Everything of Value is Useful: How Philosophy Can be Socially Relevant

Hans Radder, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam


http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-3eW
An article on the usefulness of philosophy requires some explanation. It calls for an analysis and evaluation of the divergent interpretations of the concepts “philosophy” and “usefulness,” as well as their possible connections. This article concerns the relationship of professional philosophy with personal, social, or academic life. I will outline this relationship and, based on this, explain what is, or could be, the usefulness of philosophy.

**Philosophy**

First, there is the question of what should be understood by philosophy. There is no straightforward unambiguous answer to this question. The simple fact is that there is no agreement amongst those who call themselves philosophers by profession about what philosophy is and how it should be pursued. There are, however, a number of approaches that substantial groups of philosophers follow. I mention three here. The first assumes that the pursuance of philosophy is more or less engrossed in the explanation of, and commentary on, the *texts* of the “great philosophers.” One could call this commentarism. A comprehensive example of this approach can be found in my “Socrates of the Commentarists.”

A second approach primarily regards philosophy as conceptual analysis. One analyzes the meaning of various concepts and their mutual relationships. In this tradition, “Causality and Causation: A Conceptual Analysis” could be the title of an article. A third approach, naturalism, positions philosophy within, or as a continuation of, science. Epistemology should base itself on the results of psychology and neurosciences; ethics becomes part of evolutionary or socio-biology; and a naturalistic philosophy of science can be reduced to the historical or social-scientific study of the practice of science.

According to these three approaches, philosophy only has a limited usefulness for social, scientific, or personal practices. This specifically applies to commentarism. Here, philosophers voluntarily join a secluded world of inaccessible, sometimes even unfathomable texts. Nobody can deny that we can still learn from Aristotle and Immanuel Kant, but in the twenty-first century philosophers face new problems and challenges of which Aristotle and Kant had no notion at all.

Conceptual analysis could perhaps provide useful results. For example, in the current political situation, there is a strong tendency to characterize all forms of resistance in terms of terror and terrorism. The Paris attacks, the Ukrainian conflict, the occupation of this...
Maagdenhuis (the administrative center of the University of Amsterdam, occupied in early 2015), and sometimes even all forms of fundamental critique are all generalized as acts of terrorism. In this context, a critical conceptual analysis of the current use and abuse of the concept “terrorism” and the differences with notions such as “civil war,” “independence struggle,” “civil disobedience,” and “fundamental social critique” could provide a valuable contribution to the political debate. Something similar holds true for the term “populism,” which is equally, without any additional reasoning, used far too often to disqualify views deviating from those of the reigning political elite.

Unfortunately, much philosophical analysis of concepts suffers from a number of self-imposed limitations, thereby reducing its practical relevance. In the Wittgensteinian variant, it generally suffices to provide a description of the existing use of concepts: a critical intervention would be unacceptable. Thus, the British sociologist H.M. Collins argues that his Wittgensteinian approach should hand over science in the same state as it found it.\(^3\) The more essentialist variants of conceptual analysis (attempting to find the one and only true essence of concepts) have the disadvantage that too little attention is paid to the question of whose concepts they have in mind. Consequently, the historical, socio-cultural or linguistic variability of concepts disappears rapidly beyond the horizon. One can, for instance, not expect too much from a conceptual analysis that (not only inside but also outside professional philosophy) uncritically equates the Dutch concept of wetenschap (or the German Wissenschaft and the French science) with the Anglo-American “science.”\(^4\)

Finally, there is naturalism. This approach views philosophy as a “type of general science.” For this reason, it can, in principle, make a contribution to the practical development of science. Naturalism, however, also struggles with a fundamental problem. Which “science” should the naturalistic philosopher pursue: biology, psychology, sociology, or historiography? Different choices lead to completely different “naturalistic” philosophies. The result is that much energy is spent on all sorts of debates that are of no use for the practicing scientist. With regard to its social or personal usefulness, the significance of a strictly naturalistic philosophy is dubious as well. The reason for this is that supporters of this approach too often advocate a scientistic vision of science as a neutral means for solving social and/or personal problems.\(^5\)

**Philosophy in Practice**

Thus, the usefulness of commentarism, conceptual analysis, and naturalism for actual social, scientific or personal practices is rather limited. Especially the first two approaches view professional philosophy as a more or less autonomous activity. From this viewpoint, it is indeed problematic to subsequently have something to say about the usefulness of philosophy outside the context of the professional philosopher. At best, this will result in a one-way conversation. The philosopher has discovered or learnt something that could benefit the people in their everyday lives.

---


\(^4\) See Radder, “How Inclusive is European Philosophy of Science?”

\(^5\) For these critiques of naturalism, see Radder, *In and About the World*, 175-183.
However, the relationship between professional philosophy and our social, academic or personal life can also be regarded as a mutual interaction. The reason for this is that philosophizing is not limited to professionals, but takes place everywhere. There is no essential tension between a theoretical philosophy and the practical world. Besides being agents, people are also reflective beings. More precisely: reflection, including philosophical reflection, is a normal element of all kinds of personal, social, and scientific practices.

