

Philosophy Not Dead, Just Intoxicated

Definitions

Let's begin with a few definitions. Some of these are central to what we are talking about. Others are likely to get used, and I want everyone to be comfortable with them.

Scientism is the belief in the exclusive primacy of science. Sometimes this is used pejoratively, but when I use it, I don't intend it as a pejorative. Let's not beg any questions with our use of words. Moreover, some people use that word to self-describe.

When we are objecting to scientism, we are not objecting to science.

Science is just the thing that scientism says is the only source of knowledge. If you ask me, I think that there is nothing distinctive about science as a form of inquiry.

Epistemology is the study of knowledge.

Metaphysics is the study of reality and existence. Sometimes used synonymously with **Ontology**.

Metaphilosophy is just philosophy about philosophy.

Philosophy is just the subject that metaphilosophy is about. Often it's just considered to be metaphysics, epistemology, logic, and ethics. That's good enough.

A posteriori knowledge gained through investigating the world.

A priori knowledge gained through thinking, reasoning, deduction, etc.

Prefatory Note: Metaphilosophy is an extremely messy subject. I have my own thoughts, but I also want to hear your thoughts. Do you ever encounter scientism? Does it seem plausible, or obviously wrong?

I also don't want to get stuck on the three questions I've brought. If the three questions I've brought seem to omit something, then as philosophers we have the ability to raise better questions.

Our Questions

- 1) Is philosophy useful to science?
- 2) Is philosophy useful in general?
- 3) Does philosophy need to be useful to be worth doing?

To start with, two slightly kooky scenarios.

Scenario One: You try to make a purchase using a counterfeit dollar bill. In response to the incredulity of the cashier, you wave the paper confidently. The bill *exists*.

Scenario Two: You try to make a purchase using debit. The cashier refuses to take debit, because only bills, which exist and can be held in one's hands, are acceptable.

Both of these scenarios involve some craziness. But they also describe the ways people often think. How often do people offer us money, only to give us paper? In other words, waving around some object as though it has some significance. Perhaps one example is when someone says that philosophy is useless because it does not contribute to science. This is invalid. Even if philosophy doesn't contribute to science, it might have other uses.

Is Philosophy Useful to Science?

Do you think that philosophy is useful to science? What examples can you think of?

The most well-known example may be Einstein's rejection of absolute time. He credits this to reading Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*. Does it matter that absolute time is something that a philosopher needed to take out, rather than add?

Even if someone like Hawking were to concede that Hume's work did help Einstein to make a novel discovery, this is just one case. In dealing with a complete skeptic, should we offer more cases, or should we argue that any single case is enough?

Is Philosophy Useful in General?

When we define philosophy a little more broadly, we can see that it's pretty clear that Hawking is wrong. Anything that relates to how we live, what's valuable, is philosophical in nature, and obviously indispensable.

Is metaphysics possible? Our last meeting was about the concrete modal realism of David Lewis. I can tell you why that's wrong. Essentially the view runs into a trilemma.

- 1) Everything which can occur, occurs once and only once.
- 2) Everything which can occur, occurs infinitely many times.
- 3) Everything which can occur, occurs. But some of the things which occur, occur more frequently than others.

- 1) There is the problem of causal circularity. If everything occurs only once, the worlds are mutually constraining. But this is anathema to Lewis.
- 2) There is still a problem of causal circularity, if all of the possible worlds have equal numbers of realizations.
- 3) This horn leads to arbitrariness. Why are some possibilities realized more than others?

This is metaphysics. It's destructive, taking down a very well populated ontology. Can we give an example of metaphysics which is constructive? How about the Euthyphro Dilemma?

Is it good because God commands it, or does God command it because it's good?

If you've ever used this on a religious enthusiast, you have been doing metaphysics. You've raised a question about the *grounding* of moral statements.

Does Philosophy Need to Be Useful to Be Worth Doing?

Any philosophical idea, or any discovery, might appear useless for a long time. A philosophical theorem might be such that its usefulness is hard to see.

I conceive of philosophy as a discipline that either discovers or helps. What sort of discovery could be useless? Perhaps Lewis' concrete modal realism would be useless if it turned out to be true. Alright, there are these spatiotemporally distinct worlds, but so what?

If true, it would have shown us something about the nature of reason, and something about ourselves—that we could discover concrete modal realism. Not to mention the explanatory payoff—that is if you accept Lewis's views more generally. To reiterate, the problem with Lewis' concrete modal realism is not that it's useless, or that it's speculative—the problem is that it's just wrong.

But is there a requirement for some line of inquiry to be useful in order to be valuable? I'd argue no. The demand for usefulness might as well be a demand for *money*, or profit. Given that you can't know in advance how useful any inquiry will be, the right thing to do is to follow one's curiosity with honesty.

Also, isn't the demand that philosophy be useful a bit disconcerting? While scientism demands that philosophy be useful, people are cutting down trees because it's profitable. Culturally, we're in way too much of a hurry.

Kinds of "Practical" Philosophy

Destruction

Tearing down false belief systems, worldviews, and ideologies. This is often distinctively philosophical, and sometimes philosophy does this better than science.

Examples: Religious fundamentalism, self-help, extremism.

Reconstruction

Addresses the need for the false beliefs, worldviews, etc.

Examples: morality without God. Psychology can address ways to help people think better, but the norms of logical and rigorous thought are addressed by philosophy.

Clarification

Clarifies concepts—often removing ambiguity or equivocation. Sometimes destroys false

dichotomies. Sometimes addresses culturally hot terms like the following.

Tolerance, Pluralism, Nihilism, Relativism, Conspiracy, Dogmatism, Offensiveness, Extremism, Freedom.

Prioritization

Philosophy can and should clarify the appropriate objects of anger, as well as the appropriate use of anger. Sometimes an interlocutor may be forced to admit some matter of fact which is inconvenient for them. What do they say? *It's true, but it's a distraction!* Such statements imply theories about what really matters. These theories may be so general as to be incapable of being addressed by anything except philosophy.

Reorganization

Sometimes philosophy does not so much revise what we think—it restructures how we think, like a secretary who goes into the office of a badly run business.

Examples: Empiricists sometimes allow for *a priori* knowledge. Rationalists sometimes allow for empirical knowledge.

All of these are continuous with each other, and also continuous with purely “theoretical” work which may appear to be useless.

Why Intoxicated?

Quantity There's a lot of philosophy. Knowing what's good is a judgment call.

Abstract Philosophy is the most abstract of all the disciplines, and it is hard to measure its successes.

Academia There are various abuses of the field—for instances, researches often stretch their findings to increase their number of publications. Much of academic philosophy is extremely niche.

Difficulty There is little public philosophy at the intermediate level. It's often extremely pedestrian, or else completely inaccessible.

What are your thoughts?

Characterizing Philosophy

Subject Matter

Existence
Reality

Truth
Meaning
Relevance
Reasonableness
Value
Agency

Aims

Discovering/Helping

Clarification
Interpretation
Destruction
Reconstruction

Methods

Introspection
Dialogue
Argument
Thought-experiments
Sales Pitches

Practitioners

Too numerous to categorize