The Pursuit of Philosophy
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The Pursuit of Philosophy

Some Cambridge Perspectives

Edited by

Alexis Papazoglou
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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Tim Crane is Knightbridge Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge. He works on the philosophy of mind and psychology, and on metaphysics. He is the author of *The Mechanical Mind* (1995) and *Elements of Mind* (2001), and the editor of *The Contents of Experience* (1992) and *History of the Mind-Body Problem* (2000). He is currently working on a book about the representation of the non-existent.

Michael Edwards is Gurnee Hart Fellow and College Lecturer in History at Jesus College, Cambridge. He received a Ph.D. in intellectual history from Cambridge in 2006, and his research interests are in early modern intellectual history and the history of science—specifically, the relationship between the late scholastic and Aristotelian traditions and the “new philosophy” of the seventeenth century. He has published several articles on early modern natural philosophy, metaphysics, and psychology.


Jane Heal is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge and Fellow at St. John’s College, Cambridge; she previously taught at Newcastle upon Tyne. She took her Ph.D. at Cambridge and did postdoctoral study at Princeton and Berkeley. Her main areas of interest are philosophy of language and philosophy of mind, and her publications include *Fact and Meaning: Quine and Wittgenstein on Philosophy of Language* (Blackwell, 1989) and *Mind, Reason and Imagination: Selected Essays in Philosophy of Mind and Language* (Cambridge, 2003).

Douglas Hedley is Fellow at Clare College and Reader in hermeneutics and metaphysics in the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. He has been a visiting professor at the Sorbonne in Paris and has lectured in India and China. He is the author of a trilogy on the religious imagination: *Living Forms of the Imagination* (Continuum, 2008), *Sacrifice Imagined: Violence, Atonement and the Sacred* (Continuum, 2011), and *The Iconic Imagination* (forthcoming).

Simon Jarvis is Gorley Putt Professor of Poetry and Poetics in the Faculty of English at the University of Cambridge. He is the author of *Wordsworth’sPhilosophic Song* (2007) and of *Dionysus Crucified: Choral Lyric for Two Soloists and Messenger* (2011).

Matthew H. Kramer is Professor of Legal and Political Philosophy at the University of Cambridge, Fellow at Churchill College, Cambridge, and Director of the Cambridge Forum for Legal and Political Philosophy. His thirteen books and four co-edited books range over many areas of political, moral, and legal philosophy. The most recent of his books is *The Ethics of Capital Punishment* (Oxford, 2011).

Tim Lewens is Reader in Philosophy of the Sciences at the University of Cambridge, where he is also Fellow at Clare College. His research is in the philosophy of biology, the philosophy of science, and philosophical bioethics. He is the author of *Organisms and Artifacts: Design in Nature and Elsewhere* (MIT Press, 2004) and *Darwin* (Routledge, 2007).

Fraser MacBride is Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Cambridge and Fellow at Trinity Hall, Cambridge. He was previously Reader in the Department of Logic and Metaphysics at the University of St. Andrews and in the School of Philosophy at Birkbeck College London. He has published on the history of analytic philosophy, metaphysics, and the philosophy of mathematics. He is currently completing a book on the origins of analytic metaphysics, *On the Genealogy of Universals: 1899–1925*. 
Alexis Papazoglou is a Ph.D. candidate in philosophy at the University of Cambridge and has been a visiting graduate student in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Chicago. His doctoral thesis explores the relationship between reason and nature in Hegel’s philosophy, against the background of John McDowell’s Mind and World and contemporary naturalism.

David Runciman is Reader in Political Thought at the University of Cambridge and Staff Fellow in Politics at Trinity Hall, Cambridge. He is currently a Leverhulme Major Research Fellow (2009–2012) working on the history of democracy and crisis. He is the author of a number of books, including The Politics of Good Intentions and Political Hypocrisy (both Princeton University Press). He writes regularly about politics for the London Review of Books.
INTRODUCTION:
PHILOSOPHY, ITS PITFALLS, SOME RESCUE PLANS,
AND THEIR COMPLICATIONS

