

BOOK REVIEW

Philosophy in the Age of Science? Julia Hermann, Jeroen Hopster, Wouter Kalf and Michael Klenk (eds) (2020), 265pp., £32 paperback, Rowman & Littlefield International, London, ISBN 978538142837

Preliminaries

The book under review is a festschrift, dedicated to Herman Philipse and published on the occasion of his valedictory lecture. Throughout his career, Philipse has been a vocal critic of, among other things, natural theology. One of his objections to theology is that it lacks credible methods and arguments of its own and should be refuted by scientific standards. This negative attitude towards natural religion motivates the main question of this book: what is the status of philosophy in the age of science?

The volume has been edited by Julia Hermann, Jeroen Hopster, Wouter Kalf and Michael Klenk: four of the main researchers on Philipse's research programme, 'Evolutionary ethics? The (meta-)ethical implications of evolutionary explanations of morality', funded by the Dutch Research Council. The book consists of 13 contributions from excellent authors, including one from each of the editors. To evaluate philosophy's credentials in the age of science, the editors have distinguished three subthemes which correspond to the three parts of the book: 'What is progress in philosophy?', 'What are proper methods for philosophers to employ?' and 'What is the social relevance of philosophy?' The editors have written a good introduction and the book has an adequate index.

As the theme of this festschrift is quite broad, the book won't satisfy a reader looking for a collection of substantive papers on a single topic. Even within a single part, one can find a wide range of subjects on different levels of abstractness. For example, the first part (which deals with philosophical progress) consists of a paper that investigates overlooked measures of progress as well as a paper that purports to make philosophical progress by engaging in conceptual re-engineering. There are two authors (Rik Peels and Richard Swinburne) who engage directly with Philipse. The other contributions are mostly inspired by, or related to, his work.

Although there is something to say in favour of the division into the three parts the editors have decided upon, I think it is not entirely ideal. The reason for this is that progress, methods and relevance are, as the editors recognize, 'intimately related'. I will therefore use a different classification, one based on the level of abstractness of the papers. Under the heading 'Metaphilosophy', I discuss papers 2, 5, 8, 10 and 12. These papers deal with such questions as: 'What measures of progress are there?', 'Should we do moral philosophy systematically?' and 'Should we ask for philosophy's purpose?' I use the label 'First-order philosophy' for papers 1, 6, 9 and 13. These papers analyse and/or defend a specific concept of progress or a specific philosophical method. Finally, under the heading 'Applied philosophy' (papers 3, 4, 7 and 11), I discuss those papers that make progress in philosophy, show the implications of a specific method or do philosophical work that is societally relevant.

Metaphilosophy

The main aim of this volume is to investigate what role philosophy can play in an age dominated by science. Rozemund Uljée (paper 12) strongly pushes back against this demand for a use or purpose of philosophy. We should resist this urge, Uljée insists, because taking up this problem-solving

attitude would reduce philosophy to an applied discipline. To make her case, Uljée engages with Derrida's and Heidegger's work on responsibility and temporality. We can learn from these authors, Uljée argues, that we shouldn't let science (or anything else external from philosophy) dictate philosophy's conditions of possibility. Instead, philosophy itself should decide on its conditions of possibility of what we consider relevant. Uljée's interpretation of Heidegger and Derrida is interesting and her conclusion is important. What is unfortunate, however, is that its relevance to this volume becomes obvious only in the conclusion of the paper.

Sophie-Grace Chappell's contribution to this volume (paper 8) is critical in a different way. Chappell questions the legitimacy of seeking any systematic moral theory. She sets up her paper by asking three questions that are relevant for any version of systematic moral theory: 'What counts as success?', 'Who is it about?' and 'Who is it for?' As Chappell develops these issues, it becomes clear that they constitute interesting, difficult and (often) overlooked questions for the system builder. And although not all the answers that Chappell gives herself are entirely convincing, the discussion she engages in functions as a useful reminder of how philosophy can go astray.

Hoekes and Vaesen (paper 2) argue that our focus in the discussion on progress in philosophy has been too narrow. To broaden our view, Hoekes and Vaesen first propose interpreting progress as a version of what is called 'cumulative cultural evolution' (CCE), a process by which cultural traits gradually accumulate beneficial modifications. They subsequently identify three different versions of philosophical progress in terms of CCE, and argue that the literature has exclusively focused on only one of these versions. This reveals at least two ways of making progress that are currently overlooked. The first overlooked way is in terms of the diversity of philosophical concepts, accounts and methods. Another way of making progress that Hoekes and Vaesen think overlooked is that some concepts of grounding or process ontologies, for example, are easier to grasp or easier to apply consistently than others. Introducing these concepts should also be regarded as progress and they should be considered when discussing progress in philosophy. This paper is very rich and well argued. Hoekes and Vaesen also try to analyse why the discussion on progress in philosophy is so narrowly focused. They suggest that this is partly because of institutional inertia and deference to elite male researchers. As a datapoint to illustrate this, they notice that almost all recent contributions to this discussion mention David Chalmers' 'Why isn't there more progress in philosophy?' or Timothy Williamson's 'Model-building in philosophy'.

