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WHITHER PHILOSOPHY?

Robert Stern

Abstract: This paper offers some reflections on the possible future of philosophy, from the perspective of the editor of the European Journal of Philosophy, where it is suggested that the dispute between naturalism and transcendentalism remains at the centre of the current philosophical scene, and looks likely to remain there.

We have been asked to reflect on the future directions of philosophy, from our perspective as editors of prominent journals, where in my case this is as editor of the European Journal of Philosophy. Thankfully, this means that I do not have to claim any special power of divination on my own behalf, but can instead trace any insights I might claim back to my structural and institutional role, as someone who reads around 400 papers a year, who discusses the direction of the journal with his colleagues on the editorial committee, and who plans and thinks about future initiatives we might take in contributing to the development of the discipline. What follows, then, is a view from the bridge (or perhaps engine room) of the EJP.

Given this, it is therefore a useful preliminary to mention something of the history and ethos of the journal. The EJP was founded in 1993 by Mark Sacks, after which I took over as editor. While Mark was ably supported by a range of like-minded colleagues, the journal was very much the product of his energy and vision.ⁱ In the first issue, Mark wrote an editorial to explain what motivated him in founding the EJP, which starts as followed:

For centuries, philosophical debate in Europe benefited from exchanges across cultures. That this is so is immediately borne out even by the most cursory acquaintance with the lives of the Great Dead European Philosophers. The benefits of correspondence and consequent cross-fertilization were everywhere evident. Yet in abrupt contrast to this, since the early part of this century philosophy in Europe has increasingly been pursued in disparate schools that tend, to an overwhelming extent, to ignore one another's activities. These schools are by and large confined quite strictly within national or cultural borders, and even within a given school, exchanges

between individuals in different European countries have become severely limited. Thus it is that a problematic feature common to the various philosophical traditions in Europe today is the linguistic, cultural and often political isolation in which these traditions pursue their respective ends. (Sacks 1993: 1)

Mark then goes on to identify three main problems with this isolation of traditions: First, without exposure to different ideas, each will just take for granted inherited frameworks and ways of thinking. Second, insularity will lead to a neglect of common themes between traditions, thus increasing the divisions between them, while also losing the opportunity for pooling wisdom on an issue. Third, there will be a failure to identify new problems and concerns, which can only be revealed by work that cuts across traditions rather than just remaining within them. Mark's position, therefore, may be taken in the spirit of the Enlightenment: philosophy, like all intellectual endeavours, thrives on contestation and debate but can also be prone to dogmatism and coteries, while leading different sides to face up to the outlook of alternative positions can aid the former and thus help to minimize the latter.

Nonetheless, as Mark fully recognized, there are dangers in this sort of exercise. One main danger is eclecticism, the sheer jamming together of different views with no real account taken of what makes them distinct, just for the sake of achieving some kind of artificial intellectual harmony. The other danger is homogenisation, where rough edges are smoothed down and divergences ignored, in favour of a kind of bland uniformity. Both of these outcomes threaten precisely what Mark was after, which is pointed debate where ideas are tested against their alternatives. Of course, this is not the same as promoting disagreement of the sake of it, and as we have seen, Mark did expect some common themes and ideas to emerge as the discussion continued – but premature harmony can also be as much as a problem as prolonged enmity borne simply of suspicion and ignorance.

The goal of the EJP therefore, is not to reduce current debates to an artificial unity, but rather to remove the blocks to fruitful engagement and discussion that arise from a lack of mutual comprehension and exposure to alternative ideas. To achieve this, therefore, the EJP aspires to publish the best work from a variety of approaches and backgrounds, in a way that leaves them accessible to all sides, thereby helping to

prevent an insularity and isolation within these traditions that can only be stultifying. As Mark put it in his editorial:

In view of this, The European Journal of Philosophy aims to constitute a platform to which those both inside and outside Europe can turn to find some of the diversity that traditionally played an important role in European philosophy. The aim is to establish a forum that both enhances exchanges between those working within the same tradition in different countries, and encourages the exchange of ideas between traditions, based on a healthy respect for the various conceptions of the philosophical enterprise. (Sacks 1993: 2)

I think it is fair to say that the aim Mark identifies here, and his reasons for it, remain those at the heart of the journal: certainly, as editor myself, I have tried to follow the course that Mark set for us.

