

The Limits of Philosophy: Its Disenchantment and A Case for Epistemic Humility

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Conflict over the attention space is a fundamental fact about intellectuals. It follows that intellectuals produce multiple competing views of reality. And this disagreement will go on in the future, as long as intellectual networks exist. (Colins, 1998: p. 876)

This fellow isn't insane. We are only doing philosophy. (Wittgenstein, 1969: p. 61e).

[There] is simply no avoiding the conclusion that the human race is mad. There are scarcely any human beings who do not have some lunatic beliefs or other to which they attach great importance. People are mostly sane enough, of course, in the affairs of common life: the getting of food, shelter, and so on. But the moment they attempt any depth of generality of thought, they go mad almost infallibly. The vast majority, of course, adopt the local religious madness as naturally as they adopt the local dress. But the most powerful minds will, equally infallibly, fall into the worship of some intelligent and dangerous lunatic. (Stove, 1991: p. 184)

W.C. Fields once said that scientists have discovered that the universe is composed of three elements: oxygen, nitrogen and horse manure. Philosophers have not neglected this third element in their quest for a general description of the universe. (Sorensen, 1991: p. 184).

1. Introduction

My aim in this essay is to present a general philosophical argument for the position of *epistemic humility*, or to use in a modified sense a term that I've used in my environmental and ecological research on the limits to growth, *philosophical limitationism* (Smith & Positano, 2010; Catton & Dunlap, 1980).

In general, as Rae Langton puts it, “[t]here are inevitable constraints on what we can know, inevitable limits on what we can become acquainted with” (Langton, 1998: p. 2). Relatedly and relevantly, Richard Routley (later, Sylvan) said this about the notions of limits and limits to knowledge:

From the perspective of modernity, classical ... thought ... [was] preoccupied with the notion of limits,” limits to the size of cities and states, limits on wealth and poverty, limits to avoid both excess and insufficiency, and limits to knowledge; thus, for example, Aristotle’s view that a universal (science of) science is impossible. The classical preoccupation was “replaced by a modern preoccupation with freedom as a progressive liberation of man from all traditional and natural limits,” and a modern view of unrestricted progress, of unlimited opportunities for humans, and of unimpeded domination of nature. Impressive advances in science and technology encouraged the (erroneous) idea that limits could be removed, an idea reinforced by theoretical presumptions as to the solvability of every problem, and the availability of a method – “the” scientific method – by which everything could be known.

Recently these modern assumptions have been challenged, and subjected to serious criticism. Several limitations have become very conspicuous, especially a range of ecological constraints upon “progress,” but also theoretical limitations upon technological advance and upon problem resolution. A further limitation of theoretical importance is that upon knowledge and upon scientific method (Routley, 2010, 108).

Along similar lines, Stanley Rosen has also said:

Whereas it is impossible to know “everything” we do know the method by which anything whatsoever can be known. Such is the [rather, *a*] claim, implicit or explicit, which underlies the origin of modern and much of contemporary philosophy. (Rosen, 1974, 173).

All that, however, is neither unchallengeable nor unchallenged by other philosophers.

Robert Fogelin in his book, *Walking the Tightrope of Reason*, argues that philosophy has not yet given a satisfactory response to the skeptical challenge, of the justification of purported knowledge claims, and that “it is highly unlikely that an adequate response will ever be forthcoming” (Fogelin, 2003: pp. 13-14). Philosophical reasoning produces “Gestalt changes, globally different and incompatible ways of *appreciating* the same set of facts” (Fogelin, 2003: p. 64). Thus, referring to the example of legal reasoning, “two people can apprehend the same legal situation in radically

different ways,” thereby producing “the unsettling feeling that legal decisions are *wholly* baseless” (Fogelin, 2003: p. 64). Likewise for philosophical propositions, he believes.

Some philosophers argue that there are no people (Stone, 2005); other philosophers debate the question of whether ordinary objects like ecosystems, economies, tables, or chairs exist (van Inwagen, 1981; Olson, 1995; Elder, 2000; Lowe, 2005). Why suppose that in addition to the elementary particles, fields, and entities of physics, that ordinary objects such as tables or the atmosphere exist? Isn't such an assumption metaphysically extravagant, violating standards of simplicity (Cornman, 1974; Noren, 1975; Holman, 1979; Nelson, 1982)? And what about the fact, or seeming fact, that we—or the philosophers who ponder such matters—are ourselves or themselves ordinary objects, hence our or their own reasoning does not exist (Lowe, 2005; Heil, 2005; Korman, 2007)? What does this imply about their reasoning: does it undercut itself, like someone sawing off the branch of the tree in which they're sitting (Malcolm, 1968; Jordon, 1969; Synder, 1972; Hasker, 1973; Baker, 1989; Cling, 1989; Reppert, 1991; Contessa, 2014)?

Correspondingly, Jeffrey Grupp has argued in support of the position of *mereological nihilism*, i.e., the view that there are “no items that have parts” (Grupp, 2006: p. 245). So the only items that exist are partless fundamental mental quantum particles. As he puts it:

Only partless fundamental particles exist (electrons, quarks etc.): they do not compose any composite objects, and thus empirical reality does not exist. (Grupp, 2006: p. 246)

Quantum objects are not able to constitute macroscopic objects “or any objects whatsoever” (Grupp, 2006: p. 246). Therefore, “material constitution is an illusion, and thus everyday ordinary empirical-material reality is some sort of dream” (Grupp, 2006: p. 246). A dream? A dream by whom? Presumably by a dreamer, a subjectively experiencing agent, unless dreams are ontologically free-wheeling entities. Since ordinary matter, having extension, and being located in space, does not exist, then consciousness (i.e., that which must dream), is “identical to, the quantum abstract atoms themselves” (Grupp, 2006, 381). That is all metaphysically breathtaking, but we can ask the quantum emperor with no clothes, if there are no things, like experimental apparatuses, an experimental set-up, how exactly do “we” (presumably being quantum atoms) know that quantum mechanics is “true,” rather than any other cosmic hypothesis, such as a world made of metaphysical fairies? Why accept any of these speculations?

According to W.V.O. Quine, the only things that exist are mathematical sets which do not even contain individual objects (Quine, 1981: pp. 17-18). Reflecting upon this, Hans-Johann Glock says:

Such extraordinary claims lend at least *prima facie* support to the idea that philosophy cannot contribute directly to the investigation of reality by other disciplines. Philosophers are good at arguing, analyzing, interpreting and preaching; but about reality they tend to know even less than ordinary mortals. (Glock, 2002: pp. 236-237)

This also shows that Analytic philosophy is not as Peter Unger proposes, “empty,” or “concretely insubstantial” (Unger, 2014), but on the contrary, at least as far of contemporary Analytic metaphysics goes, is more likely to be *absurd* than “empty.”