Daniel Cohnitz (paper 5) maintains that there is no general philosophical methodology. In particular, he argues against the claim that there is something like the method of cases, which takes intuitions as data and is so widespread that it can be seen as an overarching philosophical methodology. He shows that, although hypothetical cases are widespread, they can have different functions in philosophy. They function as analogies, illustrations, puzzle cases and counter examples. Moreover, Cohnitz argues, not all these variants use intuitions as input. So, even if all hypothetical cases that function as counter examples involve intuition, this doesn't show that all hypothetical cases do. In fact, Cohnitz argues that the methods that we label 'using hypothetical cases as counter examples' are on closer inspection much more diverse than they seem. This means, according to Cohnitz, that there is no general methodology in philosophy. Instead, 'philosophy is just stuck with methodological pluralism' (p.109).

Michael Klenk (paper 10) provides an interesting exploration of the idea that philosophy is societally relevant insofar as it leads to the production of knowledge that helps solve our society's real problems. One of the original aspects of this paper is that it explores the prospect of philosophy's societal relevance on the basis of different metaethical views. Klenk discusses non-naturalism, naturalism and scepticism and concludes that one's metanormative outlook should influence one's view of philosophy's relevance. What follow irrespective of one's metanormative outlook, Klenk argues, are two prescriptions. First, philosophers should be omnivores, incorporating empirical theories into their work. Moreover, they should be synthesizers, collaborating across academic and social strata. This paper is interesting, and the connection between societal relevance and metanormative views is certainly original. The arguments are, unfortunately, not always entirely convincing.

Klenk argues, for example, that if the methods philosophers employ are empirical methods, ‘then any discipline capable of employing these methods can inform us about the nature of societal relevance’ (p.181). This is a problem, Klenk argues, because it means that they cannot offer a unique contribution to resolving our society’s real problems. But this raises two questions. Why is it so important that philosophy offers a unique contribution? Can’t philosophers be relevant without being relevant in a unique way. The empirical nature of philosophy’s methods is not incompatible with their uniqueness. Biology and physics have methods that are both unique and empirical.

First-order philosophy

The papers in this section all develop and/or explain a specific philosophical method or notion of philosophical progress. P. M. S. Hacker (paper 6) explains and deploys the method of connective analysis. Rik Peels (paper 1) defends pluralism about epistemic progress in both philosophy and theology. Rosa W. Runhardt (paper 9) investigates what the implications are of adopting a specific position in the philosophy of causation (i.e., causal pluralism) for the relationship between philosophers and scientists. And finally, Ibo van de Poel (paper 13) argues that philosophers should increase their attention to what he calls ‘problem formulation’ and design and experimentation.

The method of connective analysis that P. M. S. Hacker discusses is roughly the idea that the function or meaning of a term or concept can be properly understood only by grasping its connections to others. Hacker gives many, many interesting examples of the method and distinguishes different kinds of concepts based on the explanation we provide for these concepts. Some concepts are, for instance, explained by a series of examples of overlapping resemblances (family resemblance), some by analytic definition, and Hacker distinguishes four other ways of explaining the meaning of concepts. To exemplify these distinctions, Hacker applies the method of connective analysis to thinking. This paper is certainly a wonderful contribution to the volume, and one of the highlights is an insightful diagrammatic representation of the varieties of thinking (p.127).

Rik Peels is one of the few authors who actually engages with Philipse’s work. Peels defends the view that we should be pluralists about epistemic progress in both philosophy and theology. This is pluralistic in the sense that there are many different ways in which our epistemic aims (such as true belief, knowledge and understanding) are reached. Using this notion of progress, Peels sets out to show that philosophy and theology are structurally similar. He provides many different examples of epistemic progress in both philosophy and theology, and concludes that, if there is progress in philosophy, then there is also progress in theology.

Rosa W. Runhardt critically investigates the role of the philosophy of science in the age of science. She specifically looks at the philosophy of causation and shows how philosophers in this discipline have engaged with scientists. She explains that there is often a useful dialogue between science and philosophy, where both parties influence and advise each other. However, the possibility of a useful dialogue depends, as Runhardt shows, on one’s position in the philosophy of causality. More specifically, Runhardt argues that there is a tension between causal pluralism and the idea that philosophy and science are in a fruitful dialogue with each other. Causal pluralism is a Humean view that says causation is not a single kind of relationship between things in the world. If causal pluralism is correct, then the methodological advice that philosophers contribute to science may conflict with each other. One can resolve this tension either by giving up causal pluralism, or preventing the dialogue between philosophers and scientists. Both options are unattractive. As a pragmatic solution to the tension, Runhardt proposes making the theory of causation that is applicable to science context-relative. So, the philosopher should choose which theory of causation to apply to each research project.

