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Forum

3. Philosophy as Mathematics or as Anthropology

DANIEL DENNETT

The set text does indeed launch a rocket, and I have found it valuable, at least to myself, to try to formulate my own mid-course correction.

The idea that philosophy is not only 'the queen of the sciences' but an entirely aprioristic discipline - like mathematics - is as old as philosophy, and thus probably deserves to be called the traditional view, but it is hardly the received view today. One of the most durable fruits of the 'analytic' movement in philosophy - including 'ordinary language philosophy' - is the dissipation of this dream, and its replacement by a more modest and realistic vision of the philosopher's legitimate role and method of inquiry.

Even if philosophy is primarily conceptual analysis (and that is about as accurate a two-word definition of the field as I can muster), we realize today that the concepts amenable to philosophical analyses are not, typically, as clean, pristine, and insulated as the concepts in mathematics that enable it to be (for the most part) a genuinely aprioristic field of inquiry. The concept of justice (or mind or cause or time or beauty) is an *objet trouve*, embedded in practices, theories, institutions, preconceptions, and projects, not an already distilled and isolated essence, a hard-edged seed for crystalline growths like those in mathematics.

So the philosopher bent on analyzing one of these concepts (and what else is there for a philosopher to do?) has two choices: (1) propose some bold idealization of one of these messy concepts and then, having formalized it, run like mad and hope that somebody else will get interested in playing the same game, or (2) settle for a more empirical, defeasible, and informal method of conceptual analysis.

The philosopher who takes the former road does indeed engage in a quasi-mathematical enterprise. The benefits are obvious: genuine, irrefragable, rigorous proof and a minimum of rhetorical muddying of the waters. The risks, however, are great: 99 times out of 100, the particular idealization/formalization hit upon is of only 'academic interest' - an intellectual toy that sheds precious little light on any abiding problem since it

formalizes a concept no one else would or should be interested in. Such toys often conceal this embarrassment by generating technical problems of their own to bemuse and distract the (limited) audience, sometimes for years, sometimes for generations. A huge portion of the 'standard literature' of philosophy consists 'of these artifactual problems and challenges, together with the array of attempted solutions, refutations of solutions, defenses, revisions and comparisons.

Unfortunately, something approaching the same ratio of filagree to substance besets the latter approach as well, in spite of a different trade-off between rigor of method and relevance of result. The 'naturalized' philosopher of mind (or language or justice or knowledge) treats conceptual analysis as more akin to anthropology or literary criticism, involving imaginative and critical interpretation of observed manners of speaking, presuppositions, and connotations, for instance, and as irreducibly informal and non-algorithmic in its methods. Here philosophy appears as a meta-discipline, parasitic on the investigations conducted by others with other agendas; thus philosophy of mind appears not as the axiomatized theorems derivable from the definitions of 'believe', 'see', 'intend', 'understand' and the like, but as a branch of philosophy of science, dealing in a factually enriched arena with the conceptual puzzles that arise when psychologists, neuroscientists, linguists and such types attempt to do their jobs. And since empirical facts - especially new discoveries - contribute to the development of the concepts found in such a domain, the philosophers' analyses can be jeopardized by the sort of claim our imagined psychologist makes, and hence vitiated by a philosopher's empirical ignorance.

There are still plenty of practitioners of the former sort. The Society for Exact Philosophy is alive and well, and not all its members would consider themselves to be primarily (or just) logicians. Their work provides walls of constraint for the less formal sorts of philosophical scouting operations, and occasionally even provides scaffolding for theoretical and empirical work in other disciplines.

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