

THE PLACE OF PHILOSOPHY IN EUROPEAN CULTURE^{1,2}

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the author investigates the place of philosophy in European culture. Philosophy has taken a considerable time to be recognised, or to recognise itself, as distinct from other disciplines. Although philosophy gave birth to physics and, more recently, to other sciences, it is not seen as a “technical” subject, like mathematics and natural sciences, or even social sciences such as economics. Philosophy is available to the general (educated) public while the technical subjects are not. All educated people know the names of the great Western philosophers. Less people know the names of the great mathematicians (other than those such as Descartes and Leibniz which were, at the same time, philosophers). Therefore, philosophy has not lost its place as part of high culture, as have the natural sciences and mathematics. Philosophy continues to exert a pervasive effect upon European culture in general. However, according to the author, two tasks lie before philosophers; two gulfs are for us to bridge. The first one is the gulf between philosophers of all schools and scientists (particularly physicists); the other one is that between divergent philosophical schools – between analytical philosophy and so called “continental” philosophy. If it solves these problems, philosophy will remain what it has been in the past – a shining component of European culture.

Keywords: philosophy, high culture, natural sciences, mathematics, analytic philosophy, “continental” philosophy

What place does philosophy have in European culture? Well, what is meant by the word “culture” in this question? The word is used in a number of different senses. One of those currently prevalent is that introduced by anthropologists to denote the whole complex of modes of life within a society – its marriage customs, funeral rites, style of dress, of dance and of cooking, the way its members interact with one another and all the rest.

This is a legitimate and useful concept; but it is not, I think, that intended by the word in our question. Rather, what is meant is what may be called “high culture”: culture in the sense of what is possessed by what is called “a cultured person”.

What belongs to high culture, and what are the criteria for its belonging? First, it must demand great skill in its creators.

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Secondly, and more importantly, it must give pleasure, but, in doing so, it must elevate the soul or the mind. Music, literature and the fine arts satisfy both these conditions. Note that while what belongs to high culture must elevate the soul or the mind, it cannot have the cultivation of the soul as one of its *direct* objectives, otherwise religion would be part of high culture. It is not so considered: a cultured person may be devout, but need not be.

In the phrase “popular culture” the word “culture” is not intended in the anthropologists’ sense, nor, plainly, in that of “high culture”; so we have yet another sense of the term. Popular culture comprises only what is generally appreciated or enjoyed by that great bulk of the population, formerly known as “the masses” and nowadays as “ordinary people”. Individual members of this body of people in fact, often appreciate components of high culture, say painting or classical music: you do not have to be highly educated to enjoy such things. Still, as matters now stand among us, this is not the general rule. What is called popular culture consists of what corresponds in popular taste to ingredients of high culture, as popular music corresponds to classical music. In the case of music, the line between high and popular culture is easily drawn. In some other arts, notably cinema, it barely exists.

We picked out two criteria for something to be a component of high culture: it must demand great skill of its creators; and it must elevate the mind or the soul. There is a third criterion, however, which it must satisfy.

We may see this by considering mathematics. It undoubtedly satisfies the first two criteria: it demands great skill, and, quite apart from the essential importance of its applications, it has an intellectual beauty that can be found in nothing else. It elevates the mind. Almost certainly, we can reckon mathematics as a part of the culture of ancient Greece: surely in that society any cultivated person would have known some mathematics, have taken pleasure in it and have regarded it as something he could expect others to know about. But it has not been like that since, and certainly is not like that now. Mathematics cannot be called a part of present-day European culture. Its practice demands great skill, and it unquestionably elevates the mind; but unlike, say, music, it is a component of the life of very few people indeed, compared with the population at large. Football is a component of the life of many people; but it cannot claim to elevate either the soul or the mind.

