

What is the good of your discipline? Francesca Blando

Francesca Blando

As an eager undergraduate student of philosophy, in this paper I shall make a case for choosing it as a university degree. In view of that, I will discuss the status and value of philosophy in our society, and will analyse and assess some arguments both in favour and against this ancient discipline. Firstly I will attempt the thorny task of roughly defining philosophy, by means of differentiating it from both the sciences and the humanities, in order to outline what its scopes and limits might be. Then I will tackle the epistemological issue of the value of knowledge, so as to establish whether philosophy - but also other disciplines! - has an intrinsic value or not; I shall maintain that there is no built-in value, independent from human needs and goals. Accordingly, I will claim that the value of philosophy can be pinpointed within the boundaries of human societies: as a paradigmatic case, I shall discuss the relationship between philosophy and science. I will also argue that students should pay to study philosophy at university as long as they are willing to pay for any other subject, for if we accept the reasonableness of university fees which foster the quality of higher education, then philosophy is no exception.

Since defining and demarcating philosophy already seems to require some philosophical analysis, as the hunger for definitions is one of philosophy's archetypal concerns and involves some philosophical methods, to avoid circularity I will not try to provide the readers with a conclusive definition, but rather with some instances of its key-issues. Then I shall argue that the philosophical approach differs from both the scientific and the humanistic one, hence maintaining that philosophy stands in between as a sort of perpetual (self) critical check.

Philosophy could be understood as the result of the primeval human longing for knowledge - or 'love of wisdom', as the original Greek term actually means that it aims at providing 'food for the mind'¹, as Russell emphasises. However, this definition is metaphorical and not really explanatory. More substantially, philosophy deals with basic questions such as 'is knowledge actually possible?', 'what does it mean to act morally?', 'how do languages work?', 'how can we formulate a logical argument?', 'what is beauty?' and so forth. Thus, it overlaps topics connected with psychology, politics, linguistics, mathematics, the arts, etc. Yet philosophy does not coincide with any of them, as it is neither empirical nor denotative, but it scrutinises everything (hence itself, too) with the sole aid of reason. This leads to the common objection that it cannot offer irrefutable answers and it seems not to have progressed at all over the centuries, as opposed to science. This is partly wrong: philosophical ideas have developed and adjusted themselves to the ongoing scientific discoveries and social circumstances, even if 'it cannot be maintained that philosophy has had any very great measure of success in its attempts to provide definite answers to its questions'.² For instance, philosophers played a fundamental role in revealing that even science is not capable of giving us incontrovertible answers.³ Philosophy and science can work in parallel, for they address different kinds of problems. Philosophy, just like science, can be descriptive, but it is the only one which can be normative, as I will ascertain later on in this essay. Moreover, philosophy diverges from the humanities, too, as its methods require a critical, systematic, rational and argumentative approach, rather than being interpretative. Hence, philosophy may well be employed as a

rationality test for them.

Given that philosophy might look like an extremely abstract subject matter, it seems reasonable to question whether its value is intrinsic, extrinsic, both or neither. If the first one were the case, it would not be necessary for philosophy to yield practical outcomes, for it would be sufficient to say that knowledge for its own sake has a value in order to justify the existence of university degrees in philosophy. I do believe that this is not the case, so, with the aim of proving that philosophy is valuable, I will confront the issue of its extrinsic worth in the next paragraph. Here, though, I shall focus on disproving its having an inherent value: to do so, firstly I will briefly outline the concept of 'intrinsic value', and then affirm that philosophy/knowledge does not enjoy it. I shall not use the term 'knowledge' as a synonym for 'philosophy', but rather as its superset, since other disciplines, such as the sciences, strive for it, too. This will lead to the conclusion that education for its own sake cannot exist.

Saying that something is intrinsically valuable implies that it is valuable 'in itself' or 'for its own sake', rather than 'for the sake of something else', hence having a non-derivative value.⁴ For example, gastronomic pleasure does not aim at any further goods, for even if one could object that food is necessary for bodily health and survival, this does not entail any need for particularly palatable groceries. Therefore, gastronomy satisfaction is valuable in itself. Frankena, a 20th-century American moral philosopher, listed all the entities he regarded as having intrinsic value in this sense:

life, consciousness, and activity; health and strength; pleasures and satisfactions of all or certain kinds; happiness, beatitude, contentment, etc.; truth; knowledge and true opinions of various kinds, understanding, wisdom; beauty, harmony, proportion in objects contemplated; aesthetic experience; morally good dispositions or virtues; mutual affection, love, friendship, cooperation; just distribution of goods and evils; harmony and proportion in one's own life; power and experiences of achievement; self-expression; freedom; peace, security; adventure and novelty; and good reputation, honour, esteem, etc. (Presumably a corresponding list of intrinsic evils could be provided.)⁵

Although knowledge appears in this inventory, I believe it does not possess the same characteristics as pleasure. As Pritchard alleges, ordinarily we esteem knowledge according to its instrumental value.⁶ For example, we would not regard as valuable knowledge memorising all the menus of all the restaurants of a remote city we have no intention of visiting, whereas knowing that a meteorite from outer space is likely to hit the Earth in the next fortnight would be probably deemed worthwhile. Nonetheless, Pritchard insists some types of knowledge, such as wisdom, are indeed intrinsically valuable.⁷ Conversely, I agree with Weiner when he claims knowledge is like a 'Swiss Army Concept', i.e. it consists of further sub-concepts⁸ which are the real bearers of value, depending on the evaluator's contingent perspective.