ALEXIS PAPAZOGLOU

Philosophy in Non-Philosophy Departments

The summer before I was about to begin my Ph.D. in the Faculty of Philosophy at Cambridge, I became interested in the presence of philosophy in faculties other than the homonymous one at the University of Cambridge. Did philosophy matter outside the Faculty of Philosophy? If so, what form did it take? Having been an undergraduate there I already knew that at Cambridge ancient Greek philosophy was studied primarily in the Faculty of Classics and that philosophy of science took place under the umbrella of the Department of History and Philosophy of Science (HPS). I was surprised, however, to find at least eight departments and faculties besides the Faculty of Philosophy that included philosophers or people whose work involved the close study of philosophy: HPS, Classics, History, Divinity, Political Science, Modern and Medieval Languages, Law, and English.¹ In fact it became apparent that there were at least as many, if not more, academics involved in the study of philosophy outside the Faculty of Philosophy as there were in it. I was so intrigued by this discovery that I wanted to organise an event where all these philosophers would be brought together. But what would they discuss, given their quite different backgrounds and interests? What could function as the common ground they all shared? Well, philosophy! So the theme of the meeting came to life: How did these people, from nine different faculties and departments in the same university, think of philosophy? The primary aims of the conference were:

¹ This is also the case in many other universities in the English-speaking world, but Cambridge instantiates this institutional structure to a much greater extent.
To allow people who work on philosophy at Cambridge to exchange ideas on their area of common interest and stir up some interesting conversation.

To provide a map of what philosophy is considered to be in Cambridge in the early twenty-first century, about a hundred years after the “founding fathers” of analytic philosophy reigned.

To provide insight into the question “What is philosophy?”

The main question that speakers were asked to respond to was “What is your conception of philosophy?” The speakers were also given a list of “guiding” questions that they could address while answering that question. They included:

- What is the role of the history of philosophy in the study of philosophy?
- What role, if any, should the empirical sciences and other disciplines play in philosophy?
- What is the relation of philosophy to life?

**Definitions and Wittgensteinean Themes**

The idea was to ask questions that were relevant to all of the participants, but also questions that could have radically different answers, perhaps depending on which department one came from. The aim was also to see whether there was anything identifiable as “Cambridge philosophy” at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Around a hundred years ago the movement that was to become analytic philosophy was beginning to emerge, and there was a distinguishable tendency regarding which philosophical questions should be asked and how one should go about answering them. It would be interesting to see whether there was any such identifiable trend in Cambridge today, say at least one sentence that all could agree on regarding what philosophy is (or what it should be).

It quickly became clear, however, that agreeing on definitions was not going to be the order of the day. Even Wilfrid Sellars’s broadest possible definition, “The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term” (Sellars 2007, 37), was not something all cared for. Tim Crane, for example, pointed out that Sellars’s definition, even though the most plausible, is at the same time too broad. Jane Heal, on the other hand, offered a different possible definition, closer to the etymology of the word “philosophy” and its origins in ancient Greek thought. As she puts it in Chapter 2, “Philosophy and Its Pitfalls,” “There is (or may be) such a thing as being wise. 

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2 One should note here that this attitude of the analytic school towards philosophy, believing that only certain questions should be asked in philosophy (implying therefore that some questions should not be asked) is expressive of a new philosophic ethic.
Being wise is a matter of having a good (or the right, or some admirable) stance to the world, such that one apprehends, feels, acts in ways that are good (or right, or somehow admirable)”; what is more, Heal adds, philosophy is the activity of the discursive pursuit of this right stance towards the world. This disagreement was not necessarily a surprise; when philosophers give definitions of philosophy they are not usually offering descriptive definitions, definitions of a cultural practice that a sociologist or anthropologist might have given. When philosophers give definitions of what philosophy is, they usually give normative definitions, that is, they put forward statements about what philosophy should be, what it should be aiming at, how it should be aiming at it, and so on, and as we know, answers to normative questions are the most controversial kind. It is not clear, however, that philosophy is something that can be given a definition, that there can be a statement of necessary and sufficient conditions for something to count as philosophy, because of the very nature of this practice. Echoing Nietzsche, who claimed that only things without a history could be given a definition (Nietzsche 1998, 53), Tim Crane in Chapter 1 asserts that “in understanding any complex phenomena, very little is achieved by giving definitions.” Indeed, it was an earlier Cambridge philosopher, Wittgenstein, who also tried to undermine the whole Socratic project of philosophy as the aim of defining elusive concepts. Raymond Geuss in Chapter 7, “Goals, Origins, Disciplines,” follows the Nietzschean version of this project against definitions and expands it. Instead of looking for definitions, Geuss investigates in his chapter what philosophy is by using a method that according to him philosophy itself sidelines: the genealogical method. He searches for the numerous origins of the practice that we call philosophy. He does that primarily by looking at the genealogies of philosophy that philosophers themselves have offered, in particular Aristotle’s (and Hegel’s) and Plato’s. Summing up the findings of the genealogical research, Geuss finds at least three, relatively disjointed, sources for philosophy: a concern with nature, questions about what the good is, and an interest in logical structures.