I will illustrate this with two brief examples. The first concerns the reductionism issue and, more specifically, the question whether human beings can be, in an ontological sense, reduced to their physical-chemical constituents. Are humans no more than their material components? This question arises in various guises. One of these is the reduction of mental phenomena to brain processes. Another concerns the reduction of biological, psychological or social processes to their genetic “basis.”

I would like to expand on the latter. Genetic reductionism is discussed extensively in philosophy. It is, however, not solely an academic-philosophical issue. A topical development, in which genetic reductionism plays a direct practical role, is the debate on what is called “surrogate motherhood.” Surrogate motherhood can take various forms. Consider the case when a woman wants a child in this way, with the fertilized genetic material (hers or that of another woman) being implanted into a surrogate mother, who then gives birth to a child, after nine months. Who is the real mother of this child? This debate has generally provided three types of answers to this question: the woman who contractually “ordered” the child and paid for the implantation costs, pregnancy, and childbirth; the woman who donated the ovum; and the woman who carried the child and gave birth to it. From a legal and economic perspective the first answer is the obvious one; on the basis of biological and socio-psychological principles, one could argue for the third; while the geneticist approach could serve as support for the second answer.

Here, we do not merely have a fundamental philosophical issue and debate “in practice,” but it is also a case where professional philosophy can learn from this practice. In such cases, we face real dilemmas, revealing the inadequacy of the philosophical doctrine of reductionism. The answer to the question “who is the real mother” requires a comparative assessment of the legal and economic arguments, of the (genetic and non-genetic) biological arguments, and of the social and psychological arguments. Which argument will be the deciding factor in practice will depend on the specific context. This means that, in theory, all three answers

---

6 The reason for including this example was this excerpt in an article by Wolfgang Spohn: “What is ontological independence? An object X ontologically depends on an object Y if X cannot exist without Y, if it is metaphysically impossible that X exists, but not Y. For instance, each human being being ontologically depends on its mother, or has its mother essentially.” (Spohn, “On the Objectivity of Facts, Beliefs, and Values,” 173). In other words, Spohn assumes that each person has only one (natural) mother and views this as an essential ontological characteristic of motherhood and personhood.

7 Schermer and Keulartz, “How Pragmatic is Bioethics?” 45-56.

8 There is a notable difference between surrogate motherhood and embryo donation. While, in the latter case, the woman giving birth is regarded as the mother, in the former case she is generally not. It therefore seems quite plausible that who is regarded as the real mother also depends on the ethnicity and socio-economic position of those involved.
have some validity and that none of the three can, or should be, elevated to an “-ism” by philosophers.

A second example concerns the issue of patenting. This is currently a very topical issue. First of all, there is the debate on the judicial legitimacy and moral justice of patenting parts of plants, animals, and humans. Do the patentability criteria for technological artifacts also apply to living or natural organisms? A second issue concerns the role of public science. Recently, strong pressure has been exerted on university researchers to capitalize on the results of their work through patenting. In this respect, an important question is whether such privatization is compatible with the public nature of (university) science. The general point is that the people involved in such judicial, moral and political debates take (implicit or explicit) positions on philosophical questions. For instance, regarding the ontological question of the difference between natural and artificial things; or the scientific-philosophical question of the criteria required for good science.

In the light of these examples—which can easily be supplemented by many others—professional philosophy emerges as a thematization of questions that already play a role in “non-philosophical” contexts. Socially relevant academic philosophy is not a reflection on a pre-reflective life, or a theory about a theory-free practice. Because humans are both active and reflective beings, there is and has always been reflection in our life-worlds and theory in our practices. Even if the approach by professional philosophers is, or should be, more systematic and scholarly, this still does not grant it autonomy regarding personal, social or scientific practices. Viewed in this way, there is no conflict between “basic” and “applied” philosophical research. Both are required if philosophy wants to make a contribution to social debates. For example, the ontological theory of the abstract meaning of concepts can be shown to be directly relevant for debates on the patentability of scientific research results, because the relationship between the abstract-conceptual and the concrete-material is itself at issue in this patenting practice.

The conception of the relationship between philosophy and practice outlined here differs distinctly from a recent new approach, curiously called “experimental philosophy.” In fact, experimental philosophy is an empirical social-scientific study of the philosophical intuitions of ordinary people, often with the aim of testing whether the intuitions that academic philosophers employ are also shared by non-philosophers. Viewed as such, the provision of critical and reflexive contributions to philosophy in social practices falls outside the scope of this experimental philosophy.

