

One hundred and fifty years of philosophy

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Abstract Looking back from 2049 over one-hundred and fifty years of philosophy, a student’s essay reveals what became of rival strands in Western philosophy – with a sidelong glance at the special *Topoi* issue on the theme “Philosophy: What is to be Done?” that was published almost half a century earlier.

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Memo

To: The Editor, *Topoi*
Re: One hundred and fifty years of philosophy
Date: September 1, 2049

Dear Colleague,

Your predecessor in the year 2006, Ermanno Ben-civenga, commissioned a number of then well-known philosophers to write short articles for a *Topoi* issue on the theme “Philosophy: What Is To Be Done?”. I thought it might interest you (and perhaps our readers) to see an insightful paper just completed by one of my most promising students, Jacob Kweetvee, on what has happened in philosophy since 1900. He consulted not only the standard texts and primary sources on the subject but made good use of the articles of that *Topoi* issue, taking careful note of, and sometimes evaluating, their prognostications.

As you will see, he not only expounds but celebrates the truly laudable development of our discipline into

its present state, so much to be preferred over the uncertainties and tensions of those days gone by.

Yours in the love of wisdom,

Willard Weltevrede

One hundred and fifty years of philosophy

An essay on the stabilizing trends in Western philosophy, 1900 to the present Jacob Kweetvee

Today we glory in such harmonious unanimity in philosophy that it is difficult to appreciate the near intellectual chaos from which this stability emerged. But a careful look at the dominant trends in philosophy in the 20th century will reveal how this could come about, and how solidly the consensus was built up.

To coin a name for those trends I would like to call them *philosophical imperialisms*, echoing the name now typically given to those successful political strategies we credit with the establishment of an equally stable new world order. I will detail these, first of all, to display how they influenced each other. Only after this responsible exposition of the facts will I feel free to comment and, to some extent, evaluate.

We may begin with the philosophy of mathematics, at first blush a marginal part of 20th-century philosophy, but one that in fact set the stage for much that followed. Circa 1900 we behold a true crisis atmosphere: geometry had left its moorings and “philosophical” mathematicians were urging an anarchic liberalism. Our philosophical forebears Frege and Russell were battling Hilbert and Poincaré, respec-

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tively, to maintain a realist basis for mathematical truth. When the conventionalist Poincaré asked Russell to specify what could be meant by “objective congruence,” Russell scathingly replied “That is like asking me to spell the letter A!” At that time there was great to-do about whether invoking the axiom of choice amounted to bringing metaphysical postulation into mathematics. Intuitionism, Formalism, and other such philosophical cult following was rife. But the great work of Frege, Russell, Zermelo, and Gödel established set theory, understood in a thoroughly realist fashion, as the foundation of mathematics.

There were indeed some results, going back to Skolem, that what is taken to be true does not determine what the terms denote. Shrill critics charged that mathematical realists, on their own showing, literally do not know what they are talking about. To counteract this charge, no more was needed than to become more comfortable in our realism. Uncontrovertibly, second-order language is univocal when intended to be so. When we say “the empty set” we refer to the empty set, and when we say “all” we mean that in an *all* sense of “all.” Notwithstanding those cavils, or some mathematicians’ continuing tendency to aberrancy, this new irenic realism gained the day. It has since become the teaching basis for the philosophy of mathematics in all the more advanced philosophy departments. Eventually this realism was reinforced by “naturalism” (*about which more later*) with respect to mathematics and the sciences, especially in certain West-Coast universities.

This century-long development had a great and salutary influence on the related fields of logic and philosophy of language. Logicism, though eventually not viable, had been in the forefront of the stabilizing movement in the philosophy of mathematics, and crucial in the battle against constructivist heresies. From its early vision of a logical skeleton underlying everyday language came a logic-inspired program: construction of artificial languages as models of discourse. The success of this essentially scientific enterprise could then be imitated by philosophers to elucidate not only language itself but all traditional philosophical topics: *good* and *evil*, *beauty* and the *sublime*, *animal* and the *divine* could all be put in their place.