But have we succeeded in our mission? There are certainly some positive developments, in my view. First of all, the EJP has shown that it is possible to have a successful journal that contains work in both ‘analytic’ and ‘continental’ philosophy.ⁱⁱ It has also shown that it is possible to have a successful journal that publishes work from a wider range of countries than is the norm – so not just the English-speaking world, but also other European countries and beyond. We also manage to review a wider range of books than is common in most UK-based journals, trying to give readers a sense of debates beyond the usual linguistic boundaries, and to use reviewers from a range of countries. I also hope we have managed to do this while avoiding the problems of eclecticism and homogeneity mentioned earlier, but of course that is for others to judge.

It would be wrong to conclude, however, that all our aims have been fully accomplished. It remains the fact that while the EJP has arguably managed to foster a degree of rapprochement, this growing mutual comprehension and respect is still only across a rather narrow front. So, on the ‘continental’ side, while work in the German tradition is frequently discussed, we have not managed to publish anything like as much from philosophers working in other European traditions such as can be found in France, Italy and Spain, for example. Likewise, on the ‘analytic’ side, while we have published a range of papers on a number of central topics, it is probably fair to say

that we are not a forum for a certain kind of ‘hard naturalism’, or for those engaged in debates in philosophy of science or mathematics, say. And overall, the way in which we have managed to further this dialogue is often through the history of philosophy, where this part of the subject can offer a common ground on which to build and can be a very useful way of framing issues and disagreements, but which is perhaps not quite the same as more direct confrontations on the issues themselves. Moreover, it might be said by some (though not by me) that where rapprochement has occurred, it has not always been fruitful or enlightening. So, for example, in so far as one can now find analytically trained philosophers discussing figures like Hegel and Nietzsche, and so giving rise to what has been called ‘analytic Hegelianism’ or ‘analytic Nietzschean’, this may be greeted with horror in some quarters, as the creation of nothing but a historical monstrosity, born of two totally incompatible parents. Overall, then, while I think it is fair to say that the EJP has had its successes, it is also fair to say that it has perhaps not achieved all that it set out to do.

Nonetheless, we may still justifiably claim that we have reasons to be optimistic about the future, and about our overall ‘direction of travel’ (as they say). First of all, this process was bound to take time, and the EJP is still a relatively young journal. Secondly, any coming together was bound to happen first across the areas of greatest proximity, with other areas taking longer. Thirdly, there are institutional and not just intellectual difficulties preventing some work appearing in the journal: for example, in France it is still not common for academics to publish in peer-reviewed journals, while publication in languages other than French is not always deemed acceptable. If and when such practices change, then we might expect to receive more work related to the French tradition. Finally, in so far as there is a generational aspect to such changes, presumably the increasing ‘globalization’ of philosophy, with ever burgeoning contacts between philosophers from different countries, will open up younger philosophers across Europe and beyond to publishing in a journal like the EJP.

But of course, looking forward, the EJP is not operating in isolation, but working within broader currents of European and ‘world’ philosophy – and things have changed a good deal since Mark founded the journal in 1993. Can such changes tell us something about the future, and what role the EJP might play in the years ahead? If we try to understand our present by contrasting it with our past, might this

help us with the fraught business of speculating about what is to come – even while always bearing in mind the inherent dangers of such exercises in futurology?

So, from the perspective of a journal like the EJP, how is the current philosophical scene different from the one that prevailed towards the end of the twentieth century? How might Mark, if he was writing his editorial now, think things were different?