Philosophy and Usefulness

“Usefulness” (and the related “utility”) are rather controversial terms for many philosophers. They are associated with down-to-earth issues, such as money and material gain, and are

9 Sterckx, Biotechnology, Patents and Morality; Van den Belt, “Enclosing the Genetic Commons” and “Mag ik uw Genen Even Patenteren?”
10 In Radder, Er Middenin!, Ch. 5 and 6, I discuss these questions in some detail.
11 Radder, “Exploiting Abstract Possibilities.”
12 See Goldman and McGrath, Epistemology, 190-199.
contrasted with “everything of value that is vulnerable.” This would particularly apply to the “useless” philosophy. According to its Greek roots, philosophy is then literally interpreted as the desire for wisdom. This seeking of wisdom does not focus on particular things and their instrumental value, but rather on the “higher” questions about the totality, the essence or the intrinsic meaning of reality.

This view is problematic for various reasons. The first concerns the idea of philosophy as the desire for wisdom. Unfortunately, time and time again one hears this equally arrogant as erroneous association of philosophy with wisdom during discussions on the practical meaning of philosophy. That philosophers are, in a psychological sense, driven by this desire is already a far-fetched notion. But even if this were the case, they are not really successful in this endeavor. Consequently, there is no reason why philosophers, as a group, should be deemed wiser than any other profession in society, be it plumbers, actresses or professional tennis players.

The above-mentioned implications of the examples of philosophy in practice (surrogate motherhood, patenting) are, however, more important. They show the inadequacy of the dichotomy between the higher and the useless, on which philosophers are supposed to focus, as opposed to the lower and instrumental, by which ordinary people, experts, and politicians would be driven or even obsessed.

A second view of the issue of the usefulness of philosophy emphasizes the existence of two scientific cultures: the culture of the exact sciences, focusing on prediction and control versus the culture of the humanities, including philosophy, which deals with the preservation and disclosure of cultural meanings. However, according to this view the tension between these two cultures is not irreconcilable. Philosophy might to date not have been that useful, but this need not necessarily be so in the future. This view, which plays a major role in many of the current debates on the “valorization” (the social impact) of the humanities, implies that philosophy is, or could be, “actually quite useful.” An example of such an engaged and actually-quite-useful humanities’ scholar is a philosopher of language who focuses on developing “better” storylines in computer games.

Both views of the usefulness of philosophy assume that there is a gap between philosophy and usefulness. The seekers of wisdom see the gap as essential, while the actually-quite-useful philosophers argue that the gap can be bridged and that even philosophy can contribute to “the necessary innovation of the Dutch knowledge economy.” Despite this difference, both views employ the notion of usefulness in much the same way.

I suggest that these two approaches should not be allowed to monopolize this notion, but that it should be interpreted far more broadly. Something is useful if it contributes to accomplishing a particular goal, which is deemed worthwhile. This does not predetermine the nature of the goal. It may involve the aforementioned necessary innovation of the Dutch knowledge economy.

---

13 The famous line from a 1974 poem by the Dutch poet Lucebert reads *Alles van waarde is weerloos* (“Everything of value is vulnerable”).

14 See Bijker and Peperkamp, *Geëngageerde Geesteswetenschappen*. 
knowledge economy, achieving mutual understanding through undistorted communication, or the seeking and finding of wisdom.

For these reasons, we can truly describe a professional philosophy that contributes to a quality increase in non-academic philosophical reflection as really useful. I deliberately refer to professional philosophy and not to a professional philosopher. As a discipline, philosophy is useful if it makes a valuable contribution to social, scientific or personal reflection. In this view, it is entirely consistent that individual philosophers maintain a certain division of labor. Some will focus more on the description and analysis of relevant non-academic reflections, while others will be more engaged with the systematic, scholarly thematization of disputed issues.

Does this mean that such a professional philosophy is useful under all circumstances? To answer this question, we should not only consider what philosophy is not or should not be (commentarism, conceptual analysis or naturalism), but, above all, what it actually comprises. Elsewhere, I have provided an account of professional philosophy as theoretical, normative, and reflexive. This characterization shows that philosophizing entails a specific approach. It primarily comprises a theoretical and evaluative clarification of issues that is also reflexively related to the situation of the philosophers themselves. This specificity implies that philosophy is not always or everywhere relevant. Philosophy is a discursive activity in which the linguistic and argumentative aspects are dominant. At certain times, however, action is needed, with theoretical or normative contemplation being unsuitable or even inappropriate. Some issues may be better tackled by means of a meal or a stroll enjoyed together than by means of a theoretical, normative and reflexive analysis. And sometimes, as in the recent occupations of university buildings in Amsterdam, civil disobedience is legitimate and necessary to subvert a situation of structural abuse of power. Nevertheless, I hope that I have succeeded in clarifying that many other present-day issues in our personal, social, and scientific world could definitely benefit from philosophical involvement.

Contact details: h.radder@vu.nl

Bibliography


15 I cannot expand any further on this characterization here. For more on this subject, see Radder, In and About the World, Ch.8; Radder, “Philosophy and History of Science,” 648-652.


