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Philosophy's True Home

By Scott Soames

We've all heard the argument that philosophy is isolated, an “ivory tower” discipline cut off from virtually every other progress-making pursuit of knowledge, including math and the sciences, as well as from the actual concerns of daily life. The reasons given for this are many. In a widely read essay in this series, “When Philosophy Lost Its Way,” Robert Frodeman and Adam Briggle claim that it was philosophy’s institutionalization in the university in the late 19th century that separated it from the study of humanity and nature, now the province of social and natural sciences.

This institutionalization, the authors claim, led it to betray its central aim of articulating the knowledge needed to live virtuous and rewarding lives. I have a different view: Philosophy isn’t separated from the social, natural or mathematical sciences, nor is it neglecting the study of goodness, justice and virtue, which was never its central aim.

The authors claim that philosophy abandoned its relationship to other disciplines by creating its own purified domain, accessible only to credentialed professionals. It is true that from roughly 1930 to 1950, some philosophers — logical empiricists, in particular — did speak of philosophy having its own exclusive subject matter. But since that subject matter



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Photo by Nicole Bengiveno, The New York Times

was logical analysis aimed at unifying all of science, interdisciplinarity was front and center.

This was followed (in Britain) by two decades in which leading philosophers identified philosophy with informal linguistic analysis. Fortunately, this narrow view didn’t stop them from contributing to the science of language and the study of law. Now long gone, neither movement defined the philosophy of its day and neither arose from locating it in universities.

The idea that philosophy was and still is isolated from other disciplines ignores much of its history. From 1879 to 1936 the philosopher-mathematicians Gottlob

Frege, Bertrand Russell, Kurt Gödel, Alonzo Church and Alan Turing invented symbolic logic, helped establish the set-theoretic foundations of mathematics, and gave us the formal theory of computation that ushered in the digital age.

In the field of linguistics, from roughly 1945 to 1975, the philosophers Rudolf Carnap, Saul Kripke, Richard Montague and David Kaplan developed ideas relating logic to linguistic meaning that provided a framework for studying meaning in all human languages. Others, including Paul Grice and J.L. Austin, explained how linguistic meaning mixes with contextual information to enrich communicative contents and how

certain linguistic performances change social facts. Today a new philosophical conception of the relationship between meaning and cognition adds a further dimension to linguistic science.

Decision theory — the science of rational norms governing action, belief and decision under uncertainty — was developed by the 20th-century philosophers Frank Ramsey, Rudolph Carnap, Richard Jeffrey and others. It plays a foundational role in political science and economics by telling us what rationality requires, given our evidence, priorities and the strength of our beliefs. Today, no area of philosophy is more successful in attracting top young minds.

Philosophy also assisted psychology in its long march away from narrow behaviorism and speculative Freudianism. The mid-20th-century functionalist perspective pioneered by Hilary Putnam was particularly important. According to it, pain, pleasure and belief are neither behavioral dispositions nor bare neurological states. They are interacting internal causes, capable of very different physical realizations, that serve the goals of individuals in specific ways. This view is now embedded in cognitive psychology and neuroscience.

Philosophy also played a role in 20th-century physics, influencing the great physicists Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg. The philosophers Moritz Schlick and Hans Reichenbach reciprocated that interest by assimilating the new physics into their philosophies. Today, leading philosophers — including David Albert, Hans Halvorson, Laura Ruetsche, Hilary Greaves and David Wallace — explain quantum physics to outsiders, while conceptualizing issues in ways physicists find useful. Philosophy of biology is following a similar path. Today's philosophy of science is less accessible than

Aristotle's natural philosophy chiefly because it systematizes a larger, more technically sophisticated body of knowledge.

Philosophy's interaction with mathematics, linguistics, economics, political science, psychology and physics requires specialization. Far from fostering isolation, this specialization makes communication and cooperation among disciplines possible. This has always been so. William of Ockham, Descartes, Leibniz and Kant were heavily informed by the science and mathematics of their day. Locke and Hume responded to Newton not with envy and a sense of inferiority (which Frodeman and Briggie wrongly attribute to philosophers responding to 20th-century science), but with a desire to apply Newton's lessons to their natural philosophies of mind, which were then psychology-in-the-making.

Nor did scientific progress rob philosophy of its former scientific subject matter, leaving it to concentrate on the broadly moral. In fact, philosophy thrives when enough is known to make progress conceivable, but it remains unachieved because of methodological confusion. Philosophy helps break the impasse by articulating new questions, posing possible solutions and forging new conceptual tools. Sometimes it does so when sciences are born, as with 17th-century physics and 19th-century biology. But it also does so as they mature. As science advances, there is more, not less, for it to do.

Our knowledge of the universe and ourselves expands like a ripple surrounding a pebble dropped in a pool. As we move away from the center of the spreading circle, its area, representing our secure knowledge, grows. But so does its circumference, representing the border where knowledge blurs into uncertainty and speculation, and methodological confusion returns. Philosophy patrols the border, trying

to understand how we got there and to conceptualize our next move. Its job is unending.

Although progress in ethics, political philosophy and the illumination of life's meaning has been less impressive than advances in some other areas, it is accelerating. After an erosion of faith in ethical theory in the first third of the 20th century, and calls for its abolition in the middle third, John Rawls and Robert Nozick revived theories of justice in the early 1970s. Comprehensive ethical theories, including Thomas Scanlon's and Stephen Darwall's, have also reappeared. Even discussions of death and the meaning of life have returned, led by Thomas Nagel, Samuel Scheffler, Shelly Kagan, Susan Wolf and others. As my colleague Jake Ross observes, the advances in our understanding because of careful formulation and critical evaluation of theories of goodness, rightness, justice and human flourishing by philosophers since 1970 compare well to the advances made by philosophers from Aristotle to 1970.

The knowledge required to maintain philosophy's continuing task, including its vital connection to other disciplines, is too vast to be held in one mind. Despite the often-repeated idea that philosophy's true calling can only be fulfilled in the public square, philosophers actually function best in universities, where they acquire and share knowledge with their colleagues in other disciplines. It is also vital for philosophers to engage students — both those who major in the subject, and those who do not. Although philosophy has never had a mass audience, it remains remarkably accessible to the average student; unlike the natural sciences, its frontiers can be reached in a few undergraduate courses.

Far from being years of "enduring failure," the last 150 years have been philosophy's best.