In their editors’ preface to the book, *The Institution of Philosophy: A Discipline in Crisis?*, Avner Cohen and Marcelo Dascal state that “the philosophical community today is marked by the absence of agreement about its own purpose and identity” (Cohen & Dascal, 1989: p. xi). However, this state of discord about the disagreement of the philosophers has been observed since the birth of philosophy. Thus, Xenophanes of Colophon (c. 570 - 475 BC) wrote:

No man knows, or ever will know, the truth about the Gods and about everything I speak of. Even if he should chance to speak the complete truth, yet he himself knows it not. But all may have their opinion. (Rescher, 1985: p. 3)

Sextus Empiricus (2nd Century AD), a physician and skeptical philosopher, asserted in his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*:

That nothing is self-evident is plain, they the skeptics say, from the controversy which exists amongst the natural philosophers regarding, I imagine, all things, both sensibles and intelligibles; which controversy admits of no settlement because we can neither employ a sensible nor an intelligible criterion, since whatever criterion we may adopt is controverted and therefore discredited. (Rescher, 1985: p. 3)

And in the 18th century, David Hume said this about philosophy:

Principles taken upon trust, consequences lamely deduced from them, want of coherence in the parts, and of evidence in the whole, these are everywhere to be met with in the systems of the most eminent philosophers, and seems to have drawn disgrace upon philosophy itself ... [e]ven the rabble without doors may judge from the noise and clamour, which they hear, that all goes not well within. There is nothing which is not the subject of debate, and in which men of learning are not of contrary opinions. The most trivial question escapes not our controversy, and in the most momentous we are not able to give any certain decisions. (Hume, 1960: p. xvii-xviii)

Bertrand Russell, one of the great 20th century philosophers and mathematical logicians, observed that “philosophy, from the earliest times, has made greater claims, and achieved fewer results, than any other branch of learning” (Russell, 1972: p. 13). And even more recently, George N. Schlesinger said this about the problem of the absence of any substantial body of “knowledge” in philosophy:

It is easy to refer to facts which seem to provide grounds for these misgivings. In the context of virtually every topic, for instance, in which philosophers have taken an interest we shall find some thinker adopting a diametrically opposed position to the one occupied by another, while the majority of their fellows disagreeing with them both. One school of philosophy, for example, has declared particulars—as opposed to the eternal universals—to be transient and insubstantial, while another holds that universals, have no real existence at all, and it would require many pages to summarize all the intermediate views that have also been championed on this venerable issue. Nor does it as a rule require two thousand years for such proliferation of disparate attitudes on a given question to develop. On the question of inductive reasoning, to take a well-known case, one opinion holds that it can be justified, another it can be vindicated only, while according to a third opinion it can be neither justified nor vindicated. Then it should be mentioned that there are also those who proclaimed the whole issue to be a pseudo-problem, believing induction not to be in the need of any justification whatever. Then finally there are not a few who insist that the problem of induction is neither real nor pseudo; it simply does not exist, no sentient being ever employed any such thing. It was more than 21 centuries ago, at a time when relevant material was comparatively infinitesimal that Cicero declared “There is nothing so absurd, but some philosopher has said it.” One shudders to think what scorching words he would feel impelled to utter if he were alive today. (Schlesinger, 1988: p. 282)

Naturally enough, there has been considerable debate among philosophers about the problem of the alleged lack of progress of philosophy in the light of the problem of perennial philosophical disputes (Johnstone Jr, 1959; Passmore, 1961; Kekes, 1980; Fogelin, 1985; Ricoeur, 1985; Marcus, 1985; Nielsen, 1987; Urbaniec, 1988; Cahoon, 1995; Double, 1996; Ellis, 2001; Nichols et al., 2003; Elga, 2007; Christensen, 2007, 2009; Plant, 2012; Feltz & Cokely, 2013; Christensen & Lackey, 2013; Machuca ed., 2013; Rotondo, 2015; Loncar, 2016). For some thinkers, especially, so-called “postmodern” theorists, this problem and others shows the limits or even “the end” of conventional Western philosophy (Rorty, 1979, 1982; Young, 1984; Baynes et al., 1987; Churchill, 1989; Suber, 1993; Passmore, 1996; Shackel 2005; Cherry, ed., 2006). Aron Edidin calls this the “tragic view of philosophy”:

The Tragic View of Philosophy shares the natural view of philosophical claims as determinately true or false but sees little prospect of our ever discovering which are which. The big questions that philosophers explore have right answers, but we’ll never know which they are. We are, to torture a metaphor, fated to stumble blindly through dark tunnels, each in her own favored direction, and should one of us accidentally stumble upon the treasure that we seek, she’ll have no reason to believe that it’s not just another lump of clay. (Edidin, 1991: p. 50)

Edidin goes on to say that “pessimism about the likelihood of future philosophical consensus” is based on “persistence of philosophical disagreement in the face of the evidence discovered in the last twenty-five hundred years” (Edidin, 1991, 57). Gary Gutting, after undertaking a critical survey of a number of influential pieces of philosophizing by “big names,” i.e., leaders in the field, concludes that philosophers are not successful in their quest to rationally justify their views by way of argument,

either deductive or non-deductive (Gutting, 1982: p. 327). Anglo-American philosophy is concerned with, as most contemporary professional academic practitioners would admit, the questioning of *all* assumptions, and is the discipline where everything stands open to critical examination and challenge (Schlagel, 2003: pp. 131-132). As J.J.C. Smart has pointed out:

One trouble with philosophy is that philosophers are willing to question everything, not only the premises of their arguments but the very canons of right reasoning and the methodology of argument. If this is not a recipe for circularity of argument and irresolvable dispute, what is? (Smart, 1993: p. 7)

According to Nicholas Rescher in *The Strife of Systems*, different philosophical systems represent differences in cognitive values: “differences in normative orientation toward the data afforded by our experience of the world” (Rescher, 1985: p. 120). He called his position, “Orientational Pluralism.” “Cognitive values” include consistency, simplicity/economy, explanatory adequacy comprehensiveness and so on. Consequently, for mutually incompatible philosophical theses T and \sim T (i.e., not T) arguments can be given “substantial prima facie cogency” (Rescher, 1985: p. 122). What this means, is that the fact that a reasonable case can be made out for one philosophical question, does not mean that an “equally reasonable case” cannot be produced for another incompatible answer to the same question. Philosophers differ in the cognitive values they accept and these cognitive values are used to choose cognitive theories. Consequently “schools of thought” are inevitable, because

where alternative standards for appropriate problem resolutions are available, alternative resolutions must be expected. (Rescher, 1985: p. 123)

Furthermore, consensus cannot be obtained in philosophy, because philosophical problems “always admit of diverse solutions, and philosophical argumentation, being normative in nature, admits of different results” (Rescher, 1985: p. 125).

Elsewhere, I have argued that Rescher’s metaphilosophy results in a form of relativism, that is the doctrine that all alternative positions are equally “good,” “true,” or “justified” (Smith, 1985). While there is only one “correct” solution to a philosophical problem, from an orientational perspective there is no such thing as a “correct” answer to a philosophical problem. All that is possible is to establish optimal tenability against some pre-established probative-value orientation. The same applies to the concept of philosophical truth. I argued that Rescher’s position is self-referentially inconsistent, because there is an anti-Orientational Pluralism position \sim OP, according to which Orientational Pluralism is “correct” within its own value framework, but which also implies that Orientational Pluralism is *objectively* false or incorrect. Rescher responded to this criticism in *The Strife of Systems* (Rescher, 1985: pp. 184-185). There he argued, after formalizing my argument, that “relativistic pluralism” only asserts the *tenability* of an opposing thesis A, not the (relativist) truth of A. The maintainability, not the acceptability of A is all that is claimed, so that all

Orientalism Pluralism “countenances as defensible positions that do not reciprocate” (Rescher, 1985: p. 185). Yet if this diluted claim is all that Orientalism Pluralism proposes, then the position is not only uncontroversial, but also uninteresting. Since most philosophical claims are advanced by intelligent and competent academic professionals, the claims are almost certainly to be tenable, i.e., of prima facie plausibility. Orientalism Pluralism seems to claim more.

