. See for instance his *Meditations*, 9. 30. The view *sub species aeternitatis* also plays an important role in Spinoza's *Ethics*.

the act-omission doctrine and the doctrine of the double effect.⁵ The fact that these doctrines are so firmly entrenched will by itself make us disinclined to surrender them. But with respect to at least some of them—e.g. the rights theory and the act-omission doctrine—surrendering them will result in a morality that demands greater sacrifices from us than does common-sense morality, especially in the present, needful world in which those of us who are affluent have resources to mitigate much misery. This naturally makes many of us even more reluctant to surrender these deep-seated doctrines and confront our glaring moral shortcomings. For such reasons, the prospect that moral philosophers could demonstrate that their discipline has achieved its primary, intrinsic point by arriving at a rational consensus about what is morally right and wrong looks glum, though their investigations could serve the subsidiary point of producing a steadily growing understanding of the complexities of our moral notions by an ever-expanding battery of precise distinctions.

Another thing moral philosophers could do is to carry on their investigations until they reach a normative position with which their personality makes them comfortable. Then, apart from trying to live by this position, they could strive to spread the word of it, since other people could accept this position for the same arguments as they have, though these arguments are not conclusive. Moral campaigning of this kind is important because morality is essentially a *collective* code which, if valid, must be *universally* valid, valid for everyone capable of understanding it. We must agree about what is morally right or wrong because this concerns how we treat each other, not just ourselves; by contrast, the prudential norms we uphold for the running of our own lives could be entirely individualist, valid only for ourselves with our particular aims. Besides, some moral goals are such that we cannot attain them single-handed; their attainment necessitates the cooperation of a great number of agents. Consequently, if there is no trust that these goals are pursued by a multitude of agents, it might well be futile to contribute to them. Therefore, if moral philosophy cannot achieve its primary, intrinsic point by producing a rational consensus about what is morally right and wrong in the situations we regularly face in our lives, the second best we could do is to aim for as broad an agreement as possible with congenial people.

Far from establishing a rational consensus about what is morally right, and about

5. I argue against the applicability of the concept of desert in *The Retreat of Reason* (2005, pt. IV), and *Inclusive Ethics* (2017, chap. 7); against rights, the act-omission doctrine and the doctrine of the double effect in *From Morality to the End of Reason* (2013, chaps. 1-6).

what the ground and meaning of this rightness is, moral philosophers have produced a perplexing array of possible moral systems—consequentialist, deontological, contractualist, virtue ethical, you name it—but no agreed method to decide which of these system is the sound one. Indeed, it is even controversial what ‘soundness’ here is tantamount to, whether moral judgments can be true in the same sense as factual judgments, and true independently of our affective or conative attitudes, or whether moral judgments are merely non-cognitive expressions of such attitudes.

If it had not been for the fact that moral philosophy is often too esoteric to be grasped by the public, the substantial disagreement that is raging among its practitioners might have had a deleterious effect on public morality. Philosophical disputes about the foundation and content of morality might have eroded the authority that common-sense morality has acquired over centuries as a result of the exposure effect, and weakened the motivation to abide by it. It seems unlikely that this substantial disagreement will subside, for even though our moral responses must converge to some extent if we are to be able to live together in functioning societies—which is a pre-requisite of our evolutionary success—they are surely not so finely attuned that we should expect them to converge with respect to the manifold of fanciful scenarios that our philosophically trained cognitive powers could construct. However, the existing attitudinal convergence might still be sufficient for the campaigning indicated to establish well-grounded agreement on a large number of moral issues.

In fact, I am not sure that moral philosophy has made *any* noteworthy difference to public morality during the forty years or so that I have been engaged in it. Consider, for instance, what is sometimes hailed as the greatest achievement of modern morality: the recognition of the equal worth of all humans. There is no denying that there are very good philosophical arguments undercutting the view of racists and sexists that the differences between races and sexes by themselves could be grounds for differing moral value. But from the fact that *some* differences between humans cannot ground value differences between them, it obviously does not follow that *no* such differences between them can do so.

What about differences in respect of, say, intelligence, rationality or morality, which are often propounded as the basis for humans having higher value than non-human animals? These features certainly appear to be of value, but humans plainly *differ* as regards them, so an appeal to them is unpromising as a justification for the doctrine that all humans are of *equal* moral worth or value. Likewise, the appeal to them to justify the idea that humans have a higher value than non-human animals is

ill-conceived, since it clearly is not true that *all* humans—including the most mentally disabled—rank higher with respect to intelligence, rationality and morality than all non-human animals. An appeal to membership of the biological species *Homo sapiens* by itself as a ground for moral elevation will not improve the situation because it is as little plausible as an appeal to membership of a race or sex as such a ground. All in all, philosophical discussion appears to lend more support to the—to many of us—disappointing conclusion that the value of all humans is *not* equal and higher than the value of non-human animals. But, for better or worse, this discussion has not noticeably influenced public opinion.

What, then, is the explanation of the popularity of the doctrine that all humans are equal? Perhaps that in a globalized world people of different races come together for commerce and cultural exchange and demand consideration of their interests. Furthermore, due to the advanced technology and the more effective legal regimes of modern societies, the most conspicuous advantages of men over women as regards physical strength and aggressiveness recede into the background. And the invention and legislation of contraceptives have reduced the risk that women are hampered by frequent unwanted pregnancies. So, women are in a better position to claim the same consideration as men. The most obvious way to resolve such competition between claims for consideration from people of different races and sexes seems to be to give equal weight to all of them. If something like this hypothesis is correct, the ideology of human equality is the product of social, technological and other such-like forces having nothing to do with any reflection on the grounds of moral status.

3. CONCLUSION

Summing up, given the apparently inescapable inconclusiveness of philosophical arguments, philosophy could not have the primary, intrinsic point of establishing a rational consensus about the solutions of its leading problems. It could still have the subsidiary point of promoting greater awareness of the complexities of the conceptual apparatus by means of which we attempt to decipher the world. It could also produce arguments that persuade us if we allow our personalities to slip in and give them a finishing touch. To the extent that this is so, our philosophical position will give vent to our personality. This could provide philosophy with a point for us which is partly, but not entirely intrinsic to it, since it is in part dependent on our interest in having our personality shine through our philosophy. Naturally, for our philoso-

phy to express our personality more fully, it has to be well-rounded. Additionally, if our philosophy contains elements of practical import, it could also have point for us by equipping us with something we could live by. Living by philosophy should be distinguished from living off it in the broad sense here intended, namely pursuing philosophy for wholly extrinsic reasons such as earning our livelihood, getting recognition for smartness and intellectual stimulation, ends to which there could be other means—even better means—than philosophy. There is a perpetual risk of sliding into the living-off philosophy mode because of the elusiveness of philosophical truth and the pressures of conformism.

To end on a more personal note, I have never managed to live for philosophy in the sense implying that I thought I would eventually find arguments that would conclusively solve any of its big problems. From the start it has seemed to me that it was too late in the history of philosophy—which features so many confident philosophers who have had their convictions resoundingly refuted—to entertain seriously any such hope. I have never doubted that it was unavoidable that my personality would enter somewhere in the game to fix the outcome. Also, a large part of the fascination philosophy has had for me throughout my pursuit of it stems from the fact that it is uniquely able to combine the theoretical and practical: a philosophical vision of the world encompassing practical implications to live by.

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