Ibo van de Poel (paper 13) argues that, in order for philosophy to become relevant (again), it should deploy new methods. More specifically, philosophers should increase their attention to what van de Poel calls ‘problem formulation’ and design and experimentation. Philosophers have a tendency to think that we can make philosophy relevant by merely applying our favourite thought

experiments to real-world problems. But this idea is often mistaken, van de Poel argues. The trolley problem functions as an example to make his point. Early writers on the ethics of self-driving cars assumed that if we applied such ‘toy problems’, as Van de Poel calls them, to real-world cases, this might help us solve the real problems that surround (semi-)autonomous systems. Van de Poel says this idea is mistaken. Instead of immediately seeing such issues as self-driving cars as trolley problems, philosophers should spend more time on problem-formulation. For van de Poel, this means at least two things. We should consider the context in which the initial problem arises and the formulation of the problem should be helpful in formulating possible solutions to the problem. The second methodological change van de Poel advocates is towards the methodology of design and experimentation. Sometimes the solution to a problem that involves two conflicting moral values is to look for a third possibility that takes the sting out of the original dilemma. When we interpret self-driving cars through the lens of a trolley problem, it is easy to overlook such an option. Finally, van de Poel suggests that, when we have a possible solution, we shouldn’t think that our work is over. Instead, we should experiment; that is, we should observe the consequences and learn from our observation.

Applied philosophy

The final four papers engage in good old applied philosophy. Julia Hermann (paper 3) argues that we should give contextual concerns a more prominent role in moral philosophy. As Hermann is well aware, ‘contextual’ can mean different things. She provides different ways in which contextualization can constitute progress. She shows, for example, that an analysis of risk can gain plausibility if contextual details are taken into account. Moreover, when discussing privacy, she maintains that context determines which concept of privacy is appropriate. The paper does not purport to give a systematic description of how to take context into account, but it does function as a warning against a one-concept-fits-all attitude and a too narrow focus on abstract principles.

Wouter Kalf (paper 4) shows that moral sceptics are in a good position to re-engineer our moral concepts. He starts out by presenting Loeb’s argument for moral scepticism. The argument is, basically, that moral judgements make incompatible demands on the world. On the one hand, our practice of criticizing people assumes that there are objective normative facts; one cannot evade criticism by merely stating one’s desires to act as one has in fact acted. On the other hand, moral judgements seem to be connected to our motivations in a way that is incompatible with objectivism. As moral judgements cannot both refer and not refer objectively, it follows that they do not refer at all. Or so the argument goes. Kalf realizes that this is controversial, but as his goal is to show that one can make philosophical progress if one accepts this kind of scepticism, this is not a problem for his argument. But if moral judgements are defective in the sense described above, then what should we do? And it is exactly this question that puts the sceptic in a good place to re-engineer our moral concepts. Following J. L. Mackie, Kalf proposes replacing moral goodness with prudential goodness. The reason that we are allowed to do that, Kalf holds, is that prudential concepts are in good standing, unlike moral ones. Having argued that moral sceptics are well-positioned to make the world (prudentially) a better place, Kalf proceeds by listing and defending four assumptions that he needs for his account of conceptual engineering. In the remainder of the paper, Kalf defends a specific concept of conceptual engineering. This is an interesting paper. The argument for the claim that prudential concepts are in good standing is, though, not completely convincing. One might expect that a moral sceptic would claim that prudential concepts escape a Loeb-style dilemma because they are not objective. Kalf, surprisingly, argues for the other horn. He maintains that they escape the dilemma because they are not connected to motivational states in the same way.

Richard Swinburne (paper 7) is the other author who takes issue with the work of Herman Philipse. More specifically, he responds to some of the criticisms that Philipse has provided to Swinburne’s own work. Swinburne has argued that the method of simplicity provides evidence for the existence of god, understood in the tradition of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. In this volume,

Swinburne restates his argument that we can derive all the properties that are usually attributed to god from the mere postulation of an omnipotent being. Philipse has criticized this argument, and the first half of the paper deals with Swinburne's response to this criticism. In the second half of the paper, Swinburne applies the method of simplicity to ethics. He engages with Philipse in this part as well, and argues that simplicity also plays a crucial role in determining which ethical propositions are logically necessary.

Jeroen Hopster (paper 11) tackles some of the misleading claims of popular science. His main target is the fallacy that he calls 'geological relativism'. Advocates of this idea make use of geological timescales of millions of years to trivialize the ethical impact of climate change. According to Hopster, this approach is unjustified because the selection of a specific timescale is not ethically neutral and should be motivated by ethical considerations. Proper reflection shows, Hopster argues, that the timescales we should employ are much smaller. In the final section of the paper, Hopster also argues that we can use insights from climate psychology to take away psychological obstacles and increase general moral engagement.

Conclusion

In summary, the editors have done a really good job with this festschrift. It contains contributions from a wide range of disciplines and really attests to the broad scope of Herman Philipse's work.

References

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