My aim for the conference, however, wasn’t to see how many different definitions of philosophy people could come up with. My suspicion before even the participants’ papers were presented was that this event was not going to be about arriving at definitions. What I thought was that the Wittgensteinean observation concerning aspect seeing would more accurately capture the landscape painted by the Cambridge philosophers, and that’s where the name of the conference came from: “Aspects of Philosophy at Cambridge.” The title served both as an indication that the conference wasn’t aiming at representing philosophy at Cambridge in its totality but only certain parts of it, and as an allusion to the famous duck-rabbit drawing in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1953). The premature diagnosis was that depending on which aspects of philosophy at Cambridge one focused one’s gaze on, the image one would be presented with could be very different. But I think the conference itself showed that perhaps this way of thinking about
philosophy at Cambridge was unnecessarily divisive (separating Cambridge philosophy into this kind and that kind, a duck on the one hand and a rabbit on the other) and that the Wittgensteinean metaphor of family resemblance is more apt as a representation of the relationship of the work of contemporary philosophers in Cambridge.

The chapters in this book vary dramatically in terms both of form and of content. Some contributors, like Tim Crane and Jane Heal, address most of the guiding questions head on. Others focus on just one sub-question; Tim Lewens, for example, considers the question of the relationship of the natural sciences to philosophy, whereas Michael Edwards considers the question of the role the history of philosophy can and cannot play in the practice of philosophy. Others, like Fraser MacBride, approach the issues obliquely by demonstrating in action how the history of philosophy can illuminate our understanding of our philosophical culture. John Forrester opts for a more personal response, showing how philosophy is still for some of us a personal (love) affair, whereas Douglas Hedley demonstrates how a particular tradition in philosophy going back to Plato and continuing with the neo-Platonists and the Cambridge Platonists can still exert a powerful influence in the way some of us understand the discipline of philosophy, thus showing that the relationship philosophy has to its past is very different from the one science has to its past. Raymond Geuss’s contribution to this collection, though not one of the papers presented at the conference, moves in the area of questions that the conference dealt with, and I feel that it naturally belongs in this book. Part of the purpose of this collection is of course to make explicit the plurality of perspectives on philosophy living in the University of Cambridge today. As I have already mentioned, however, it is also an attempt to see if one can identify certain common themes and trends among Cambridge philosophers from around the university. Rather than offer a summary or analysis of each of the essays in this collection, I will discuss the themes in them that I find to be the most recurrent and the most important to how the contributors understand philosophy in itself but also in relation to other disciplines.

**Tradition and Philosophy’s Pitfalls**

Jane Heal, Tim Crane, and Douglas Hedley make the point that philosophy in the way it’s practised in the English-speaking world today is part of a tradition, broadly speaking a tradition that has its origins in ancient Greek philosophy and Judaeo-Christian religion. A philosophical tradition, as Tim Crane points out, is more correctly understood as a collection of inter-related texts than a body of doctrines or a distinctive technique. In Chapter 1, “Philosophy, Logic, Science, History,” he offers an impressive and often amusing deconstruction.

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3 Unfortunately the conference contributions from the Faculty of Classics and the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages are missing from this collection.
of certain stereotypes and myths about the philosophical tradition of analytic philosophy. Somewhat shockingly, he points out that what can be seen as the prototype of analytic philosophy, Russell’s project of “philosophical logic,” tackling philosophy’s problems by formulating them in the language of the *Principia Mathematica*, never really took off. Furthermore, Crane undermines analytic philosophy’s alleged special relationship to logic, or the philosophy of language, or Quinean naturalism; analytic philosophy is not defined by any of these things, he claims, and any attempt to construe it as such will necessarily leave out important parts of what is uncontroversially analytic philosophy. However, philosophical traditions do, unfortunately, sometimes become dogmas. When philosophy becomes dogma, Crane warns, “assumptions become treated as established facts, and then it is simply impossible for philosophers working within this framework even to acknowledge that there might be other (equally intelligible and sensible) ways of looking at these problems.” Unfortunately, as Crane points out, the risk of this type of scholasticism “particularly afflicts a successful intellectual inquiry and an institutional orthodoxy like analytic philosophy.” Scholasticism, however, is the death of philosophy, according to Crane, as it undermines one of its essential features: disagreement and criticism.

