

A Renewal of Philosophy

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For centuries, Western philosophers have grappled with profound questions. How do we know what we know? When are we justified in claiming we know? Are there universal moral truths? Does the physical world exist independent of human perception? If it does, do we perceive it directly—or only via representations in our minds? Are the human mind and human body two distinct substances, or are they one physical thing? If they are distinct, how do they interact; but if they are identical, where can we locate conscious experiences in someone’s brain? These problems have yet to be solved, and perhaps they never will be. Yet, at the same time, science made great strides in answering questions about the physical world. Can we finally say then that philosophy has failed—that it is dead? In this paper, I will argue that if the purpose of philosophy is to *answer* the profound questions, then yes, philosophy has failed. But I will also suggest that if we reconsider its purpose, then philosophy is very much alive.

Here at the University, criminology and nursing students are required to take at least one philosophy course about ethics in their respective fields. Their professors traverse thorny ethical issues: Is plea bargaining moral? Should there be mandatory sentences for serious crimes? Are police sting operations fair? Is plea bargaining ethical? Should we allow assisted dying? Is abortion murder? To the disappointment of the students, the answers to these problems are no more

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forthcoming then are the centuries-old profound problems of philosophy exemplified above. Many of these students complete their ethics courses frustrated *because they were expecting answers*. What good is a class in ethics if they return to their legal or nursing programs without the rules which will guide them through the maze of dilemmas they will face in their careers?

Bertrand Russell (89-94) asserted the following: In contrast to physical science, which “is useful to innumerable people who are wholly ignorant of it,” philosophy only directly affects the lives of those who study it. Philosophy does not directly produce knowledge. Though philosophy is the great mother of sciences, it leaves it to the other sciences to find answers—because if it were to produce answers, it would no longer be philosophy. Indeed, said Russell, the purpose of philosophy is not to find answers, but to better ourselves as people by helping us clarify questions; accept uncertainty; examine our beliefs, convictions, and prejudices; remove ignorance which prevents us from eventually finding answers to problems; and to help us achieve personal liberation by developing compassion and kindness. If Russell was correct, then it is no wonder that criminology and healthcare students don’t find immediate answers to their problems; yet it is the hope that philosophy helps them take small steps towards becoming clearer thinkers and better people.

Russell believed that the ambiguities, misunderstandings, and other obstacles to clear thinking were the result of the inadequacy of grammar. Propositions must either be true or false—but not indeterminate. But what is the truth value of a statement such as “The present of King of France is bald,”

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considering that the present King France is a non-existent entity. How can something that doesn't exist have a property; and moreover, how can we determine the truth value of such a claim? Russell sought to clean up sloppy language by translating it into logical form, a superior "language" which explicitly elucidates the *intent* of the deficient grammar, which is in this case, "There exists one and only one present King of France, and he is bald." If we apply Russell's logic, we have a conjunction, $A + B$. Unless *both* conjuncts are true, the statement is false. Since A is false, we now have successfully determined the falsity of the entire statement. Russell thus cleaned up language, at least with respect to nonexistent definite descriptions. But using a similar strategy of determining the logical intent behind grammar, Russell's theory of descriptions solved various classic puzzles of grammar presented by Frege and Strawson.¹

Russell's student, Ludwig Wittgenstein, initially seemed to share Russell's belief that the best strategy to address philosophical problems and to clarify thinking was to clean up language. Both Russell and Wittgenstein sought to clarify language insofar as grammar is often imprecise and ambiguous, but they employed distinct strategies. As explicated above, Russell sought to expose the underlying logic, and reduce the world to logical statements about simples.² But Wittgenstein took a different approach: His *picture theory* taught that those objects—and only those objects—which could coherently fit together in a picture were part of the world. Anything else was nonsensical, and one could not possibly encounter nonsensical states of affairs composed of things that did not fit logically together (*Tractatus*). Russell explained how sentences referring

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to nonexistents could have meaning by reducing such sentences to anatomical logical statements, as described above. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, stated that nonexistents, so long as they were logically possible (the present King of France is possible, but a round square is not), were facts of the world. They may be true facts, or false facts—but all *logically possible* states of affairs are part of the world as described by language, according to Wittgenstein.