The emergence of “possible-world” semantics in the 60s sealed this development, thus allowing for a theory of language that could conscientiously spurn rival approaches. There had indeed been threats to universal accord on how language is to be understood. But “ordinary-language philosophy,” developed by heirs to the quaint musings of a Wittgenstein, as well as puzzles over the theory-ladenness of language and its possible

defects when confronted with new phenomena—a favorite theme during the so-called “historical turn” in the philosophy of science—were soon enough left behind. After only a decade or so, there remained no sign of their once strident participation in the philosophical fora. Attention to Austin’s and Strawson’s debunking treatment of theories of truth, for example, gave way everywhere to theories of “truth-makers.” Naturalized semantics focused on genuine word–world relations, defeating all other ideas about the language we live in and the world we speak about.

The undeniably formidable achievements in this area brought new life to the ancient subject of metaphysics. Indeed, how could language be understood at all, if not through a theory of what there is, an ontology to supply referents and contents to each grammatically well-formed part of a sentence? An ontology, in other words, which could offer entities as counterparts to not just names and concrete descriptions, but to predicates, functional terms, abstract noun clauses, connectives, adverbial and sentential modifiers, syncategoremata? Such a one as Ryle could fulminate about the “Fido–Fido” theory of meaning. But it is a safe bet I wager that if he had a dog called “Fido” he called him “Fido”—why think that it is any different with a predicate or ampersand than with a dog? How language functions, how utterances can carry information or be meaningful, can only be understood if we are provided with a genuine explanation, which nothing short of metaphysics can provide.

Thus metaphysics flourished again. How to choose between its complex and sophisticated theories? That question, in philosophical methodology itself, became a vehicle of progress toward philosophical unanimity! In the context of metaphysics quality of explanation alone is at issue, so conclusions about *what there really is* could be supported in one way only: by *inference to the best explanation*. But what better basis could there be? As the still vastly admired David Armstrong said: *if inference to the best explanation is not rational, what is?*

Thus analytic metaphysics, in quite nearly the form that it takes today, became the staple fare at all the more advanced philosophy departments in North America and Australasia. This salutary unanimity spread—if frustratingly slowly sometimes—into Britain and the European Union, and painstakingly further into Asia, Africa, and Latin America. I’ll shortly indicate how perilous the situation was still at the turn of the century, but let me first show how this development in metaphysics supplied the crucial ingredients for unification in epistemology, philosophy of science, and philosophy of mind.

Inference to the best explanation is a rule of right reason, hence properly in the domain of epistemology. Being, beyond consistency, the sole rule that is applicable in metaphysics, it must clearly be the most fundamental of all rules of right reason, and therefore have hegemony also in ordinary and scientific reasoning. Hence this topic lay precisely at the heart of the case for several major developments: first of all *scientific realism*, secondly the thesis of the fundamental *unity of all the sciences*, and thirdly *reductionism* with respect to both intensionality and the mental. How marvelously has not the development in initially disparate sciences led to unification! Thus chemistry became part of physics via atomic physics, biology part of chemistry and physics via molecular biology, and so forth. What better explanation than an underlying unity that in turn could only be due to their having got hold of the fundamental blueprint of the universe? And analogously, what better explanation for all those *prima facie* intensional and mental concepts floating about in discourse about persons and the personal than that they are all in principle reducible to a single basis—which must then, in view of the hierarchy evident in the sciences, be physical?

It was sometimes said that the 20th-century history of the philosophy of mind in analytic circles was just a succession of ever less ambitious attempts at a consistency proof for materialism. But it was because of insight into the subject itself that difficulties were naturally met with lowering criteria of success: type–type reduction, first hoped for, had to be relinquished in favor of the anomalous status of the mental, reducibility itself giving way to supervenience—and the initial daring empirically testable hypotheses had to give way to ones designed to be empirically irrefutable. Why strain at a gnat? But of course one heard the usual complaint of romantics unable to forego earlier enthusiasms—not to mention cavils by crypto-dualists and the like, who had been opposed from the beginning anyway.