Jane Heal also expresses worries about the pitfall, as she puts it, of philosophy: scholasticism. For her, however, the dangers lie not in philosophy becoming dogma but in philosophy losing touch with other aspects of human life. One of the reasons why philosophy is at such risk has to do with its very nature: “The risk of such ambitious and speculative enterprises, in particular those that lack any evident or agreed empirical or other constraints on development, is that they may cease to have nourishing roots in the concerns of human life in general.” This is in a way not only a Wittgensteinean kind of worry, something close to Heal’s heart, but also a worry that goes back to the Greeks’ conception of the role philosophy as an integral part of leading a good life.

Another cause that Heal identifies as putting philosophy at risk of falling into the pitfall of scholasticism has to do with philosophy increasingly becoming a professional or institutional practice. When philosophy becomes a career, one’s concerns can move away from the truth towards peer pleasing: “The intellectual activity becomes, to an increasing extent, an elaborate game played by clever people, answering more and more to criteria internal to the enterprise and less and less to criteria implicit in the concerns that started the whole line of reflection or are latent in the rest of human life going on around it. In short, the activity becomes ‘scholastic’ in the pejorative meaning of that term.” Again, for Heal the worry is that the professionalisation of philosophy results in it losing touch with the rest of life. Of course, this is only an objection if one really believes that contact with the rest of life is important to philosophy, or that the “criteria implicit in the concerns that started the whole line of reflection” are the right criteria and concerns to continue with. The criteria of correctness and the concerns of a line of inquiry can certainly change during the investigation itself, and we wouldn’t want to say that this is necessarily a
bad thing. What is more, as Douglas Hedley reminds us, philosophy from its very inception was seen by outsiders as irrelevant to human life and its practical concerns. In Chapter 9, “Forms of Reflection, Imagination, and the Love of Wisdom,” Hedley revisits the anecdote recounted in Plato’s *Theaetetus* of the maid from Thrace who laughed at the philosopher Thales, who as he was walking was gazing at the starry heaven (rather than at the ground he was walking on) and fell into a well. “It is a dislocation between thought and existence that is drastically captured by the ridicule of the Thracian maid,” Hedley observes; this dislocation, however, is something many have considered a necessary condition for doing philosophy. Philosophy in many schools from the Pythagoreans onwards has been closely associated with certain ascetic ideals that require a withdrawal from everyday life as most humans live it. Nietzsche is the most famous critic of this aspect of Western philosophy, deeply rooted, as he saw it, in the Socratic and Christian disdain towards the everyday world. One can’t help but ponder whether the stereotype of the philosopher in the Thracian maid anecdote survives today, at least to some extent.

So the issue of philosophy’s contact or lack of contact with life is an old one and can’t necessarily be blamed on the institutional structures of universities today. But perhaps what Heal is putting her finger on is that by the very standards and criteria of those practising philosophy it has become irrelevant—irrelevant to them, that is, to philosophers. If what philosophers are really doing is merely playing clever games with each other, then even by the standards of most professional philosophers that isn’t philosophy any more. If that is the case, a return to our motivating goals and criteria of what counts as “good” philosophy is in order. That would be a way of curing philosophy by doing philosophy, putting to work the critical aspect of philosophy and challenging the contemporary philosophical practice itself.

But according to Crane and Heal there are other remedies for a philosophy that might be in danger of becoming scholastic. For Crane philosophy’s awareness of its own history can be a way of it avoiding becoming scholastic: “One reason why philosophers should be aware of their own history, then, is that this awareness enables them to achieve a certain distance from their assumptions, to recognize them as assumptions, to make themselves aware that there are genuinely different ways of looking at the questions.” Crane himself does

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4 Both the Socratic dialectic of the early Platonic dialogues and Hegel’s dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* are examples of how that can happen.

5 Of course, there is a beautiful irony in this episode involving Thales falling into a well, given Thales’s philosophical position that “everything is water.”

6 There is, however, another kind of criticism one can direct towards today’s philosophical practice, or at least towards today’s philosophical education, namely, that it fits the contemporary form of life too well. The (transferable) skills one acquires in the process of acquiring an education in philosophy—analytical skills, an atomistic outlook (breaking down problems into their component parts), focusing on small problems in isolation from the big picture, and so on—are not too different from those sought by management consultants.