I think the major change that might strike him is the increased pluralism of philosophy, where there is no longer a dominant area of philosophy (as philosophy of language was at the high point of the ‘linguistic turn’, for example), or dominant method (such as philosophical analysis, or phenomenology, which in their day seemed somehow *de rigueur*), or indeed dominant *ism* or school at all (as opposed to the periods when existentialism or logical positivism or structuralism were in the ascendant). Indeed, philosophers today are much less likely than in the past to think of themselves as part of some clearly defined ‘research programme’ or ongoing tradition at all, and thus to label themselves accordingly as ‘existentialists’, ‘positivists’, ‘ordinary language philosophers’ or whatever. These schools of thinking seem by and large to have petered out, leaving philosophers to pick and choose where they want to stand on a range of issues.

Of course, there are some exceptions to this trend, where it is arguable that certain schools that existed in the twentieth century still remain, while other new research programmes have perhaps come along to join them. So, for example, critical theory in some form continues to have its distinguished exponents (such as Axel Honneth), while post-structuralism is perhaps still represented by Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek, and phenomenology by Herbert Dreyfus and others. One tradition that certainly seems to persist and thrive is pragmatism, which was given considerable contemporary life by Richard Rorty and is continued by others such as Richard Bernstein and Robert Brandom. And perhaps ‘experimental philosophy’ may in time achieve a kind of dominance, who knows. It is also the case that while philosophers may not associate themselves with any particular school, they may still attach themselves to a past thinker, and so describe themselves (perhaps with a suitably self-deprecating smile) as ‘a Kantian’, ‘an Hegelian’, ‘a Quinean’, ‘a Lewisian’, and so on. And of course, some people may even continue to think of themselves as ‘analytic philosophers’ (and perhaps even, in some sort of reaction, as ‘continental

philosophers), but if such terms ever meant much, they are surely now too diffuse on their own to count as belonging to a clearly defined ‘school’.

So, if the schools and traditions Mark may have had in mind in 1993 are no longer so readily identifiable, what unites and divides us today? Is there just a smorgasbord of different philosophical problems and issues, with a wide variety of suggestions for dealing with them, with little overall shape to the way in which the discipline is structured? If many of the traditional camps have been dissolved, is this perhaps how things stand, and is this also the shape of the future?

I think this view of things is perhaps premature, as arguably certain fundamental fault-lines still run through the subject, even if these do not take the form of clear schools. So, although many of the ‘research programmes’ of the twentieth century have now mostly been disbanded, we still commonly divide on how philosophical problems and issues should be understood and approached. For example, for some philosophy is only to be undertaken in close connection with the history of the discipline, where for others it is no more relevant to doing philosophy than studying the history of science is to doing science. Likewise, for some philosophy is foundational for and therefore somehow prior to science, whereas for others naturalism requires it to have a more subordinate role. To some, philosophical problems are to be dissolved rather than resolved, perhaps because they represent a particular and peculiar sort of intellectual difficulty for us, whereas for others they are questions are to be settled by following as closely as possible other methods of inquiry. Similarly, there is considerable divergence on the relation between philosophy and other disciplines, concerning whether philosophy is somehow sui generis, or close to other areas, and if so, which – the natural sciences, the social sciences, or the arts and literature? And to just mention one more issue of this sort: does the philosophical enterprise somehow inevitably come up against the limits of language and thought themselves, and hence involve the attempt to express the inexpressible, or at least express what cannot be said except in some tortured and necessarily elusive way, or is philosophy just one more mode of human investigation, taking its place alongside the rest, albeit perhaps at a greater level of generality and abstractness than most? And of course, underlying these divergences and disagreements between individuals no doubt lie those great divergences of what William James called ‘philosophical temperament’, to be traced back to the person’s up-bringing, character and very outlook on life. In my experience, it does not take

much scratching beneath the surface to find out which side a philosopher is on with respect to these issues, and that if he or she takes a line on one, he or she will often take a related line on them all, broadly reflecting the fault line between naturalism and what can be called transcendentalism.ⁱⁱⁱ

If I am right about this, does this mean that the ‘analytic/continental’ divide in effect remains in place, with these disagreements replacing previous ones? So, for example, it may be tempting to think of analytic philosophers as ahistorical, naturalistic and close to the natural sciences, while continental philosophers are more historically informed, less naturalistic, and further away from the natural sciences. There is perhaps some truth in a picture of this sort, but there are too many exceptions to make it plausible: for example, many philosophers who one might think of as analytic nonetheless reject naturalism, while many philosophers one might think of as continental make considerable use of scientific theories in their philosophizing. So, rather than trying to fruitlessly map the analytic/continental division onto the newer picture, we might rather ask, how might this set of disagreements develop in the future? How might this debate proceed?