Once the coherence of the physicalist position was well understood, it could appeal to its natural base, which is precisely *naturalism*, now recognized as the common ground for *all* philosophical theorizing. A great figure from that intermediate, as yet rather chaotic stage, Willard van Orman Quine, expressed this now common ground very well:

Naturalism looks only to natural science, however fallible, for an account of what there is and what what there is does. Science ventures its tentative answers in man-made concepts, perforce, couched in man-made language, but we can ask no better . . . To ask what reality is *really* like, however,

apart from human categories, is self-stultifying. (W.V. Quine, “Structure and Nature,” *Journal of Philosophy* **89** (1992): 6–9, here p. 9)

Notice how deftly this genius advances the cause, by identifying naturalism’s opponents as reaching for unintelligible realities beyond our grasp! Thus were unified all aspects of analytic philosophy with the natural sciences, of which this philosophy can claim to be essentially an extension, pursued with the same ultimate aim and the same criteria of adequacy as science itself (to the extent applicable). At the same time, it displays our own discipline as taking its place in the currently received scientific knowledge, wherein all useful knowledge and practice start. Not in some purported critical surveillance of the very greatest achievements of reason the world has seen! Such “critical surveillance” was never more than an inability to grasp the new realism’s elucidation of what science is really achieving.

This short account will suffice as exposition of the 20th century’s dominant tendencies that made the growth of our present harmonious unity possible. But my account would be incomplete without a good look at contrary tendencies that could have prevented this happy conclusion.

As I have already mentioned, the quaint musings of Wittgenstein, after his early metaphysical stage, inspired a fortunately short-lived movement known as ordinary-language philosophy. Mainly centered in Britain to begin with, it spawned heretics in various other countries. The names are no longer familiar to today’s students, but we could mention Austin, Strawson, Ryle, and later on Wright, Diamond, Hackett, Cavell, Bouveresse—pockets of discontent that sometimes made common cause with other maverick streams. I think here of, e.g., McDowell, who harked back to both Wilfrid Sellars and Wittgenstein, as well as of Richard Rorty’s and Hilary Putnam’s harking back to an outdated, unregenerate pragmatism.

The latter we must also mention in another connection. His slogan “the mind and the world together make up the mind and the world,” though of course literally and logically absurd, highlights that century’s continuing nostalgic flirtation with Kant. Not only in Germany and France, but also even on some of our ivy-league campuses, there were revivals of Kantian, neo-Kantian, and transcendentalist thought. One would have thought that in the struggles between Cassirer and the logical empiricists, not to mention the vanquishing of Intuitionism in the philosophy of mathematics and in logic, their hopes had long since been solidly defeated. Apparently their line of thought

received comfort from connections with certain maverick concerns in ethics and morals. There appears to have been some reinforcement also from earlier pragmatisms and the so-called “historical turn” in the philosophy of science. I suppose that in such dire straits one grasps at any straw.

In any case, none of this amounted to anything at all in the end—theories are what we want, theories as near to theoretical science as can be constructed while still not leaving the philosophers’ armchair! That is the proper task of philosophical mankind.

Just to dot the “i”s and cross the “t”s, however, we may note that this so-called “historical turn”—exemplified in such (now mostly forgotten) writers as Norwood Russell Hanson, Paul Feyerabend, Stephen Toulmin, and Thomas Kuhn—died a natural death. The reason was simple: its central philosophy of language could not be incorporated naturally in the reigning view. According to those stalwarts, scientists sometimes confront new phenomena within “defective” language, impregnated by old theories, so that their terms are “theory-laden” and properly applicable only in the context of the theories that “infected” them. None of this makes any sense in our clear-headed view. Every term in language has a referent, though often one that hinges on a function from contexts and possible worlds into realms of abstract entities. After all, those possible worlds obviously include ones of which a given theory is true, regardless of how outdated or irrelevant that theory may be to the user. Such idle puzzling over the “actual use of language in actual practice in actual scientific contexts” (as their slogans would have it) has long since sunk without a trace. Now we have a unified view of the sciences: they catalogue the natural properties and relations constituting the fundamental structure of the universe, and the laws that maintain this structure. E basta!

Retrospective conclusion

But how did it look to philosophers writing in the year 2006? We know, from an issue of the journal *Topoi*, on the theme “Philosophy: What Is To Be Done?”, precisely how it looked. The most prescient contributor, despite himself, was the one who responded to *What is to be done?* with

What indeed? Piety, or its simulacrum, is everywhere on the rise, and the three dominant monotheistic religions offer us only a choice among institutionalized superstition, institutionalized self-righteousness, and institutionalized barbarism ... [W]hat card-carrying academic

philosopher nowadays has the courage to be a serious iconoclast in public, to challenge the disturbingly convergent cherished idols of collectively embraced religious and political mythologies? ... Not, of course, that there exists a suitable forum. Our agora is simply too vast. Without high-profile access to the mass media, one might as well converse with the walls and lecture to the winds.