Philosophy has taken a considerable time to be recognised, or to recognise itself, as distinct from other disciplines. Aristotle of course had no conception that the *Organon*, the *Metaphysics*, the *De Anima*, the *Ethics* and, perhaps, the *Politics* were comprised in philosophy, and his other works in natural science and literary criticism. All were part of knowledge. Even in our day W. V. Quine thought that philosophy was just the most general sector of science. Newton’s great work of physics was entitled *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, and we still have University Chairs of Natural Philosophy (and of Experimental Philosophy) devoted to what we now call natural science. In the XIX century psychology was only gradually detached from philosophy, a detachment some still regret. In the XX century mathematical logic budded from

philosophy, perhaps as a branch of mathematics, perhaps as a separate discipline of its own, and has itself given birth to computer science. Linguistics detached itself more rapidly. Cognitive science is a later, and arguably illegitimate, child of philosophy.

But I do not believe that philosophy is merely the mother from which nascent sciences are born, a matrix of overheated vapour within which new stars are formed and begin to shine by their own light; and I think that few people, philosophers or non-philosophers, believe this either. Philosophy may give birth to new disciplines which we cannot now imagine; but there are forms of philosophical enquiry that will never be absorbed by sciences that have become extraneous to it.

Now the example of mathematics was not unique. In classical times it was an ingredient of high culture; now it is so no longer. The same holds good of the natural sciences. The further mathematics and the natural sciences have advanced, the less and less have they been reckoned as what every cultivated person may be expected to know about. The natural sciences remain very influential, however, not directly through peoples knowing about them, but by apparently authoritative pronouncements by scientists about their implications.

Has the same happened to philosophy? No. Philosophy is classified in all universities with the Humanities or the Arts rather than with the sciences; and that agrees with the general conception of its place as part of human wisdom. What ground do we have for so classifying it? Philosophy, unlike the sciences, carries its past with it. A student of physics, rather than of the history and perhaps the philosophy of physics, does not need to read Newton or Maxwell or even Einstein: competent modern accounts of their theories suffice for his purpose. The work of a scientist lives a *residue*, which can be encapsulated in a modern exposition of it. This is not true of the writings of the philosophers. They resemble poetry and drama in that the possibility of extracting something new from them can never be closed off. A good education in philosophy must comprise an education in the history of philosophy, and from the original sources. The ideas of Kant, for instance, have had many able expositors; but his work cannot be said to have left a residue that may be encapsulated in the textbooks, and makes the reading of his work redundant.

For this reason, although philosophy gave birth to physics and, more recently, to other sciences, it is not seen as a “technical” subject, like mathematics and natural sciences, or even the social sciences such as economics. It is available to the general educated public as the technical subjects are not, save to those who have been trained in them. All educated people know the names of the great Western philosophers, many more than the ones that know the names of the great mathematicians (other than those such as Descartes and Leibniz who have also been philosophers). The writings of great philosophers can be readily obtained, in the original and in translation. Anyone attracted to the subject, or to some particular philosopher, can without difficulty read the classics of philosophy. To do so, he does not need to have had a great deal of previous training, as he does to read mathematical works; and if he finds that he needs help in understanding or evaluating what he reads, there are plenty of good introductions to

and commentaries of Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Husserl, etc. Philosophy has not therefore lost its place as part of high culture, as have the natural sciences and mathematics.

By contrast with the sciences, most educated people in Europe have probably read some philosophy, even if only Platonic dialogues. In the Middle Ages, the famous work of Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, was one of the most widely read books. We cannot name any work of philosophy of which the same is true today. It remains that in many European countries, a significant number of people keep abreast of contemporary trends in philosophy and at least deep into books by philosophers of the day. I was impressed when an Italian daily newspaper, *Il Sole 24 ore*, printed articles on philosophy by myself, Professor Vattimo, Angelo Marchesi, Enrico Berti, Professors Possenti and Haldane and Dr. Massarenti. Though I am ashamed to say that this would be unimaginable in Britain, I believe that something similar would have been possible in a French or German newspaper, and perhaps in other European countries. Philosophy does still satisfy all three criteria for belonging to high culture.