Then Russell and Wittgenstein parted ways. Whereas Russell may have succeeded in exposing the underlying logic which is the *intention* of ambiguous grammatical statements, and may have succeeded in inventorying the world of anatomic facts, Wittgenstein embarked on a much more radical project: To refute that anatomical facts have significant meaning at all; and moreover, to refute widely accepted metaphysical beliefs on the grounds that such metaphysical theories *do not fit into pictures*. For example, beliefs about morality, good, bad, evil and God are out the window—such things cannot be pictured. Indeed, no judgments about states of affairs can be pictured—only states of affairs themselves make any sense.

Wittgenstein was not done yet; his project was not to lead us into nihilism by denying meaning or values, then walk away. He pointed us in a new direction by offering an alternative method to understand life which relies neither on metaphysical theories nor on value judgments (indeed, it precludes them). This is the world of *Realität* —the present moment of *here and now* which cannot be converted to grammatical descriptions nor to metaphysical concepts. Indeed, the present moment is *all* we ever have. The “past” is merely a memory experienced in the present; ideas about the “future” likewise necessarily reside in

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the present. No sooner than we attempt to conceptualize, philosophize, moralize, or otherwise judge an experience, the moment in which such experience resided is already gone. Thus, we are always and inescapably in the present moment which words cannot capture. The word *pain* is not identical to the experience of pain, it is merely a word. Because words cannot capture an experience, *Realität* is a mystical place devoid of words (and thus concepts) where one might hope to find personal meaning—yet in which there is no possibility of conceptualizations, judgments, nor proclamations about immaterial yet purportedly objective features of the world such as moral codes (Atkinson 37-43).

Equally as radical, Wittgenstein argued that all language is public. *Language games* set forth agreed-upon rules, without which language would be nonsensical, much like would be a game of chess to non-players. At first, this claim might seem uninteresting. But a deeper understanding of this claim reveals that if there is no private language, then although *sensations* are private, culture defines *concepts*. This means that one's self identity is contingent upon public language. This is a radical claim that the nature of human cognition is contingent and cultural—rather than *a priori* (i.e., necessary and prior to experience). We can see how Wittgenstein's language game theory is related to *Realität*: The present moment, although private, does not lend itself to language; and language, necessarily public, never captures the present moment. Thus, *private* meaning exists only in the moment and cannot be conceptualized. Conceptualization necessarily involves adopting culturally constructed, public concepts.

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To review up to this point: Russell understood that the purpose of philosophy was liberation and sought to eliminate the confusion of language by seeking a universal language of logic. Wittgenstein elucidated how language works, and thought it worked just fine for its intended purpose—making an inventory of facts and communicating socially using language games—but that meaning in life would not be found in language. Towards the goal of finding meaning, Wittgenstein lead us into the mystical present-moment of *Realität*.

For those who still cling to conventional views of logic: Quine attacked the empirical philosophers' distinction between analytic and synthetic claims as dogmatic. He stated that the proposition "No bachelor is married," presumed to be analytically true by definition, is not so—because definition "hinges on prior relations of synonymy" (261). But Quine points out that for words to be synonymous they must be interchangeable *salva veritate*.³ If a statement such as "All bachelors are unmarried men" to be analytic, the words "bachelor" and "unmarried man" would have to be interchangeable. But said Quine, "Truths which become false under substitution of 'unmarried man' for 'bachelor' are easily constructed with the help of 'bachelor of arts' or 'bachelor's buttons . . ." But even if we ruled out alternate definitions of "bachelor," interchangeability *salva veritate* would not be an assurance of *cognitive synonymy*, which Quine asserted would be necessary for analyticity. The general terms "creature with a heart" and "creature with kidneys" are alike in extension, i.e., they point to an identical creature—because hearts and kidneys can only exist together. Thus, they are interchangeable *salva veritate*. But they are not *cognitively* synonymous. Therefore,

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in an extensional language, cognitive synonymy and interchangeability are distinct matters. That “bachelor” and “unmarried man” point to the same object does not mean that they are cognitively synonymous. If they are not assured to be cognitively synonymous, we can question whether “All bachelors are unmarried men” is analytic.

Quine also attacked the second “dogma of empiricism”, viz., the verification theory of meaning, which states that the meaning of a statement is its *empirical* verification condition. (267) The dogma (and self-contradiction) here is that according to *itself* the verification theory is meaningless, because *it* has no empirical verification condition.