Timm Triplett, in his essay “Rescher’s Metaphilosophy,” has written that for the relativist there are no rational grounds of choice between different perspectives and

this seems to be exactly the situation Rescher’s orientalism pluralism would leave us in: truth and rationality within a perspective, but no grounds for rational choice among perspectives. (Triplett, 1999: p. 222)

Triplett then goes on to say:

It seems to me then that Rescher has simply adopted a standard relativism with respect to cognitive values. He might well accept this assessment, but argue that this is a limited relativism because it applies only to adjudication among competing cognitive values, whereas pure relativists see *every* position as rationally indifferent with respect to every other. But this does not in fact make a difference between Rescher and the relativists in terms of the results achieved. Cognitive values are such fundamental features of a person’s or culture’s world view that it is difficult to see how Rescher could avoid the most implausible implications of relativism, according to which one has to concede that even the most seemingly intellectually outrageous or ethically monstrous beliefs are outrageous or monstrous only from certain perspectives. For Rescher offers no clear and useful criteria regarding cognitive values that would allow us to reject some sets of values. Thus, there are no grounds for rejecting that set of cognitive values which regards the literal statements of the Bible, or the words of a guru, as (to select from among Rescher’s “Sampler of Cognitive Values”) “significant, central, illuminating, weighty, fundamental, and urgent” and everything that is in disagreement as “insignificant, peripheral, unhelpful, trivial, surface and negligible.” “God is my measure of truth”, some say. And for others, it is the words of Jim Jones or the leader of the disastrous Heaven’s Gate Cult. (Triplett, 1999: p. 222)

The metaphysical image following from the Orientalism Pluralism position is that of a Big Parade of philosophical systems and proposed solutions rolling on and on through time, undefeated and unrejected.

Another similar approach is offered by in *Skeptical Essays* by Benson Mates, who writes that philosophical problems are meaningful, but unsolvable, because cogent arguments can be presented on both sides of the debate, endlessly (Mates, 1981). But if this is so, then cogent arguments can also be advanced against Mates’s own position—as well as for it. This could leave us in a situation of indeterminacy

about the acceptability of his metaphilosophy, and thus a prima facie reason for rejecting Mates' position as well.

I argued in *The Progress of Rationality of Philosophy as a Cognitive Enterprise* (Smith, 1988), that the history of philosophy is more accurately seen as a graveyard of systems of thinkers that have been destroyed by critical arguments. As a pastime, over the last few years, I have either read, or skimmed, hundreds of philosophical articles published since 1988, the year of publication of *The Progress of Rationality of Philosophy as a Cognitive Enterprise*. It is clear from examining this representative sample of philosophical literature that there is substantial agreement between philosophers, even champions of particular systems and "isms," about outstanding problems confronting such systems and "isms," such as the failure of logical positivism, for example (Marcus, 1985). Modern philosophy, because of its great critical power, has undermined almost all philosophical positions. The hyper-rationality of philosophy is like a universal solvent, dissolving every conceptual container that it encounters.

I will now briefly discuss two examples of philosophy's self-stultification: Anglo-American Analytic philosophy, and the programs of materialism or physicalism and naturalism. As a third example of philosophical limits, I'll also consider metaphilosophical skepticism and rationality skepticism.

2. Example 1: Analytic Philosophy

As Nicholas Rescher has argued, somewhat at variance with his own Orientational Pluralism by virtue of his making a seemingly objectivist claim, Analytic philosophy itself has now collapsed "unraveling from within" (Rescher, 2001: p. 114). Analytic philosophy held that understanding the nature of the world was to be achieved through understanding the nature of thought and the nature of thought was revealed by analysis of its expression in language (Dummett, 1993: p. 154). Colin McGinn says that Analytic philosophy

is premised on the assumption that the nature of certain objective facts is coded into the concepts we bring to those facts, so that philosophical truth is to be ascertained quite differently from other kinds of truth—as it were, by gazing into the conceptual mirror in which reality is reflected. This is actually... a very surprising and radical idea... for why *should* certain parts of reality, and not others, be thus coded? (McGinn, 1993: pp. 24-25)

This is a very good challenge indeed to Analytic philosophy as defined here: can it be shown by an analysis of language that the nature of the world is reflected in language? Influential works argue that this challenge cannot be met (Rorty, 1979). Even if this fundamental problem could be resolved, there are many other problems confronting Analytic philosophy (Wang, 1986). In particular, the methodology of Analytic philosophy and conceptual analysis often makes use of "intuitions," beliefs about the correct use of language (Jackson, 1998), but the reliance on intuitions to supply

counter-examples, has itself been subjected to a sustained critique (DePaul & Ramsey, eds, 1998; Weinberg, 2001; Cappelen, 2012; Musgrave, 2014; Deutsch, 2015). A concise argument illustrating the problems facing the philosophical use of intuitions to supply counter-examples—which I’ll discuss further later in this essay—has been given by Richard Miller:

Modern Analytical philosophers often deny that they rely exclusively on intuitions, but in fact the vast majority of objections to proposed analyses do take the form of complaints that our intuitions show that the analysis fails to match the existing concept. The conflict among sophisticated practitioners of conceptual analysis thus often comes down to disputes over which intuitions are to be disregarded and which are to be given centrality. But what are the criteria by which we measure centrality and importance? About this crucial point there is no consensus. Needless to say, many philosophers are distressed by the whole situation. Hilary Putnam, like many others, has written disparagingly of the current state of philosophical intuitions: “Of course, if our intuitions are ways of thinking that have real weight in our lives whether that weight be practical or spiritual, then I can see why we should regard them as important. But the intuitions [of contemporary philosophers] seem to me very far from having either practical or spiritual significance (Putnam, 1992, 139).” (Miller, 2000, 233)

Along similar lines, the method of counter-examples faces an analogous problem, as George Schlesinger points out:

No philosophical thesis can be expected to be confirmed or disconfirmed by any conceivable experiment. The method of counterexamples is of course widely practiced in philosophical polemics but with radically less firm results than in mathematics. Essentially, it is infected by the infirmities so characteristic to all philosophical discourse. Because of the amorphousness that permeates the whole discipline, one of the difficulties is that there is almost always room for disagreement as to whether a purported counterexample is a genuine instance of the subject matter under discussion. Suppose, for example, someone concluding as a result of an argument he constructed, that in general condition C is a sufficient and necessary condition for a person to know that p. Further, suppose, that his opponent produces a counterexample illustrating a situation where I seem to know that p, even though condition C has not been fulfilled. This in most cases will not have to be the end of the story, since the advocate of the original thesis has the option to maintain that in the situation depicted by his adversary, I cannot in fact be said to possess a genuine knowledge that p. Decisive results cannot be produced with the method of counterexamples simply because the question of what constitutes an instance of knowledge, or for that matter an instance of freely willed act, or of a correct value judgment, and so on, is itself disputable. (Schlesinger, 1988, 284)

Therefore, the problem described by the critics of Analytic philosophy is that its fundamental methodologies fail to be supported by the machinery within the paradigm, so that Analytic philosophy fails in its own terms. Of course, that is but one criticism that can be made among many, as Robert Hanna has exhaustively worked

out, but as I see it, it is alone sufficient to question the Analytic philosophy research program (Hanna, 2021, 2022).

3. Example 2: Materialism or Physicalism and Naturalism

Most contemporary Anglo-American philosophers could be said to be practicing “Analytic philosophy” in a broader sense than that defined above. Their concern is to use the theories and empirical data, largely from the natural and mathematical sciences, along with the use of mathematical or symbolic logic, in order to address perennial philosophical issues, as well as other philosophical issues arising from the sciences themselves. Some philosophers want to “naturalize” epistemology, seeing traditional philosophical questions and concepts being replaced by more precise scientific ones (Quine, 1969; Churchland, 1990; Sorell, 1991), although most are satisfied with developing a *scientific* philosophy, in epistemology and metaphysics or ontology (the theory of what exists and does not exist) (Sellars, 1963).