Ideas propounded by philosophers are therefore able to seep down into the general consciousness and exert an influence on many people's thinking. This is particularly evident in political philosophy. It needs no argument that the work of John Locke and of John Stuart Mill contributed greatly to liberal ideas and ideals, and that the writing of Jean-Jacques Rousseau had a formative influence upon the ideals of the Revolution of 1789. Nor is any argument required that the work of Fichte and Hegel played a major part in the development of Prussian nationalism. The most salient example is, of course, the work of Karl Marx, which was the dominant influence upon socialist revolutions of the XX century.

The classics of moral philosophy have been far less influential in general. The ideas of some of the greatest moral philosophers, of Aristotle and Kant, say, have exerted very little influence on the ethical ideas of the non-philosophical public at large. But some schools of moral philosophy have been influential: Utilitarianism, in particular, has influenced the moral outlook of a great many people.

The dualism of Descartes has probably had a more pervasive influence upon the thinking of the general run of Europeans than any other philosophical conception of human nature, prompting such misbegotten questions as "Do animals have souls?"; and, to the detriment of our behaviour toward creatures of other animal species, the mechanist Cartesian view of animals has also affected, or infected, our outlook upon our fellow creatures. Today some philosophers, especially of the analytic school, have imbibed the mechanist view of ourselves prevalent among many scientists, leading to perplexity about the nature and utility of consciousness; "What is the point of there being such a thing as consciousness?" they ask. Such questions are remnant of Cartesian dualism, now seen as an obstacle to the desired goal of total materialism. These are unhappy effects of philosophical ideas, filtered down to the thinking of so-called "ordinary people", and of the ideas of philosophically untrained scientists which nevertheless impress some philosophers: but they illustrate the muffled interplay

between the thoughts of professional philosophers, scientists and those who have never read either a philosophical or a scientist article.

Philosophy continues to exert a pervasive effect upon European culture in general. Philosophy – but not analytic philosophy – has in our time influenced both literature and literary criticism. Philosophy cannot assume the triumphant posture that the natural sciences take up. It has made great progress since it was initiated by the ancient Greeks; yet there are few philosophical problems that have definitively been solved. You may say the same of physics and of cosmology: no one can predict the appearance of these subjects in fifty years' time. But there are theories which all present-day physicists accept, even though they know that there are imperfections in them which will have somehow to be resolved, and that the theories now accepted may be replaced by others. By contrast, outside logic, there are few theories which all philosophers accept. I do not think that this is due to the physicists' being better at their job than philosophers are at theirs; doubtless if the physicists had been made to do philosophy and the philosophers to do physics, the result would have been much the same.

What is a genuine cause of regret, is the paucity of dialogue between philosophers and physicists. The generality of philosophers know too little physics to dare to venture to treat of the philosophical problems it raises, or to take due account of physical theories when addressing problems on which they bear; I confess that I myself know far less physics than I ought. Here I disagree with the bold claim of the manifesto that analytic philosophers are both humanists and scientists: they may respect physics, but they do not know it.³ Specialist philosophers of physics speak a technical language among themselves, and fail to communicate with other philosophers in the mainstream.

Physicists are aware that their subject raises many conceptual difficulties, but do not image that either a training in philosophy or a discussion of these difficulties with philosophers would help in solving them. This failure in communication across the gulf which separates the humanities [and] the sciences lame the thought of philosophers and also of physicists about the nature of physical reality, concerning what physics have made such tremendous advances in our knowledge and has raised such tremendous problems for our understanding.

Scientists principally value scientific theories for the ability accurately to predict the results of observation.