A first option would be for one side or the other to win out over their opponents. This is of course always a possibility – but it seems unlikely, as in certain fundamental respects it is a reworking of Plato’s battle between the gods and the giants, and rationalism and empiricism, and idealism and realism, battles which look unlikely to be resolved any time soon. A second option might be that one side or the other just peters out and dissolves. Again, this is also possible, but which side will this happen to, and why? Naturalists, of course, characteristically think that with the rise and rise of modern science, this will eventually happen to their opponents in philosophy – much as atheists think much the same of religion. But of course, it is an in-built feature of the transcendental approach to feel immune to this sort of threat, as they take philosophy and science to be operating at different levels to begin with, so no matter how successful the latter is in its own terms, it cannot provide a threat to the former.

A perhaps more inclusively optimistic view might be to hope that agreement between these sides could be reached in some way, either in each finding common ground with the other, or both somehow moving to a higher position in which they can find some sort of harmony. The former option seems unlikely, however, given the divergences between both sort of view, while the latter option has its own difficulties:

such attempts at Hegelian sublation have a tendency to leave neither side satisfied, so hostility can easily break out again; and it is hard to see how a Kantian critical dissolution of the debate can be made to work, as Kant is himself on one side of this dispute.

There are, then, maybe two other ways this could go. Firstly, other issues or approaches may replace these debates, so that while these questions now seem vital and urgent, in what is to come they will be taken no more seriously than debates between those who were preoccupied with certain issues in philosophical theology, where by and large philosophers are no longer concerned with such issues. However, where again of course that may happen, these questions seem sufficiently central to us, and run so close to the very nature of philosophy and its concerns, that this again seems unlikely.

Finally, then, it may be that both sides just proceed by ignoring the other, and going on in blithe ignorance of the positions defended by their opponents, simply setting these aside. This option does seem to be real, and is arguably happening in many quarters, as each approach starts by scorning the pretensions of the other, rather than engaging with it, exploring possible common ground, and questioning its own assumptions. Of course, not all our philosophical energies can and must be taken up with such encounters; but it is surely important that they have their place, if a kind of sclerotic dogmatism is not to ensue.

And this, of course, brings us back to the EJP: for, while perhaps the schools and traditions that Mark had in mind when writing that editorial in 1993 do not still persist in quite the same way, we still seem to face a parallel difficulty today, namely a different set of related divisions which also may drift into isolated camps unless some forum for mutual comprehension and discussion exists, so that a role for the EJP still remains, even within this changed landscape. Moreover, if the future shows any resemblance to the past, that role looks set to continue, however the contours of these debates may change, and however philosophy may make its uncertain way into whatever lies ahead.

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ⁱ Very sadly, Mark died prematurely in 2008. In their obituary from the EJP, Axel Honneth and Sebastian Gardner give a more complete account of Mark's role in founding the journal: see Honneth and Gardner 2009. The first editorial committee consisted of Mark and Axel Honneth, as well as David Bell, Peter Bieri, Monique Canto-Sperber, Vincent Descombes, and Onora O'Neill.

ⁱⁱ In his editorial, Mark refrains from using these terms, where he talks instead about 'traditions' and 'schools' without using labels or names. In the context of his editorial, this was no doubt wise, as using such categories is immediately divisive, and anyway we all know they are crude markers at best. However, it is hard for me to discuss these issues in the space allowed without helping myself to the labels available – but where I do so, please note it is with many caveats attached.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is of course no accident that this issue was another central concern of Mark's, pursued in part through a research project he led at Essex towards the end of his life. The fruits of that project can now be found in two collections of papers: Smith and Sullivan (ed) 2011, and Gardner (ed) forthcoming.