Most leading philosophers in the Anglo-American tradition today are *naturalists*. Naturalism historically has been associated with the proposal that cognitive enquiry should be conducted in accordance with the results and methods of the natural sciences and that the world should be understood in terms compatible with *materialism*, namely, the view “that nothing exists except for spacetime, material objects and events in spacetime, and the properties exemplified by spacetime and the objects and events therein” (Rea, 2002: p. 8). As Wilfred Sellars has aphoristically put it:

in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that is, and of what is not that it is not” (Sellars, 1963: p. 173; see also Armstrong, 1968, 1978-1979)

A research program within the naturalism camp is *physicalism*, which as Esfeld has observed, sees physics specifically, the most “basic” or “fundamental” of the physical sciences, as the “measure of all things” (Esfeld, 1997: p. 319). For physicalists, *current* microphysics is not the “measure of all things,” but the general idea is that present day physics is a good approximation, or is in the general direction, to a “final physics” or a theory of everything (Esfeld, 1997). This act of “faith,” to use Roger Penrose’s term, is made in the face of the logical inconsistency between the general theory of relativity and quantum mechanics, and the problems of empirically testing string theory, among other issues (Penrose, 2016).

Physicalism in the 20th century aimed to resolve problems such as the mind-body problem: how does consciousness, subjective awareness, the self, and the entire landscape of our mental life relate to a biochemical system such as the human brain?, and how do various brain processes relate to thoughts, purposes, intentions and ideas (Mandell, 1988)? Materialism or physicalism is one answer to this question, and this

position has been the dominant philosophy of mind in Anglo-American Analytic philosophy since the 1950's, with some dissent nowadays (Bayne, 2021).

One of the best-known philosophical exports from Australia is *central state materialism*, or “the contingent identity thesis,” which holds that consciousness is just a brain process and that mental phenomena are just brain phenomena, and this identity thesis is not a conceptual or analytic truth but instead necessary a posteriori (Smart, 1963; Armstrong, 1968). Central state materialism proposed a *type-type* identity theory, namely that *types* of mental states such as a sensation of pleasure, are identical with types of central nervous system states. Type-type identity theory was abandoned by most materialists or physicalists by about 1970 because of the functionalist argument that the same type of mental state could be implemented or realized by widely differing neural structures. Other materialists or physicalists believed that a more radical approach was needed. Many materialists or physicalists then explored *functionalism*, the idea that the mental is a feature defined by a functional role, but which is implemented or realized by different kinds of neural “hardware.” Computer metaphors likening the mental to computational states and the brain to computer hardware, were widely accepted and employed. This position was much explored for a while before eventually essentially fading from philosophical interest (Fodor, 1981).

Eliminative materialists see future neuroscience and artificial intelligence leading to the elimination of “folk psychology” based upon commonsense mentalistic propositional attitudes. Mind-talk in science will be eliminated or replaced (Stich, 1983; Churchland, 1988, 1989; Everitt, 1981; Gordon, 1986; Madell, 1986; Bogdan, 1988; Graham & Horgan, 1988). Other materialists or physicalists, yet again, felt that the concept of *supervenience* was the best way of understanding the mind-body relationship (Davidson, 1993; Kim, 1993). Stated simply, the idea of supervenience is that there is no mental difference without a corresponding physical difference. Thus, mental phenomena supervene on physical phenomena. There are difficulties for any such view, because the question of the identity and individuation criteria for properties is an open philosophical question (Van Gulick, 2001). But even before this conceptual problem was dealt with, champions of the supervenience such as Jaegwon Kim conceded that the supervenience concept was too weak to aid physicalism because the supervenience relation could also obtain for rival metaphysical theories such as Cartesian dualism, i.e., the ontological theory proposed by René Descartes, to the effect that the mind and body are ontologically distinct realms that somehow also causally interact, so long as “there were invariant correlations between the two” (Van Gulick, 2001: p. 8; Kim, 1999). However, there is a critical reply to the idea of supervenience as applied to the mind-body relation, namely that supervenience implies that the relationship between the mental and the physical is solely a one-way street: the facts of neurology determine the facts of psychology, and not the other way around, which yields the possibility of *epiphenomenalism*—the view that the mental and the physical are ontological distinct substances, and mental states are the causal effects of physical events, but mental events are never the causes of physical events—

as an example of a non-materialist/physicalist theory of mind that's fully consistent with supervenience (Van Gulick, 2001).

Materialists or physicalists about the mind, being naturalists, had hoped that neurophysiology, cognitive science, and the research program of "artificial intelligence" would ultimately supply the empirical support for their metaphysical work, although most materialists or physicalists were also careful to point out that the mind-body problem is a metaphysical rather than empirical problem that could be completely solved by scientific data (Chappell, 1981; Tännsjö, 1987: p. 451). There is certainly a large body of cognitive and neuropsychological data that can be interpreted so as to fit neatly with the materialist or physicalist worldview, because neuroscience itself has been strongly committed to reductionist principles. But there are also neurophysiological data which, whilst not empirically refuting materialism or physicalism, also make it very difficult to establish the neural correlates of consciousness, which will now be detailed (Hodgson, 1994; Noë & Thompson, 2004; Hohwy & Frith, 2004).

The neuroscience literature provides examples of highly intelligent, or at least people of a normal/functioning intelligence, who have "water on the brain" or *hydrocephalus*. Correspondingly, John Lorber once presented a paper entitled "Is Your Brain Really Necessary?" at a scientific conference (Lewin, 1980). He reported on one high IQ mathematics student who gained a first-class honors degree in mathematics, and was socially normal, but had "virtually no brain" (Lewin, 1980, 1232). A brain scan revealed

that instead of the normal 4.5-centimeter thickness of brain tissue between the ventricles and the cortical surface, there was just a thin layer of mantle measuring a millimeter or so. (Lewin, 1980: p. 1232)

Most of the subject's cranium was filled with cerebrospinal fluid. There are also more recent examples of this "no-brain" phenomenon (Feuillet, 2007). While many hydrocephalics suffer physical and intellectual disabilities, many do not, and have normal brain functioning, even though the neurology of their brains is highly abnormal. This indicates, at the very least, that the neurophysiology of the brain is *highly plastic*, because of the large degree of redundancy and spare capacity of the brain. It might also indicate that the cerebral cortex does not carry out all of the activities it has been traditionally thought to carry out, and that other structures in the brain may carry out those functions instead, or at least act as an effective "back up" (Bergland, 1988; Edelman, 1978). Another view is that "the scope of possible explanation should not exclude extracorporeal information storage (Forsdyke, 2015: p. 341). Whatever the ultimate results of this debate actually are, it is established fact that it will be some time, if at all—assuming the human race survives long enough—before neurophysiology can displace the ordinary psychology of human mental life, of emotions, desires, and beliefs. As David Chalmers has put it:

Consciousness ... is as perplexing as it ever was. It still seems utterly mysterious that the causation of behavior should be accompanied by an inner subjective life. We have good reason to believe that consciousness arises from physical systems such as brains, but we have little idea how it arises, or why it exists at all. How could a physical system such as a brain also be an *experiencer*? Why should there *be something it is like* to be such a system? Present-day scientific theories hardly touch the really difficult questions about consciousness. We do not just lack a detailed theory; we are entirely in the dark about how consciousness fits into the natural order. (Chalmers, 1996: p. xi)

Matters are even more difficult if parapsychological phenomena are accepted as real facts in need of explanation, and not bogus (Dybvig, 1987; Beloff, 1987; Radin, 1997; Storm & Goretzki, 2021). If parapsychological phenomena such as ESP do indeed occur, then there would need to be changes to neurology and perhaps even physics in order to account for them in materialist or physicalist terms, since these phenomena *prima facie* defy simple materialist or physicalist explanations, as numerous articles in the highly readable popular American journal, *The Skeptic*, point out in detail. Hence many thinkers doubt whether such phenomena are real. On this issue I remain agnostic, a fence-sitter until more scientific evidence, for or against, is in.

