

Synoptic Reflection and Fundamental Philosophical Disagreements

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(David K, 2024)

Philosophy seeks to correct partial views and complete fragmentary experience by some vision of the whole. This ancient aim has always constituted the readiest apology and the highest honor of philosophy. But only whole [people] sense the whole. [Humankind] becomes whole, as Goethe suggested, only by joining one. (Smith and Wright, 1929)

Let's call people who wholeheartedly pursue and practice philosophy as a full-time, lifetime calling and who grapple with fundamental philosophical issues and problems, whether successfully or not, *real philosophers*. And here's what I mean by "real philosophy":

By *real philosophy*, [I] mean authentic, serious, synoptic, systematic reflection on the individual and collective human condition, and on the natural and social world in which human and other conscious animals live, move, and have their being. Real philosophy

fully includes the knowledge yielded by the natural and formal sciences; but, as [I] see it, real philosophy also goes significantly beneath and beyond the exact sciences, and non-reductively incorporates aesthetic, artistic, affective/emotional, ethical/moral, and, more generally, personal and practical insights that cannot be adequately captured or explained by the sciences. In a word, real philosophy is all about the nature, meaning, and value of individual and collective human existence in the natural cosmos, and how it is possible to know the philosophical limits of science, without also being anti-science. (APP, 2013)

According to this picture of real philosophy, the synoptic-&-holistic element of philosophical reflection is essential to it, and complementary to the existential, individualized element—as per the Chicago School of American pragmatists quoted in the epigraph of this essay. Synoptic holism in philosophical reflection and existential holism in a person’s life go hand-in-hand.

Now, in “On Fundamental Philosophical Disagreements” I wrote the following:

For the sake of clarity and simplicity, let’s say that two people X and Y have a *philosophical disagreement* if and only if, for some explicit philosophical claim C, or some explicit philosophical theory T, X believes that C or T is true, but Y believes that C or T is either false or nonsensical, or conversely. Then by a *fundamental philosophical disagreement*, I mean a philosophical disagreement between X and Y *not only* in terms of explicit philosophical claims or theories, *but also, and above all*, in terms of (i) *the worldview* that’s presupposed by X’s or Y’s explicit claims or theories, and (ii) *the set of thought-shapers* that’s characteristically associated with that worldview (see Hanna and Paans, 2021; Maiese et al, 2023).

These worldviews and thought-shapers are almost always *implicit*, not explicit, and not only that, they’re also very often logically, semantically, and cognitively operative in philosophical claims and philosophical theories in such a way that the people who believe and assert those claims and theories, whose thinking is thereby committed to those worldviews and shaped by those thought-shapers, are *self-consciously unaware of those very commitments and shapings*. For example, there is a fundamental philosophical disagreement of precisely this kind between those philosophers or philosophically-minded people who are committed to and thought-shaped by *the mechanistic worldview*, and those who are committed to and thought-shaped by *the organicist worldview* (see, e.g., Hanna and Paans, 2020, 2021, 2022; Torday, Miller Jr, and Hanna, 2020[; Hanna, 2024a]).

Now, if X and Y have a philosophical disagreement, but either (i) they both share essentially the *same* worldview and corresponding set of thought-shapers or (ii) at least one of them is agnostic about and uncommitted to any particular worldview and corresponding set of thought-shapers, then it’s a *non-fundamental* philosophical disagreement. Correspondingly, it seems to me that in cases of non-fundamental

philosophical disagreement, then philosophical correspondence and philosophical conversation *could be* interesting and productive, perhaps profoundly significant, and perhaps even mind-changing, life-changing, or world-changing. Such philosophical interlocutors could at the very least learn something interesting, productive, or even profoundly significant from one another, and perhaps even change each other's minds, each other's lives, or the world.

