

Peter Unger. *Empty Ideas: A Critique of Analytic Philosophy.* Oxford University Press 2014. 272 pp. \$47.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199330812).

Although the main thesis of Peter Unger's *Empty Ideas* is stated a number of times throughout his book, I'll just state it as claiming that the whole of analytic philosophy of the last 60 years or so are 'concretely empty'. Why does Unger, who has been so entrenched within the 'analytic' tradition, think that his thesis is correct? Well, I should first say that his book has nine chapters, and most are structured as follows: 1) Look at what is being done in philosophy (really, analytic metaphysics). 2) Look at how the debates, no matter however they fall, will always fall, correct or not, in such a way that the winning party will be offering 'concretely empty' ideas. Furthermore, sometimes in order for a debate to even get to correctness, it will require that the parties settle on 'parochial claims'. Other times, at least it seems to me from *Empty Ideas*, that in order to get to a correct ideas requires that one endorse a form of dualism. This then raises the question of whether the implicit, perhaps sinisterly hidden, thesis of Unger's book is that dualism is the correct way to think about reality. Of course, if so, why doesn't he just state this as the thesis of the book?

Getting back to the question of why Unger might think that the analytic tradition of the last 60 plus years is misguided despite him being within it, I will only gesture that he is comfortable about being honest with what he and his colleagues have been doing. If you have been just playing a game of 'concrete emptiness', and you are being honest with yourself, and if you are comfortable (or think it's a duty to do so) with calling out what you've been doing, then it makes sense to call everyone out about the game they've been playing. I will suggest in this review, though, that Unger is too harsh in his appraisal of his colleagues about the game of analytic metaphysics they've been playing, and that furthermore, he has done very little to touch many other areas of philosophy, including those areas which are dominated by the analytic approach. But first, what just is Unger's argument (in sketch) for such a central claim as this:

when it's not downright parochial, recent and current philosophy are heavily pervaded with concretely empty ideas and, what's more, the emptiness of these thoughts is due to their analyticity. But for a philosophy that aims to be highly relevant to concrete matters and issues, is there really any alternative? (25)

The argument for this revolves around understanding what Unger thinks philosophy should be primarily doing. It should be making claims about concrete reality. And claims about concrete reality delineate how the world (the universe, or even multiverse) is. More specifically, claims about concrete reality delineate what things there are in the world and how they are related to each other. Suppose I make a claim like this: If I had a dream last night of speaking with a red dragon working at a hot dog stand, then I had a dream. According to Unger, this claim is either parochial or concretely empty (I don't know which since this is my example and not his). Many claims of analytic philosophy are just like this. They don't delineate how concrete reality is. Although the claim makes a correct idea, it is a concretely empty one. Okay, I agree. But once again, his argument is what? I think it's something like this: Look at this issue, and look at the claims being made. Don't they parallel the red-dragon-at-a-hot-dog-stand claim? Yes, they do. So, the claims are concretely empty. As such, analytic philosophy for the large part has been doing philosophy that results in concretely empty ideas.

But there is a second crucial component to his argument. Unger identifies a kind of philosophical ethos of our times that he labels 'Scientiphicalism'. Yes, Unger spells it 'Scientiphicalism' and not 'Scientiphysicalism'. This should be noted. Just ponder the differences. But what is this ethos

that so many of us are committed to? Unger's characterization of it, even in his own summary, is far too long to quote here. That said, I can say that it's basically this: Physicalism, or even materialism, is true. Everything is physical/material. But furthermore, given that much of what exists is very complex, these complex entities are fundamentally physical, and nothing else. Although within this dominant camp, there are debates about reductivism versus eliminativism, both sides of the debate are Scientiphilicasts. Basically, according to this ethos, there is nothing *concrete* which is not physical/material. (Of course, this leaves open questions about the existence and nature of *abstract* reality; but in terms of *concrete* reality, there is only the physical/material according to the Scientiphicalists.) Now according to Unger, many claims of philosophy from such a Scientiphicalist perspective are going to proceed as concretely empty. Given that they already accept concrete reality as 'Scientiphicalist', they are then going to be making claims that follow *analytically* as *concretely empty*; any claim from Scientiphicalism is going to cohere (just so long as it is coherent) according to that view of what concrete reality is made of, and so will be concretely empty; it won't specify another way that concrete reality could be.

Before criticizing Unger's work here, I want to emphasize that his book is important, and in many ways *very* important. I think some of its importance is that it should make us more mindful in what we're doing when producing philosophical literature. Just exactly what are we doing? I also think that this would be a great book to center a graduate seminar on. If a graduate program decided to have a second seminar on the profession of philosophy (maybe offered in the second year), then *Empty Ideas* would be a great candidate. Perhaps in a couple hundred years students will have a choice between Kant's *The Critique of Pure Reason* and Unger's *Empty Ideas*. Some readers will be offended that I've even considered giving an opt out to that very difficult and important text of Kant's. Others will think that I'm being ridiculous to think that either should be even considered. But I think that in educating our apprentice philosophers, we should have them engaged in extremely difficult texts that push the limits on what philosophy can do in the first place. This is exactly what Unger's *Empty Ideas* does so well.

In the 'criticism' part of this review, I will just highlight a few things. First, I'm rather surprised that Unger doesn't touch anything from the rest of the panorama of philosophy. He doesn't touch ethics, political philosophy, or aesthetics. Okay, these are all normative. But he also certainly doesn't touch epistemology. And although epistemology is at times normative, much of it is not (at least not directly). He says nothing about how his views will affect that great part of analytic philosophy of the last 60 years which is called 'epistemology'. Are the thoughts of Gettier and those who worked within that paradigm 'concretely empty'? I don't know; it's not clear from Unger's work. Second, I think that Unger doesn't adequately give credit to the many philosophers who draw out implications (both 'good' and 'bad') from the claims made by others and their views. This is very significant, and not easy, work. Why put this work down by saying that it is 'concretely empty'? Third, he discusses toward the beginning-middle part of this book Davidson's Swampman. And although Unger uses Swampman for different purposes, he completely skips the very substantive, and not concretely empty, issue of whether it's possible for the regenerated Swampman, being *physically identical* to its prior counterpart, to actually be mentally different in terms of memories and beliefs. This just seems highly implausible to me. There should be more of a debate about whether this is possible, and given so, there should be more of a debate about what is concretely *substantial*, not *empty*. Unger also passes up on the substantial when discussing Presentism versus Eternalism. Fourth, and finally, in his chapter 'What Become of Us', he ironically doesn't consider the possibility that upon suffering bodily death, we are liberated into a realm of existence where we experience quite a bit, and quite a

bit that is rather pleasant; he, in fact, excludes this possibility by endorsing the same view it seems he is critical of, namely 'Scientiphicalism'.

Please read Peter Unger's *Empty Ideas*. I imagine an incredible amount of debate not just on this work, but based on this work. Well done Unger for starting a kind of philosophical fire, even if you didn't think it would start just the kind of fire you have imagined!

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