Philosophers of science, and particularly of physics, concern themselves with the interpretation of those theories, that is with clarifying what, if the theories are true, they must be understood as telling us about the nature of reality. The nature of reality is of course the subject-matter of that branch of philosophy which we call metaphysics: the philosophy of physics is a substantial part of metaphysics. Different interpretations of one of the same physical theory – quantum mechanics, for example – yield what are

³ The Author refers to the manifesto of the 6th National Conference of the Italian Society for Analytic Philosophy, that is available at: <http://www.sifa.unige.it/genoa04/intro.htm>.

in fact different but, for the time being, empirically equivalent physical theories. We have, however, no examples of empirically equivalent theories – or that yield the same predictions of observable events – that is demonstrably not logically equivalent – capable of translating into one another and I doubt if there are any. So the interpretation of physical theories is not a matter only for those with philosophical concerns, irrelevant to practicing scientists. It can never be held for certain the empirical results will not favour one interpretation as against another. The philosophy of physics is relevant to physics, which should lament the loss of that title by which it was known by Newton, “natural philosophy”.

I should not like my remarks about physics to be heard as a retraction of my earlier disparagement of scientific attitudes on the part of some philosophers, who take materialism as axiomatic although it is doubtful whether they could clearly explain what matter is. Because of the manifest great successes of the natural sciences, many scientists have adopted an arrogant attitude to the effect that all we know we know by science; even if history is counted as a science, it is not from science that we know that genocide is wicked, or that Michelangelo was a great artist. This attitude on the part of scientists has shamefully intimidated some philosophers, who hope by humbling themselves before the scientists they will be entitled to share in their triumphalism. None of this is to the credit of either scientists or philosophers.

It may be argued what I have said about physics applies equally to other sciences, neurophysiology for instance, which concern human nature more than the nature of physical reality. That may be so: the problem is certainly not specific to physics, though I personally think that the philosophical conundrums raised by physics are deeper as well as more difficult than those raised by other sciences.

However this may be, we face difficulties that philosophers of past generations did not. Never before, I believe, have philosophy and the natural sciences been so far apart. But I see no reason why we or our successors will be unable to tackle these difficulties. The European tradition of philosophy survived having an inadequate logic (though not one comparable to alchemy): it surmounted that obstacle by creating a more adequate one. Doubtless the European tradition of philosophy will overcome its inadequate grasp of scientific theory.

The divorce between the studies of philosophers and of physicists, once regarded as parts of the same subject, is as much to be deplored as a more discussed failure of communication – that between philosophers of the analytic school and those inaptly labelled “continental”. Never before, since that gulf opened, in about 1920, has there been so severe a difficulty of communication between European philosophers of different schools. The difficulties have perhaps lessened somewhat since, say, 1960; certainly the will, on both sides, to overcome it has greatly strengthened.

In my opinion analytical philosophy owes its origins more to the work of philosophers on the continent of Europe than to that of the British philosophers G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell, who are sometimes credited with being its founders. The remote

ancestor of analytical philosophy was the great Czech mathematician and philosopher Bernard Bolzano, who in mathematics anticipated the work of Weierstrass and in philosophy that of Gottlob Frege, who was born in the year that Bolzano died and was the true father of analytical philosophy. He, rather than Russell or even Peano, was the inventor of modern logic. Even if there are some contemporary analytical philosophers who now wish to repudiate it, without question it was the linguistic turn that launched analytical philosophy. And the linguistic turn was first taken in Frege's *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik* of 1884, in which the epistemological and metaphysical question "How are numbers given to us?" is answered by an exploration of the senses of sentences containing terms for numbers.

Some have, unfairly to Frege, attributed the linguistic turn to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Frege had seen natural language as infected by maladies – ambiguity being the most obvious – that made it unsuitable for scientific use because they rendered deductive inference unreliable. He therefore not only aspired after but constructed a symbolic language devoid of these defects, and used it to carry out his construction of number theory and of analysis. Before he had completed the task, he learned that his beautiful purified language was inconsistent. This naturally made him more wary of language than ever. He never retreated from his view that we human beings can grasp thoughts only as expressed in language – verbal or symbolic language; but he thought of *all* language as liable to mislead us into taking form for substance.