By sharp and indeed diametric contrast, however, precisely because worldviews and their corresponding sets of thought-shapers are (i) presupposed by and hence ubiquitously present and deeply rooted in the semantic and cognitive background of all other beliefs and thoughts, whether philosophical or non-philosophical (see, e.g., Pepper, 1942/1970), (ii) almost always implicit, and also (iii) almost always logically, semantically, and cognitively operative in ways such that people are self-consciously unaware of their commitments to those worldviews and of precisely how their thinking is shaped by those worldviews' characteristic thought-shapers, then it seems to me obvious that in cases of fundamental philosophical disagreement, philosophical correspondence, philosophical conversation, and especially philosophical debate, will be not only philosophically *uninteresting, unproductive, and un-significant*,¹ but also *annoying, counterproductive, and enervating*. No matter how much and no matter how vigorously such interlocutors talk or write to one another—or more precisely talk or write *at* one another—they will always be doing so at cross purposes. They will never, ever learn anything substantive from one another, and they will never, ever rationally change each other's minds, their lives, or the world. (Hanna, 2023: pp. 2-4)

In that essay, obviously, I took a highly skeptical view of resolving philosophical disagreements that are grounded in synoptic differences in worldviews. But could there be *some way* around this rational impasse?

Since that time, it has occurred to me that one way around it might be to treat a worldview not as a monolithic unit, but instead as a complex structure built up out of constituent specific synoptic insights or reflections about some or another domain of information about the rational human condition, each of which could be individually identified, and then compared or contrasted with differing insights or reflections about that domain. Then, philosophers who have encountered a fundamental philosophical disagreement might come to synoptic agreement on *some individual parts* of a Big Picture, and then go on to construct a holistic shared worldview *piece-by-piece*, like a team working together on an enormous puzzle. If a given insight or reflection doesn't fit into the current shared Big Picture, then it can be temporarily put aside for later discussion and possible inclusion. If fundamental agreement between philosophical interlocutors can be reached on a partially-assembled worldview, then that would constitute genuine philosophical

¹ I.e., being *contra-significant*, as opposed to being merely *insignificant*.

progress, even if they do not ultimately share one comprehensive and complete worldview. Let's call this *the puzzle-building-teamwork method of shared synoptic reflection*.

I concluded "On Fundamental Philosophical Disagreements" on a sharply negative note:

[W]hen two people philosophically encounter one another and experience a fundamental philosophical disagreement, what should they do? As an expression of respect for one another as human real persons possessing dignity, *they can and should politely and respectfully mutually agree to disagree*. But any further philosophical encounters between them *should also be avoided like the plague*. (Hanna, 2023: p. 5)

But if my updated view is correct, then philosophical interlocutors who have encountered a fundamental philosophical disagreement might be able to work around it by engaging in the puzzle-building teamwork method of shared synoptic reflection.

For example, an organicist philosopher and a mechanistic philosopher might come to agreement about the meaning and anti-mechanistic implications of Kurt Gödel's famous incompleteness results (Gödel, 1931/1967), and thereby share a specific synoptic insight about the scope and limits of digital technology and the research program of artificial intelligence (Chomsky, Roberts, and Watamull, 2023; Keller, 2023; Hanna, 2024b), even if they continued to disagree about whether the natural universe as a whole is fundamentally organic or fundamentally mechanical. Then, by generalizing this partial synoptic agreement, they might discover significant common ground in other parts of philosophy—for example, in the philosophy of physics (see, e.g., Hanna, 2024a: ch. 4). Constructing part of an enormous puzzle together is categorically better than constructing nothing together; correspondingly, sharing part of a worldview is categorically better than utter disagreement. So when this puzzle-building teamwork method of shared synoptic reflection is combined with healthy pragmatistic fallibilism and rationally hopeful team spirit, then genuine philosophical progress is possible.²

² I'm grateful to Matt Andersson for drawing my attention to (Smith and Wright, 1929), and for thought-provoking correspondence on and around the main topics of this essay, and also to Martha Hanna for suggesting the puzzle-constructing metaphor.

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