There are also some deeper metaphysical problems confronting materialism or physicalism, for example, how to make sense of the meaning of “physical” in “physicalism.” What is the “physical”? In an influential discussion of the literature on this question, Barbara Montero says that the question of physicalism only is a real issue if the physicalist’s notion of the physical excludes in principle some phenomena from being physical (Montero, 2001: p. 62). I made a similar critique of physicalism in a paper published in 1983 and a book in 1984, as others also have before (Chomsky, 1968; Smith, 1983, 1984; Hempel, 1980). If the “physical” is understood in a narrow way, then materialism or physicalism is false, because current physics is likely to be strictly false, but if the “physical” is understood in a wider sense based upon a future physics—including one perhaps influenced by human-spawned super-intelligent machines—then intuitively, non-physical items might be included (Crane & Mellor, 1990; Pettit, 1993; Robinson, 1993; Poland, 1994; Tye, 1996; Melnyk, 1997; Hutto, 2000; Crook & Gillett, 2000). But worse yet, the “materialism” or “physicalism” in materialism or physicalism is at the very least *prima facie* inconsistent with modern physics, as Montero and others have observed:

Current physics, which posits such things as particles with no determinate location, curved space-time, and wave-particle duality, tells us that the world is indeed more ghostly than any ghost in the machine. And if the existence of ghostly phenomena does not falsify physicalism it is difficult to say what would. ... Bertrand Russell made this basic point in 1927: “matter,” he said, ‘has become as ghostly as anything in a spiritualist’s séance.’ (Montero, 2001: pp. 62-63; see also Montero, 1999; Russell, 1992: p. 78; Daly, 1998)

There is also an interesting literature discussing quantum theory and consciousness, that has anti-physicalist implications (Penrose, 1994; Pylkkänen, 1995; Esfeld, 1999;

Stapp, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2006 a, 2006 b; Schäfer, 2006; Klein, 2006; Laszlo, 2006; Helrich, 2006), which I'll discuss in another essay.

Running parallel to the mind-body debate have been two other debates that also interconnect.

The first debate is about the characterization of the doctrine of *naturalism*, in which a number of philosophers have argued that the doctrine of naturalism is self-defeating or incompatible with other epistemological and metaphysical theses (Koons, 2000; Rea, 2002). I will not attempt to summarize this debate in detail here; but the main problem in a nutshell is that definitions of "naturalism" are either refutable, vacuous, or self-defeating, by presupposing an indefensible or at least undefended account of what "nature" and the "supernatural" are (Rea, 2002).

The second debate is about the unresolved controversies in the philosophy of science about the nature of science and scientific method (Newton-Smith, 1981). Again this is a vast topic that again cannot be summarized here in detail. But the dialectical situation should be a familiar one by now to readers: attempts to present a *general* account of the scientific method, including skeptical accounts, have been undermined by on-going waves of criticism. An important book on this topic by Philip Kitcher, *The Advancement of Science*, notes that

little headway has been made in finding a successor for legend [once-received philosophy of science or logical empiricism]. If anything, recent work in the history of science and in the sociology of science has offered even more sweeping versions of the original critiques. (Kitcher, 1993: p. 8)

It is something of a scandal that those who put all the weight of their metaphysical systems upon science have actually not as yet resolved this issue.

In concluding this section, we should note that when confronted with this array of problems, some philosophers have moved away from reductive materialism, to a non-reductive materialism (Post, 1987) and others have adopted more traditional non-materialist theories (Smythies & Beloff eds. 1989; Foster, 1991; Hasker, 2001; Langsam, 2001; Bolender, 2001; Strawson, 2006). And some philosophers believe that the mind-body problem is not solvable in terms of current science (McGinn, 1989; Nagel, 1994; Kirk, 1991). No doubt, if any of these alternative positions begins to get substantial followings, another wave of criticism will leave these positions wrecked as well. After all, these alternative non-materialist positions—substance dualism, idealism (that fundamental reality is mental), panpsychism (that all matter has a mental aspect to it) and so on—are mutually inconsistent with each other, so unless the world is inconsistent in this respect, only one of them, at best could be "true." This does not mean that the entire debate has been for nothing; on the contrary we have become clearer about what we don't know, which positions fail and which arguments are unsound. What, however, I hope that this brief survey has shown is the bewildering

difficulty in addressing even one philosophical problem, let alone sketching a new worldview as some of the ecological critics of the establishment suppose. The discussion of the mind-body problem has not been an accidental choice of problem to discuss; this problem has had an enormous amount of attention devoted to it not only by philosophers, but also by cognitive scientists and neuroscientists. If this problem has not been resolved, then it does not build up confidence that other philosophical problems can be decisively resolved.

Indeed, Eric Dietrich and Valerie Hardcastle in *Sisyphus' Boulder: Consciousness and the Limits of the Knowable* (Dietrich & Hardcastle, 2005), have made this very point, namely, that the solution, if there can be one, of many philosophical problems depends upon solving the hard problem of consciousness and the related problem of subjective and objective points of view (Dietrich, 2023); but there is no solution, or at least any sort of reductive solution as proposed by physicalism and naturalism; so there can be no complete theory about what it is to be human (Dietrich & Hardcastle, 2005: p. 102). We are therefore correct in following Robert Hanna in holding that consciousness is *sui generis*, a fifth fundamental force in the natural universe, and that is that (Hanna, 2023). This is a conclusion that is unsettling for mainstream professional academic philosophy and science alike, that see their sacred mission not to be acknowledging and admiring the butterflies of reality, but instead to be tearing them apart to see how the bits into which they've dissected prima facie phenomena actually make things work, thereby killing the goose that laid the golden eggs.

4. Example 3: Skepticism and the Limits of Philosophy

The general aim of Western philosophy has been to produce rationally justified arguments for either general philosophical positions (realism, anti-realism, freedom of will, determinism etc.) or systems (materialism, idealism etc.) or more modestly, in support of solutions to specific philosophical puzzles and paradoxes. It has also been held by the vast majority (but not all) Western philosophers that *Clifford's principle*-- "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" --if not true in general, then at least applies to philosophical all arguments and theses (Clifford, 1879; Fogelin, 1994: pp. 114-115). So, in philosophy, reasoned arguments rule and beliefs cannot be accepted as true because of cultural convention, practical utility, or "faith." All beliefs must be subject to rational scrutiny, including very basic ones such as, for example, the principle of induction, the justification of reasoning from the observed to the unobserved or from the known to the unknown, a fundamental metaphysical presupposition of science itself, as many contend (Vetter, 1969; Stove, 1986; MacNamara, 1991; Rosenkrantz, 1992; Cargile, 1998; Pargetter & Bigelow, 1997; Foster, 2004). The premises of an inductive argument might move from the statement that all observed Xs have been Y, to the conclusion that *all* Xs are Y or will be Y. But *not all* Xs have been observed. How do we know that the laws of nature, such as the fundamental laws of quantum mechanics, will not undergo a radical transformation? To assume that nature is uniform is to beg the question at issue,

namely, *why* is nature uniform? We are presupposing what we have to prove, namely, the principle of induction. Or so the argument goes. Many philosophers believe that this problem alone challenges the rationality of science; as David Papineau puts it:

The problem of induction calls the authority of all these laws [i.e., laws of nature] into question. For if our evidence is simply that these laws have worked so far, then how can we be sure that they will not be disproved by future occurrences? (Papineau, 2007: p. 287)

No satisfactory formal theory or justification of induction has been generally accepted after two millennia of research.

