

Plato Goes Pop

Timothy Williamson

[*Times Literary Supplement*, 5529 (2009), p. 15]

It was only a matter of time, after the success of Stephen Hawking and the subsequent wave of popular science books, before someone noticed the gap in the market for books of popular philosophy. The gap is now rapidly being filled. A pile of them sits on my desk as I write. But they don't emulate the stereotype of popular science. The authors are not trying to communicate mind-twisting recent developments in philosophy beyond the readership of technical journals. Indeed, several of them seem rather embarrassed about the association with academic philosophy, anxiously emphasizing their credentials as street-smart, clued-in drinking companions (*Beer and Philosophy*, *Wine and Philosophy*): despite being philosophers, they are sexy and never in any way in the least boring. The blurb for the Blackwell Philosophy and PopCulture series (*South Park and Philosophy*, *The Office and Philosophy*) says 'Philosophy has had a public relations problem for a few centuries now. This series aims to change that, showing that philosophy is relevant to your life'. The titles, not only in that series, tell a slightly different story: 'philosophy', 'philosopher' (*The Undercover Philosopher*), 'philosophical' (*Philosophical Provocations*) are treated as words that sell books, not as put-offs to be concealed until the reader is already hooked. An old-fashioned image is not always bad for business.

Recent changes in philosophy's self-image facilitate popularization. 'The linguistic turn' belongs in the last century. Increasingly, philosophers have returned to

seeing their subject matter as the world, rather than only our talk or thought about it: not just the word ‘beer’ or the concept of beer, but the stuff you can drink. Philosophers of time study time itself, alert to the possibility that Special Relativity undermines the ordinary language of time. Contemporary moral philosophers do not restrict themselves to describing the rules of moral discourse; they can argue directly about whether torture is absolutely always wrong. In these ways, philosophy no longer defines its questions in ways radically alien to a more innocent understanding.

At the same time, the growing specialization and technicality of academic philosophy has made it ever less accessible to non-specialists, thus ever more in need of popularization. Much work in moral and political philosophy bears on urgent practical issues, public or private, but often in a qualified, indirect way; it may become tractable for decision-makers only after going through several stages of mediation, in what the original author may regard as a process of crass over-simplification. Similarly, philosophers of language are currently debating relativism in terms of subtle issues about the exact structure of a formal theory of meaning. The debate really does implicate popular versions of relativism often invoked when disagreement looks irresolvable (“That’s true for us even if it’s false for you”). For non-specialists, some mediating process is needed to elucidate what is at stake.

Not much popular philosophy attempts to mediate recent developments in technical or academic philosophy to a wider audience. When philosophers are cited, they tend to be the mighty dead. Philosophy, unlike physics, is apparently best consumed when well pickled. Many of the authors seem too little acquainted with recent developments to be in a position to mediate them. Some seem actively hostile. Academic

philosophy is presented as trivial logic-chopping that has lost touch with the deep, simple questions at the heart of real philosophy. Thus popular philosophy steps in to undertake the proper task of philosophy, which the professionals disdain.

The bluff amateur style of philosophy is not without presuppositions. It takes for granted that simple questions (“Why be good?”, “What is truth?”) have simple answers, and that to find those answers it is unnecessary to take much notice of what other people working on the same questions have recently come up with — popular philosophers tend to ignore each other as well as the professionals. This optimistic procedure is taken to be the way to make philosophy serious again. Naturally, the actual results are riddled with boring old fallacies and confusions, rarely even amusing new ones. For instance, I read “when Jane says she loves Dick, she is actually saying that she is in love with her ideas of Dick”, which embodies at least two mistakes as old as the undergraduate essay. Too often, the genre of popular philosophy is abused as an opportunity to pass off one’s pet theories dogmatically on a readership unacquainted with the standard objections and alternatives to them, unhampered by the tiresome business of being reviewed by one’s peers.

Few professional philosophers that I know have forgotten the fundamental questions from which their inquiry originated, not least because they have to explain the connections every year when teaching undergraduates. The elaborate apparatus of academic writing in philosophy results not from self-indulgent pedantry but from the need to distinguish different interpretations of the question, which may have different answers, to provide non-question-begging evidence in support of one’s answers, to assess whether one’s answer is any better supported than those carefully developed by others,

and so on. Although rigour is sometimes portrayed as the resort of those who lack the courage to speak from the gut, the real risk-taking is in precise statements and explicitly articulated arguments, since the point of such formality is to make errors maximally easy to spot. If you are afraid of being caught out, take refuge behind a smokescreen of vagueness and obscurity.

Of course, similar remarks apply to specialization in any academic discipline. But philosophy seems peculiarly vulnerable to the charge that its nature requires accessibility. It would be more blatantly dumb to tell physicists to drop their equations and start doing real physics, or historians to get out of their archives and start doing real history. According to a venerable tradition, philosophy is an essentially practical activity, whose aim is to improve our lives. If so, it should be accessible, for there is little point in giving people advice they can't understand. This conception is not limited to ethics, the branch of philosophy most obviously relevant to how to live. Descartes, typecast as the founding father of modern epistemology, tried to develop a method of inquiry that would enable one to avoid error and gain genuine knowledge. By contrast, most contemporary epistemologists have lowered their sights. They may tell you what knowledge is, but they won't tell you how to get it. Wouldn't it be nice, though, to have a sort of epistemology that *did* tell you how to get knowledge? Some popular philosophers seem to be moved by the practical calling. For those in a hurry for practical advice, academic philosophy is not the best place to go. That is nothing new. The founder of the Academy gave a lecture *On the Good*. Most of Plato's audience came expecting to be told how to get rich, or stay healthy, or be happy, and were disappointed to hear a lecture full of mathematics,

culminating in the statement that the Good is One. Its practical implications were not immediate. As a research instrument, Descartes' method fell short of his advertising.

Not all contemporary academic epistemologists are determined to be practically useless. The Bayesian school applies probability theory in ways that really do help one handle uncertainty better in predicaments that lend themselves to a probabilistic representation. A mass of psychological evidence indicates that, without such training, humans are scarily bad at thinking with probabilities. But Bayesian epistemology is not popular philosophy: it is highly mathematical. There are also theoretical reasons for doubting that any rule of action can be fully practical, although some are less impractical than others. If the rule says "In such-and-such circumstances, do so-and-so", cases can always arise in which it is unclear whether the circumstances are so-and-so, and therefore unclear what you must do to comply with the rule.

Although practical and academic medicine have different and sometimes conflicting imperatives, we don't want practical medicine to ignore academic medicine (as alternative medicine does). It is not wholly different in philosophy. Although there is even more uncertainty in academic philosophy than in academic medicine, in both cases practice should take account of that uncertainty, not hide it from the patients.

Philosophical questions are too interesting and important to be left to the professionals. The more people who ask them, the better. It is good that accessible books exist to feed such curiosity. A few do it well. But it is a pity that so much of the genre shows such incuriosity about what is really happening in philosophy now.