Next, enter Derrida. One of Derrida’s projects was to question logical centrism (*naïve* devotion to logic). Widely accepted laws of logic such as LEM—the law of excluded middle—are false according to Derrida’s concept of *differance*:⁴ Logical centrism failed to recognize dynamic flow based on relationships of opposites. Indeed, *A* implies *not A*. Love and hate, for from being mutually exclusive opposites, have something important in common: They are both strong emotions. Logic-centric philosophy, forever seeking primacies of meaning, has failed to recognize the symbiotic relationship of opposites. The laws of physics reveal potential energy, which can be thought of as residing somewhere between existence and non-existence—again, challenging the law of excluded middle.⁵

Derrida also questioned implicit metaphysical biases in philosophy, e.g., that “good” is better than “bad,” and that “reality” is preferable to “illusion.” Further, we erroneously believe that *aporia*—confusion and doubt—is to be avoided.

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Also, on the chopping block were Russellian efforts to find logic in language. Derrida pointed out that communication is laden with difficulty because language is *polysemic*. Words have multiple meanings, and these meanings are constantly in flux. Written language is out of the writer's control (and the reader is not present at the time of writing), therefore there's a contextual disconnect such that written material can be interpreted by readers in ways not intended by the writer. Moreover, Derrida attacked the "classical assertion" that performative utterance refers to something outside of itself, because *language transforms the very situation it describes* (355). With ambiguities such as these, it seems that language itself may have trouble being a tool of effective communication.

Rorty dealt a final insult to centuries of philosophy as a descriptive endeavour. He argued that schools of philosophy which try to establish truth correspondence to the natural world ("Mirror of Nature") are bankrupt (370). Rather, Rorty advocated a pragmatic theory of knowledge wherein scientific and metaphysical "truths" are recognized as merely contingent vocabularies which are employed by social convention because of their usefulness—not because they *correspond* to an objective world.

If my brief overview of the modern philosophers and their theories which I have referenced above has influenced us, we are now likely in states of *aporia*—knowing less than we thought we knew when we started this inquiry, and perhaps less than we expected to know after finishing several years of philosophy classes. But remember Russell's claim—that philosophy does not have answers, only questions. Derrida and Quine warned us that if we accept dogmatic answers to the

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problems of philosophy, we are likely fooling ourselves. Wittgenstein offered a possible approach to the confusion and frustration which are inevitable consequences of a plethora of intractable metaphysical problems: The meaning of life is to be discovered, here and now, not in metaphysical theories but in the non-conceptualizable experience of *Realität*. Perhaps we are witnessing the death of dogmatic philosophy and even of metaphysics itself. Philosophy could be reborn as an authentic quest for personal liberation, freedom, and meaning—free from questionable logical and metaphysical claims which, even if true, would not give us meaningful insights into life. Centuries of dogmatism may have imprisoned us; indeed, Wittgenstein asserted that his aim was “To shew the fly the way out of the bottle” (Investigations 165)—that is to say, no amount of hard thinking about which theories are correct will free us. Rather, freedom is a consequence of letting go, ceasing the persistent and insatiable quest for answers to intractable problems, and instead becoming aware of the present moment. But paradoxically, this very argument of Wittgenstein’s might itself be considered just another example of a philosophical theory, which as such should be dismissed by its own logic, as should the theories of Russell, Derrida, Quine, and Rorty. How then can we justify adopting Wittgenstein’s approach or that of the deconstructionists more than any other philosophical position? The answer may be that our study of philosophy—including the theories that I have elucidated herein—form a ladder. This ladder offers us a method to rise above the insatiable quest for the “correct” descriptive metaphysical theory which corresponds to an objective world, and rather towards an open state of acceptance of the unknown, letting go, and surrendering to the only sure thing we have—the present moment. Once

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we've achieved freedom, metaphysical ladders may no longer be needed—indeed, they may be the walls of the bottle which trap the fly.

Notes

1. The referential theory of language holds that names and descriptions refer to things in the actual world. But this gives rise to certain puzzles of identity, references to nonexistents, negative existentials, and substitutivity (Lycan 19-26). Russell's theory of definite descriptions offers plausible methods of dealing with these puzzles by extracting the logic behind the grammar (Donnellan).
2. *Simple* refers to the smallest reducible objects. But the concept of simples came under attack by Quine for placing an artificial limit on reducibility (271).
3. Two expressions are said to be interchangeable *salva veritate* if the substitution of one for the other does not change the truth value or meaning of any context in which either expression appears.
4. Derrida intentionally misspelled the word *difference* to illustrate that words are difficult to interpret without context. He gives us context for *differance*, otherwise we would not know its meaning.
5. Arguing for idealism, W.T. Stace used the indeterminacy of potential energy as an argument against the objectivity of science (620).

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