The rationality of philosophy, dominated by the hyper-rationality of Clifford's principle, has been questioned by an array—although still a minority—of skeptical, relativist and nihilist philosophers, from the skeptics of the ancient world (e.g. Sextus Empiricus, 2nd century AD) to philosophers critical of system building like Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), and philosophers of minor or insignificant status in the great multiverse of philosophical “superstars,” such as myself, who is glad to be insignificant in the great cognitive whirlpool (Smith, 1986). Postmodernism in particular, as well as associated movements such as feminism, deconstructionism, and environmentalism, have all presented challenges to the hyper-rationalism of 20th and 21st century Analytic philosophy.

Postmodernism, for example, is difficult to define, for as Frodeman observes, postmodernism is a movement “that celebrates its own schizophrenia, embracing pastiche and spontaneity and renouncing self-classification” (Frodeman, 1992: p. 308). However, common to all postmodernist thinkers is the rejection of the modernist idea that there is a unified account of what makes an inquiry scientific and rational; there is a death of “metanarratives” constituting “universal” human history (Lyotard, 1984). Lyotard puts it this way: “there is no longer any horizon of universality, universalisation or general emancipation to greet the eye of postmodern man” (Lyotard, 1992: p. 89). Postmodernism has rejected *epistemological foundationalism* (i.e., the thesis that knowledge can only be justified by obtaining a secure grounding), the *referential theory of language* (i.e., the thesis that language has meaning through by virtue of the representation of the objects referred to) and the *correspondence theory of truth* (i.e., the thesis that sentences or statements are true by virtue of “corresponding” to reality) (Lynch, 2009). However, the rejection of those conventionally accepted, but controversial philosophical theses, has produced something of a “reality problem” (Chalmers, 1985, 1989; Martin, 1989; Clendinnen, 1989; McArthur, 2006; Wray, 2008), and also since the 1960s it has yielded a wide intellectual debate about the doctrine of *relativism* (Burke, 1979; Hugley & Sayward, 1987; Edwards et al., 1995; Norris, 1997a, 1997b; Fairlamb, 1997; Shogenji, 1997; Kuna, 2005; Zimmerman, 2007; Boghossian, 2007; Pritchard, 2009; Wright, 2008).

The doctrine of relativism has been debated by philosophers since at least Plato's discussion of the classical relativist Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates says that Protagoras proposed that "[m]an is the measure of all things, alike of the being of things that are, and of the not-being of things that are not" (Plato, 1985: p. 856). Since that time, the definition of the word "relativism" has been subjected to perennial philosophical dispute, with some philosophers arguing that the position is itself incoherent or self-refuting (Bearn, 1985; White, 1989; Fox, 1994; Hales, 1997; Benningson, 1999; Lockie, 2003), and others attempting to make logical sense of the notion (MacFarlane, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2009). Informally stated, relativism about some knowledge-claim P is the view that there exists a plurality of standards and principles about P, which vary between people, cultures, "forms of life," frameworks, times (and other phenomena whereby beliefs can vary) and there is no single, neutral (with respect to alternative, incompatible principles and standards) method of choice between these standards and principles (Siegel, 1987: p. 6). The knowledge-claims P could include various claims to scientific knowledge or to knowledge in general (epistemic relativism), ethical knowledge claims (ethical relativism), legal knowledge claims (legal relativism), or philosophical knowledge claims (philosophical relativism), or even metaphilosophical knowledge claims (metaphilosophical relativism), the idea that "no metaphilosophy is objectively best" (Double, 1996: p. 37; Ellis, 2001). In addition to relativism about truth-claims, relativism can also be about the justification or warrant for beliefs, about conceptual schemes (conceptual relativism) (Davidson, 1984), or about what exists (ontological relativism) (Quine, 1969). Relativism can also be supported by a number of arguments from considerations about the sociology of knowledge (Morrow, 1985; Tibbetts, 1986; Katz, 1989; Slezak, 1989, 1991, 1994; Bunge, 1991; Pickering, 1997; Demeter, 2009), from social constructivism, as in "we collectively invent the world rather than discover it" (Kukla, 2000: p. ix; see also Fine, 1996; Craib, 1997; Hacking, 1999; Burr, 2003)) and from epistemological considerations about anti-realism (Fine, 1991; Nelson, 1994; Okasha, 2000; Lewens, 2005).

At the center of the relativism debate is a challenging problem that Paul Boghossian in *Fear of Knowledge* (Boghossian, 2006) has likened to a Kant-style "antinomy of reason": on the one hand, epistemic relativism is allegedly self-refuting, but on the other hand, epistemic objectivism (the denial of epistemic relativism) is allegedly logically circular, and hence philosophically unjustified. Even if epistemic relativism were not self-refuting, the "circularity" problem itself challenges both epistemic relativism and objectivism alike. The *diallelus problem*, as stated by Sextus Empiricus in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, is as follows:

[I]n order to decide the dispute which has arisen about the criterion, we must possess an accepted criterion by which we shall be able to judge the dispute; and in order to possess an accepted criterion, the dispute about the criterion must first be decided. And when the argument thus reduces itself to a form of circular reasoning the discovery of the criterion becomes impracticable, since we do not allow them [the dogmatists] to adopt a criterion by assumption, while if they offer to judge the criterion

by a criterion we force them to regress *ad infinitum*. And furthermore, since demonstration requires a demonstrated criterion, while the criterion requires an approved demonstration, they are forced into circular reasoning. (Sextus Empiricus, 1976: II, 20)

Although the problem of the criterion—all epistemic norms are of equal standing—has been advanced in support of epistemic relativism (Sankey, 2010: p. 6, 2011, 2012)), the point of the diallelus problem is that *all* epistemic norms are equally unjustified, *including* epistemic relativism itself, applied self-reflectively (Talvinen, 2009; Schwab, 2013; McCain, 2014).

Fries's Trilemma says that the rational justification of a theory of knowledge (or justification) would be either (i) question-begging, (ii) lead to an infinite regress, or (iii) be viciously circular (Nelson, 1965; Haller, 1974; Kekes, 1975, 1976; Johnson, 1976; Berkson, 1979; Apel, 1976). This problem of the ultimate justification of reason itself has been regarded as “one of the most important and one of the most difficult of all the problems of philosophy” (Chisholm, 1982: p. 61), subject to continuing philosophical dispute (Mercier, 1906; Coffey, 1938; Rescher, 1980; Huby & Neal, 1989; Amico, 1993; Floridi, 1996), with influential philosophers seeing the challenge of rationality skepticism as unmet (Hiley, 1987; Fogelin, 1999; Landesman, 2002: p. 202). Landesman sees the criterion argument as the most powerful skeptical argument and concludes that

there is another basic claim of global skepticism that is, I think, quite correct, namely that we cannot prove that we have knowledge without using knowledge already in our possession. So arguments intended to prove that we actually know something beg the question because they must rely upon background information. (Landesman, 2002: p. 202)

Landesman thus accepts a position of epistemic humility, uncommon in philosophy, a discipline not known for its modesty:

skeptical arguments do justify the verdict: not proven. Like Hume, we should enter the affairs of life with that verdict in the backs of our minds, recognizing our fallible condition and being wary of speculative claims. Our claims to knowledge should be constrained by an understanding of the limits of our ability to prove the reliability of the procedures we use to get in contact with the external world. (Landesman, 2002: p. 202)

The problem of ultimate justification has led to the school of critical rationalism, which rejects the justificationist framework and holds that “our knowledge consists of unfalsified hypotheses” (Miller, 2006: p. 254). Critical rationalism involves “the total repudiation of any attempt to use arguments to support the hypotheses that we adhere to” (Miller, 2006: p. 78), but “critical rationalists have not abandoned truth; only the pretensions of justified truth” (Miller, 2006: p. 80). Sextus Empiricus would perhaps regard such a position as skepticism posing as rationalism, for would not Occam’s

Razor (i.e., do not multiply entities beyond necessity) also require one to abandon truth, once justified truth is abandoned with all attempts of verification? (Derksen, 1980; Hauptli, 1991).