In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein took a different view. We did not need to construct a purified language: a perfect order already underlay the sentences of natural language, an order which he had faith would be revealed by a complete analysis of those sentences. In his later philosophy he repudiated that faith, and, with it, the desire for perfect order. It remained that we had no need to purify natural language by constructing an ideal language, but not now because there was a perfect order underlying it, but because the ideal of perfect order was itself illusory. Natural language is a disordered jumble, which can be described only piecemeal; but for creatures that engage in such multifarious activities, a disordered jumble is precisely what we need.

This altered attitude is a natural consequence of turning from the philosophy of mathematics that had been Frege's central concern to more general philosophical problems. It is not at all that mathematics is unconcerned with concepts expressed in the language of everyday speech. "Cardinal equivalence" and "ordinal number" are terms seldom met with in everyday speech; but "just as many" and "the fourth one" are quite common. There are many important such mathematical concepts: cardinal number, ordinal number, measurement-number (real number), rate of change, continuity, finitude, dimension. But the mathematician is not interested in characterising the ordinary speaker's notions of such concepts. He wishes, rather, to replace the hazy everyday concepts by precisely defined ones, concepts so defined as to be applicable in most general case. The philosopher of mathematics, like Frege, handles mathematical concepts as the mathematician does, or tries to do better at this than the mathematicians have done.

When philosophers reflect on non-mathematical concepts that are not the special property of particular sciences such as chemistry, they are bound to try to unravel the grasp of them manifested in everyday speech. This is because many philosophical perplexities stem from confusions generated by the everyday concepts. The mathematician's response is to define the concepts more precisely, even if not faithfully to our ordinary grasp of them, and then prove some theorems about them. This approach is sometimes fruitfully copied by philosophers, but it often appears superficial, even for mathematical concepts; both Brouwer and Weyl felt that the notion of continuity in classical mathematics did not do justice to our understanding of temporal continuity. The difference of approach is of course due to the simple fact that it is not the object of mathematics to resolve philosophical puzzles.

There is no sharp distinction between scientific concepts and everyday ones. Philosophers of the present day discuss everyday concepts such as "material substance" and "natural kinds" taking for granted scientific facts and ideas known to everyone, such as the molecular composition of matter, the theory of evolution by natural selection and the concept of "a species". But the scientific understanding of more general concepts yet, such as "time", "space", "cause" and "matter itself", which are salient components of everyday thought, is not general currency; it was for this reason that I earlier laid such stress on the need for philosophers to understand physics.

The difference of approach between mathematicians and philosophers explains why philosophers such as Wittgenstein turned away from the ideal of system. But the heterogeneity of linguistic expressions and of the uses of language is no more a bar to a systematic account of language than the heterogeneity of chemical compounds, of their behaviour and interactions was a bar to a systematic account and explanation of them. Donald Davidson was the great proponent of the study of language through a systematic theory of meaning. This was perhaps remotely inspired by the tentative and unsatisfactory explanation of meaning advanced by the Vienna Circle, surely a salient movement within analytical philosophy. The concept of meaning is the bridge between the philosophy of language and the philosophy of thought; it is obviously because words have meanings that thoughts can be expressed in language and that the theory of meaning is a path – perhaps the most direct path – to an analysis of the contents of our thoughts. Likewise the concept of truth is the bridge between the philosophy of language and metaphysics, because metaphysics is that branch of philosophy that aims at giving a coherent picture of the reality we inhabit. As the opening sentence of the *Tractatus* asserts, reality is composed, not of objects, but of facts. Facts are true propositions; what facts there are is a matter of what propositions are true. So, to arrive at a view of what propositions, in general, are true, we must understand the concept of truth, just as, to arrive at a view of what propositions are, and what propositions we can grasp, we must understand the concept of meaning. The concepts of meaning and of truth are inextricably linked: they can only be explained *together*. Their explanation will be comprised in a theory of meaning. That is why I continue to believe that the philosophy of language is the foundation-stone of all philosophy.