[...] The value of knowledge relates to how ascribing knowledge is a shorthand way of ascribing a number of valuable sub-concepts, each of which may be of particular value in our practical reasoning depending upon what standpoint on our practical reasoning we take. But knowledge has no special value in itself [...].⁹

For instance, wisdom is worthy as it helps people stoically tolerate the unfairness of life and live more positively. Consequently, each field of education whose main objective and upshot is knowledge cannot be intrinsically valuable either, so that their accomplishments have an impact only if applicable to the world.

Now I shall challenge the idea that philosophy is useless and does not influence our society at all, by probing the liaison between philosophy and science. The American physicist Steven Weinberg states the only merit of proper philosophy is to defend science from bad and harmful philosophy. Most philosophy is inconsequential, ineffective, obscure rather than profound and does not have anything to do with science. Even if scientists might be said to be acting under the influence of some sorts of philosophy (a term which has to be understood in a very broad sense,

here), this is a 'rough-and-ready realism' which is not shaped by any academic philosophy. Then he cites the epistemological principles of logical positivism as one of the philosophical creeds which succeeded in retarding the progress of science¹⁰ and Kuhn's debated relativism as the latest 'reinventing the wheel' as regards the fallibility of science. His conclusion is that philosophy can be of no guidance for science.¹¹ Even if I judge some of the above criticisms well-grounded, for various philosophical texts are rather unintelligible and their speculative nature appears completely detached from the concrete successes of science, this does not imply that all philosophy is meaningless. Graham says: 'When things are hard to understand, people who suspect they're nonsense generally keep quiet. There's no way to prove a text is meaningless'.¹² This is not true, because logic provides us with the necessary tools to analyse the validity or soundness of arguments, and consequently to discern between good and bad philosophy. Hence, I reckon philosophy of science can still be a useful means as to delineating the structure, the methods, the limits and the goals of science, both from a descriptive and a normative standpoint. Philosophy steps forward whenever a moral has to be drawn out of scientific discoveries or when a choice which is apparently arbitrary needs to be made. This is neither because philosophy is better and above science nor because it is watertight, but rather because it engages in problems science does not have time to contemplate. For example, scientists use inductive reasoning without really questioning its validity, whereas philosophers are fascinated by this issue. Even if philosophy is highly theoretical - a feature which disciplines like physics and mathematics display, too - and never unassailable - but science is not either! -, I think it can help science be less biased and always proceed rationally and logically. Moreover, Kuhn's ideas about the inevitable theory-ladenness of observation¹³ not only are not naive and 'recycled', but they also operate as a constant reminder that science is not a goddess, but simply a human enterprise which demands continuous adjustments and doubting. Hence, philosophy has the extrinsic value of working as a rationality test and as a provider of potential basic principles and generalisations.

Having shown that philosophy is indeed worthwhile, now I will shortly point out why students should pay tuition fees in order to study it. Since the scope of this essay cannot include a more thorough assessment of whether university fees are legitimate or not, here I shall accept that they are beneficial as long as they are truly utilised to implement the quality of teaching, research and university facilities in general. Having demonstrated that studying philosophy is just as important as studying any other valuable subject, for its goals, outcomes and approach are not only fascinating, but also effective in everyday life by virtue of their rationality, systematicity and critical control, it follows transitively that, if we are prepared to pay in order to study physics, mathematics, etc., then we should feel the same about philosophy. Researches in philosophy are just as valuable as the ones carried out by other faculties; hence, tuition fees are necessary and justifiable.

In this paper, I have shown that, in spite of the severe cuts of university funds experienced by philosophy departments in the UK, philosophy still stands as an essential discipline among the assortment of university subjects. I have established that, although I do not think it retains any intrinsic value, philosophy is neither old-fashioned nor useless, but it occupies an important position even in our technologic and materialistic society. To do so, I have illustrated how science and philosophy are interrelated and mutually enhancing. Hence, the good of philosophy consists in its capacity of analysing situations from a constantly critical perspective, in order not to accept reality blindly and passively, but to shape it and understand it ever more.

Bibliography

Hsu, S. (2007). "Paul Graham against philosophy and literary theory", *Information Processing*, (Fall 2007 Edition), URL = <http://infoproc.blogspot.com/2007/09/paul-graham-against-philosophy-and.html>.

Kuhn, T. S., 1962 (Third ed. 1996). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Ch. X, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Popper, K. (1934). *Logik der Forschung* (The Logic of Scientific Discovery), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Pritchard, D. (2007). "The Value of Knowledge", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2007

Edition), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/knowledge-value/>.

Pritchard, D. (2006). *What is this Thing Called Knowledge?*, Ch. 2, Oxon: Routledge.

Russell, B. (1912). *The Problems of Philosophy*, chapter XV: The Value of Philosophy, London: Williams and Norgate, in *The Skeptic's Dictionary*, Robert T. Carroll (ed.), URL = <http://www.skepdic.com/russell.html>.

Weinberg, S. (1993). "Against Philosophy" in *Dreams of a Final Theory: The Search for the Fundamental Laws of Nature*, URL = http://depts.washington.edu/ssnet/Weinberg_SSN_1_14.pdf.

Zimmerman, M. J. (2007). "Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Value", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2007 Edition), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/value-intrinsic-extrinsic/>.

Endnotes

- Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, ch. XV.
 - Ibid.
 - For example, see Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* or Popper, *Logik der Forschung*.
 - Zimmerman, "Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Value".
 - Ibid.
 - Pritchard, *What is this thing called Knowledge?*, p. 17.
 - Ibid., pp.17-18.
 - For example, personal fulfilment, wellness, security, etc.
 - Pritchard, "The Value of Knowledge".
 - As it was, for example, against the 20th-century ground-breaking atomic theory.
 - Weinberg, "Against Philosophy", pp. 1-9.
 - Hsu, "Paul Graham against philosophy and literary theory".
 - Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Ch. X.
-

Created on: May 10th 2010

Updated on: May 12th 2010