Graham Priest in *Beyond the Limits of Thought* discusses Sextus Empiricus's criterion argument applied to the question of distinguishing veridical from non-veridical perceptions (Priest, 2002). Priest rejects the claim that to have reasonable grounds for belief one needs a criterion and claims that experience itself is a defeasible reason for believing that the world is a certain way. This response seems to assume a realist theory of perception; as D.A. Kaufman, has noted, if a non-realist theory of perception is adopted, then one is on the road to Hume's (and Sextus's) problem (Kaufman, 2002). For a critique of the direct realist theory of perception, see (Smythies & Ramachandran, 1997). Priest also claims that skepticism is self-refuting, even if the criterion argument succeeded:

If Sextus' arguments worked then they would show that skepticism is rationally acceptable, contrary to his committed position that they are not. (Priest, 2002: p. 47).

As Priest says: "To assert something involves taking on the commitment to support it with rational grounds for supposing it to be (objectively) true if challenged" (Priest, 2002: p. 47). The question of whether or not global skepticism is self-refuting has been discussed in the literature: see, for example (Gallois, 1993; Michael, 1995; Gemes, 2009, 2010). These arguments cannot be evaluated here, but it can be noted that even if global skepticism is self-refuting, this alone does not refute the skeptical arguments advanced against rationalism, such as the criterion or regress arguments. What would follow is another Kantian-style antinomy of reason, namely, that both global skepticism and the negation of that position are false, which would not have been surprising to a paraconsistent logician such as Priest.

The power of the criterion argument can be illustrated by a brief reconsideration of the role of intuitions in philosophy, as an important part of philosophy's methodology. As Timothy Williamson has observed in *The Philosophy of Philosophy*:

[T]he current philosophical mainstream has failed to articulate an adequate philosophical methodology, in part because it has fallen into the classic epistemological error of psychologizing the data.... The picture is wrong; we frequently have better epistemic access to our immediate physical environment than to our own psychology. ... Our understanding of philosophical methodology must be rid of internalist preconceptions. (Williamson, 2009: pp. 4-5)

Be that as it may, intuitions, as I discussed earlier, are a core part of Analytic philosophy's methodology: "intuitions involve or somehow reveal what our concepts are," Mark Fedyk says, and

the basic idea is that an intuition is about the salient features of a case, it has propositional content, and the propositional content of an intuition is obtained in some way from the implicated concept. (Fedyk, 2009: p. 56)

Williamson on the other hand, while agreeing that intuition, “plays a major role in contemporary analytic philosophy’s self-understanding,” also says that

there is no agreed or even popular account of how intuition works, no accepted explanation of the hoped-for correlation between our having an intuition that P and its being true that P. Since analytic philosophy prides itself on its rigor, this blank space in its foundations looks like a methodological scandal. Why should intuitions have any authority over the philosophical domain? (Williamson, 2009: p. 215)

For example, it is widely held that Edmund Gettier presented intuitive counterexamples to the justified true belief account of knowledge, but empirical evidence indicates that these “intuitions” are not cross-culturally valid (Weinberg et al., 2001; Nisbett et al., 2001; Alexander & Weinberg 2007; Vaidya, 2010). Feltz has argued that psychological evidence indicates that intuitions are not a reliable source of evidence for epistemic justification (Feltz, 2008). A lively debate has occurred about this issue (Greenman, 1987; Bealer, 1992, 1996, a, b; Sosa, 1996, 2007; De Paul & Ramsey eds, 1998; Jackson, 1998, 2005; Pust, 2001, 2004; Rescher, 2001; Stich & Weinberg, 2001; Weatherson, 2003; Laurence & Margolis, 2003; Levin, 2004; Hales, 2004; Williamson, 2004; Jackson, 2005; Bishop & Trout, 2005; Sandin, 2006; Boulter, 2007; Symons, 2008; Earlenbaugh & Molyneaux, 2009; Chapman et al., 2013). The debate cannot be resolved by appealing to intuitions, for that would be begging the question, since the “intuitions” of the anti-intuitionists are clearly in conflict with the intuitions of the intuitionists. Intuitively, the debate does not seem capable of resolution, for the reason mentioned by John Woods in his book *Paradox and Paraconsistency*. (Woods, 2003). For any philosophical argument A, “*Philosophy’s Most Difficult Problem* is that of adjudicating in a principled way the conflict between supposing that A is a sound demonstration of a counterintuitive truth, as opposed to seeing it as a counterexample of its premises” (Woods, 2003: p. 14).

A challenging examination of the epistemic status of intuitions in philosophy has been presented by Steven D. Hales. In his 2000 essay “The Problem of Intuition,” he argues that the problem of intuition is that philosophy is only possible (that is, “traditional *a priori* philosophy” (Hales, 2000: p. 145), if the proposition that “nothing is self-justifying” is rejected, for justifying the use of intuitions via intuition is not only circular, but logically contradictory according to an argument developed by Hales. Hales’ argument is as follows:

The problem of intuition:

1. If a proposition is epistemically justified, then it is justified either *a priori* or *a posteriori*.

2. If a proposition is epistemically justified *a priori*, then its justification depends on the method of intuition justifying some propositions.
3. If the proposition “the method of intuition justifies some propositions” is epistemically justified, it is not justified *a posteriori*.
4. “The method of intuition justifies some propositions” is epistemically justified.
5. Nothing is self-justifying.

From 1, 3:

6. If “the method of intuition justifies some propositions” is epistemically justified, it is justified *a priori*.

From 2, 6:

7. If “the method of intuition justifies some propositions” is epistemically justified, then its justification depends on the method of intuition justifying some propositions.

From 4, 7:

8. The justification of “the method of intuition justifies some propositions” depends on the method of intuition justifying some propositions.

From 5, 8:

9. Thus “the method of intuition justifies some propositions” is not epistemically justified.

From 4, 9:

10. “The method of intuition justifies some propositions” is and is not epistemically justified. (Hales, 2000: p. 139)

Thus, either “ ‘the method of intuition justifies some propositions’ is epistemically justified on the basis of nothing other than the method of intuition itself” or else “philosophy grounded in the use of rational intuition is bunk” (Hales, 2000, 145).

In his book *Relativism and the Foundations of Philosophy*, Steven Hales goes even further and argues that:

1. there is no reason to think that rational intuition is a better means of discovering which philosophical propositions are true than Christian revelation or even the ritual use of hallucinogens; and 2. the truth values of philosophical propositions are relative to doxastic perspectives, and may be true in one perspective and false in another. (Hales, 2006: p. 184)

Hales believes that there are three live options to the problem outlined in 1. above: (1) skepticism: there is no philosophical knowledge, (2) nihilism: there are no philosophical propositions and (3) relativism: the truth of philosophical positions is relative to perspectives. He attempts to prove the relativist position by eliminating

both skepticism and nihilism. In particular, he claims that skepticism is self-refuting, so there must be a method of obtaining knowledge about philosophical propositions, and if there is one way of getting knowledge of philosophical propositions, there must be at least two, so there must be conflicting philosophical truths, so relativism is true (Hales, 2006: pp. 120-121). As critics have pointed out, this argument is highly questionable and even if accepted, skepticism seems to be the “natural” position to adopt, not relativism (Jackson, 2008: p. 255). Hales, however, relies on this self-refutation argument against skepticism:

- (1) If skepticism about philosophical propositions is true, then we cannot know the truth of any philosophical proposition.
- (2) Skepticism is a philosophical proposition.
- (3) Therefore, if skepticism about philosophical propositions is true, we cannot know it. (From (1), (2)).
- (4) Proposition (3) is a philosophical proposition.
- (5) Therefore, if skepticism about philosophical propositions is true, then we cannot know it (Hales, 2006, 92-93).