Two tasks lie before us, two gulfs are for us to bridge. One is that between philosophers,

of all schools, and scientists (particularly physicists); the other that between divergent philosophical schools - between analytical philosophy and that amorphous style perhaps by contrast with analytical philosophy it should be called “synthetic” philosophy misleadingly labelled “continental”. Noting that in 1900 Frege, the father of analytical philosophy, and Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, were rather close in their general views. I argued in the past that the way to bridge the second gulf is to go back to the time when it first opened up and analyse how it came to open up. So far as I have noticed, no one has attempted to do this. I think now that something much simpler will do the job. The gulf opened for sociological reasons. Before the First World War, Russell and Moore had both continued the long-established practice among British philosophers of reading philosophy written in German. The practice hardly survived the War; for this reason, the gulf between English-speaking philosophers – though not, of course, analytical philosophers in general – and those on the continent began to open long before Hitler came to power. In 1929, Gilbert Ryle, formerly the interpreter to British audiences of Brentano, Husserl, Meinong and even Heidegger, otherwise unknown to them, was converted by an encounter with Wittgenstein, an Austrian who spent most of philosophical career in Cambridge, to a different style of philosophy. It would be a complete mistake to attribute analytic philosophy in Britain to Americans, as the manifesto appears to suggest. The Oxford school of “ordinary language” philosophy, dominant from 1945 on, owed nothing to philosophers in the United States, of whom its practitioners were largely ignorant. Only after that school collapsed did Oxford come under the influence of American philosophers. From 1933 onwards, as emphasised in the manifesto, Nazi persecution compelled many Austrian and German philosophers to take refuge in the United States. By the end of the Second World War, intercourse between English-speaking philosophers, since the War predominantly of the analytic school, and those who spoke German, Polish, Italian or French was finally silenced. Even now it has not been restored, as you will all be dispiritedly aware. Analytic philosophy has attracted professional philosophers in Italy, France and Germany; as the existence of this society demonstrates for the most part, they practise it without seeking to communicate with their colleagues who continue to work in the so-called “continental” vein. But, unless they write in English, they do not communicate with the bulk of analytical philosophers, either, because these are American and therefore will not and cannot read anything not written in English. The intellectual gulf has become a linguistic one.

I do not in the least believe that the solution is for all analytical philosophers to write exclusively in English, while “continental” ones write in Italian, French or German: that would merely make the gulf between two schools forever impassable. Rather, the gulf must first be bridged in Europe. That is a task best undertaken by European philosophers familiar with both traditions. The problem is one of communication. What is needed is for every philosopher of either school who cares about bridging the gulf to take care to write in a manner that can be understood by members of the other school. To write philosophy in such a manner is to write so that members of the school to which the author does not belong will recognise the work as a telling contribution to the philosophical problem with which it deals, one that needs either to be accepted or to be answered.

But how are they to do that? How should I, for example, know how to write so as to be understood and make an impact on “continental” philosophers? Or how should Professor Vattimo, for example, know how to write to be understood and make an impact on analytical philosophers? So far as I can see, the only way to achieve that would be for each of us to write an article and then for the other (or someone else of the same philosophical school) to write a critique of it, explaining why it seemed to him opaque, unconvincing or irrelevant. *The European Journal of Philosophy* has had a commendably catholic editorial policy, but it does not serve the purpose I have in mind. I should like to see a journal devoted to just the purpose I have indicated: articles by those who acknowledge themselves to be analytical or “continental” philosophers, published simultaneously with critiques by members of the other school. In a fairly short time this should lead to an ability on the part of members of both schools to communicate effectively with the other, if they had the will to do so. The gulf would have been bridged.

Without question the European tradition of philosophy has been a great one. It has explored the great problems of philosophy with depth and insight. It faces problems at the present time, those I have described and possibly other ones. It ought to strive to solve these problems, and will solve them if the will to do so exists, which it surely does. If it solves them, it will remain what it has been in the past, a shining component of European culture.