No one would listen to philosophers! That could not change till all that superstition and barbarism had disappeared and till philosophy could speak with one voice. Our political philosophers can now in thoroughly realist fashion advise the government on the effective ways of realpolitik. Our ethicists, knowing that all sound criteria must have their basis in scientific knowledge, can apply decision theory to social problems based on empirically verifiable preferences visible in the Senate and House majorities.

Think of how much kibitzing in ethics was over and done with once robots had been constructed to act out the whole family of trolley-problems! We now have a definite and incontrovertible solution to such dilemmas as

A trolley is hurtling down a track. In its path are 5 people tied to the track by a maniac. You are on a bridge under which it will pass, and you can stop it by dropping a heavy weight in front of it. As it happens, there is a very fat man next to you, the only heavy weight in sight ... do you push him over?

Once decision and game theory were properly applied ... but that is a familiar story to us all now. After our simulation and computer analysis of 1,374,091 variants on the case—including variations on the number of possible victims and the fat man’s age, weight, gross annual income, and net worth—there was a clearly discernible “saddle point,” and that settled the matter.

The least in tune with the times was certainly the author who voiced his discontent with precisely the trends that would inherit the future:

In April of 2004, I attended the ... American Philosophical Association in Chicago, and having said my own piece, I went to other talks on offer. One of the first was in a logic session concerned with, essentially, the counterfactual issue of what Frege would have answered if somebody had asked him if ... Then it suddenly hit me that, after decades of milking every sentence of Frege’s for all its meaning (and often for more than that), we were now moving into a first counterfactual level of speculation—and I had an oppressive

vision of centuries of ever more nestings ahead of us, about what Frege would have said when confronted with the n -th counterfactual, and so on, until the end of time.

Clearly he saw a specter of scholasticism and ever narrower concentration on smaller issues, whereas in fact the very foundation of our current consensus was laid in sessions such as these, sessions where the so-called “great issues” of past philosophy were not so much rejected as blissfully and rightly left ignored.

But this writer was rivaled in blindness by another who wrote on the future of ancient philosophy:

O les beaux jours. Où sont les neiges d'antan? In the past, even the future was brighter. Fings ain't what they used to be—they never were . . .

Q: Where is ancient philosophy going now?—*A:* Downhill, and to the dogs. *Q:* Where will it go in the future?—*A:* Further downhill, and right past the dogs. *Q:* What can be done?—*A:* Not much. *Q:* What will be done?—*A:* Nothing.

He was not blind to the future of his hopelessly outdated concern with outdated concerns, fostered undoubtedly by his sojourn in the “old Europe.” What he was blind to, however, was the vitality and glorious progress found among those who live wholly in the one living language there is, our own beloved English, and

focus squarely on philosophical problems so fundamental that they can be understood at once even by freshmen. It used to be said that there are only two topics with universal appeal. But now, at least on our college campuses, there are three—for metaphysics in its new puzzle-oriented form conquers all freshmen hearts.

Finally, though, some of these writers are *so yesterday* that I can hardly comment at all. A certain professor Dreyfus spoke glowingly about philosophers whose names I do not know—Continental European, I am guessing—and a Priest predicted that precisely that sort of philosophy, now lost in the misty past, was going to preoccupy us today! As for van Fraassen, the few passages I browsed displayed eminent good sense—but, mystifyingly, the Editor's introduction dismissed him as “not so much answering the question as attempting to exorcise a nightmare.”

My teacher, Professor Weltevrede, has however urged me not to omit mentioning something else. What I have recounted here is still not as universally accepted as I may have somewhat wistfully implied. While we are all agreed on it here, and there is no dissenting voice to be heard in the Universal Philosophy Association, it does seem that those discontented writers of 2006 do have some intellectual (if that is the word!) progeny elsewhere—let that suffice as a cautionary final word on the subject.