In his brief discussion of the problem of the criterion, Hales says that the skeptic is offering either particular items of knowledge, such as the skeptical argument itself, or asserting the validity of methods such as non-question-beggingness as a criterion for knowledge (Hales, 2006: p. 150). Bueno has replied to Hales on this often-made point against skepticism, saying that the (Pyrrhonian) skeptic is not advancing a position but “only pointing out that, *according to the dogmatist’s standards*, the *dogmatic philosopher lacks knowledge*” (Bueno, 2008: p. 252). Skepticism is a *reductio* of dogmatism, rather than a positive position. In any case even if the notion of “philosophical propositions” was defined so broadly as to include such negative positions, the skeptic could accept that if skepticism about philosophical propositions is true, then we cannot know it. This on its own does not undermine the claim that we cannot know the truth of any philosophical proposition, but instead supports it. Further, using Hales’s own argument that I discussed above, philosophical skepticism would follow on his own terms if the proposition “the method of intuition justifies some propositions” is *not* epistemically justified on the basis of nothing other than the method of intuition itself. The critique of philosophical intuitions as a method in philosophy would yield at least a robust form of philosophical skepticism.

We are thus led to the position described by philosopher William Lycan, which says that intuition as a method for philosophy is “feeble and of very little epistemic authority” and that “philosophical theorizing *per se* is itself feeble and of very little epistemic authority” (Lycan, 1996, 143). Indeed,

[i]n particular, what of philosophical method taken as a whole? There is a *corner* in which the philosophical track record is good: logic. Otherwise, the history of philosophy is a disgusting mess of squabbling, inconclusion, dogma and counter-dogma, trendy patois, fashionable but actually groundless assumptions, vacillation from one paradigm to another, mere speculation, and sheer abuse. Nothing in that

sordid history can be called *progress*, except what derives directly from developments in logic or in science, and consensus has always been limited to what are really very small groups of people confined in small geographical regions over short periods of time. If we use consensus production as our yardstick, then—and again, I know no other—we find that as between science, common sense and philosophy, science and common sense do very well while philosophy comes in a pathetically weak third. I take this seriously. And I believe that a felicitous explanatory coordination between common sense and science is the best that philosophy can hope to achieve (Lycan, 1996, 149).

This seems to be a very grim situation for the discipline of philosophy, so it is natural to ask: where to now, philosophy?

5. Conclusion: Where To Now, Philosophy?

The argument I've presented above would seem to indicate that philosophy cannot be a guide to the truth, or even approximate truth, about reality, for many reasons, not forgetting the issue of even getting to first base and deciding what counts as "truth," namely, the problem of the criterion. We have seen how major philosophical research programs, such as physicalism, and analytic philosophy itself have ultimately failed, just as programs before them, such as logical positivism, came aground and were intellectually ship wrecked. Does this mean that philosophy is therefore bankrupt, in all its forms, and should therefore be abandoned? Or given this failure, should the intellectual bar be lowered instead? The short answer is no, because the very act of proposing the bankruptcy of philosophy, is itself a philosophical thesis, and puts one back upon the "wheel" of philosophy (Smith, 1988).

Instead of embracing skepticism, we should boldly proclaim that the traditional quest to *defeat skepticism*, and thereby put human knowledge on a secure footing, as traditionally conceived, as Descartes hoped, should be discarded. Nor for that matter can justification be divorced from a cultural context; it is not unreasonable to accept as defeasible most widely-held common sense beliefs, such as the existence of the external world, and consciousness, unless shown with compelling evidence and argument to be delusional. We have to start somewhere, so why not start with what is at hand, and then sort *that* out further if necessary?

Moreover, Clifford's principle, that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" or argument (Clifford, 1879; Fogelin, 1994, 114-115), should be rejected, since a strict application of this hyper-rationalism leads to justification skepticism. As Marcus Arvan pointed out in "Has Contemporary Philosophy Over-Fetishized Rigor?," the giants of past philosophy, like Kant, were not concerned with rigor for rigor's sake, but instead were concerned with formulating a new "big picture," and thereby charting a worldview that presents a revolutionary vision of existing problems (Arvan, 2012). The same point can be made about all the past greats of Western philosophy, including Socrates, Plato, Aristotle,

Hobbes, Locke, Mill, Rousseau, Hegel, and so on. It is highly unlikely that their work would be accepted for publication if it had been done in the context of contemporary professional academic philosophy, and sent to any Anglo-American Analytic philosophy journal, or peer reviewed by mainstream academic publishers. Arvan quotes a passage from Simon Blackburn's review of Davidson's *Truth and Predication*:

Philosophers think of themselves as the guardians of reason, intent beyond other men upon care and accuracy, on following the argument wherever it leads, spotting flaws, rejecting fallacies, insisting on standards. This is how we justify ourselves as educators, and as respectable voices within the academy, or even in public life. But there is a yawning chasm between self-image and practice, and in fact it is a great mistake to think that philosophers ever gain their followings by means of compelling arguments. The truth is the reverse, that when the historical moment is right people fall in love with the conclusions, and any blemish in the argument is quickly forgiven: the most outright fallacy becomes beatified as a bold and imaginative train of thought, obscurity actually befits a deep original exploration of dim and unfamiliar interconnexions, arguments that nobody can follow at all become a brilliant roller-coaster ride towards a shift in the vocabulary, a reformulation of the problem space. Follow the star, and the raw edges will easily be tidied up later. (Arvan, 2012)

Arvan then concludes that the over-emphasis on rigor can dull and suppress creative and revolutionary thought:

But now what fosters revolutionary thought in a philosopher? Not, I think, an emphasis on rigor. Rigor and Revolutionary Thought, it seems to me, inherently pull in opposite directions. The more rigorous an argument is—the more of a “sure thing” its premises are—the less revolutionary it is apt to be. Rigor narrows the way we think about things. Rigor tells us: “If you can't justify each of your premises to an intelligent, skeptical reader, your argument is a non-starter.” Yet, again, how many Great Works of philosophy actually satisfy this stricture of Rigor? I wager: not many. (Arvan, 2012)

In other words, valorizing rigor yields philosophical *rigor mortis*. But since we are inevitably committed to some kind of philosophy if we are to continue living (and even the people in the night clubs pursuing sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, have a “philosophy” of sorts, hedonism), one worthy choice would be to opt for a *life-shaping philosophy*, as proposed by Hanna, which rejects the intellectual imperialism of professional academic Western philosophy, with its careerism, conformity, coercive authoritarianism, dogmatism, esotericism and hyper-specialization, and hyper-rationalism, because such a discipline is “fundamentally theoretically, emotionally, morally, and/or socio-politically at odds with the rest of humanity” (Hanna, 2022: p. 49), and replacing that crisis-ridden, self-stultifying philosophical paradigm with a realistically optimistic dignitarian humanist alternative (Hanna, 2020). This essay has offered further reasons for abandoning that received paradigm of philosophy and making that radical replacement.

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