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WELL-ORDERED PHILOSOPHY?

REFLECTIONS ON KITCHER'S PROPOSAL FOR A RENEWAL OF PHILOSOPHY

Eva-Maria Jung, Marie I. Kaiser, Ansgar Seide

Abstract: In his recent article *Philosophy Inside Out*, Philip Kitcher presents a metaphilosophical outlook that aims at nothing less than a renewal of philosophy. His idea is to draw philosophers' attention away from "timeless questions" in the so-called "core areas" of philosophy. Instead, philosophers should address questions that matter to human lives. The aim of this paper is twofold: first, to reconstruct Kitcher's view of how philosophy should be renewed; second, to point out some difficulties relating to his position. These difficulties concern the integration of his naturalism into the pragmatic vision of philosophy, the role of putative philosophical experts, and the ideal status of the program of well-ordered inquiry.

Keywords: Dewey, experts, metaphilosophy, pragmatic naturalism, well-ordered science

1 INTRODUCTION: THE SHORTCOMINGS OF CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY

In his recent article *Philosophy Inside Out* (PIO), Philip Kitcher presents a metaphilosophical outlook that aims at nothing less than a renewal of philosophy. His idea is to draw philosophers' attention away from "timeless questions" (PIO, 252) in the so-called "core areas", under which he subsumes metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language, and philosophy of mind. Instead, philosophers should address questions that matter to human lives and, thus, strengthen their work in certain areas of philosophy that are

commonly thought of as being only peripheral. This amounts to turning philosophy inside out.

Kitcher's vision of how to renew philosophy precedes a pessimistic description of its actual state. Following John Dewey, Kitcher puts forward the criticism that philosophy runs the risk of becoming a "sentimental indulgence for a few" (PIO, 250). He argues that, especially in the Anglophone world, philosophers have developed a highly technical, specialized language in order to address questions from various fields (PIO, 250; IDP, 20). This has the unfortunate result that contemporary philosophy is often more engaged in performing finger exercises than in solving problems that are urgent for human lives.

Kitcher insists that the situation in philosophy is, compared with other fields of inquiry, particularly problematic (PIO, 250 f.). In the natural sciences there is a lot of disagreement, too. But there are also reliable methods, and an understanding of how small, seemingly unimportant questions can contribute to larger, significant questions. By contrast, the disagreements and controversies in philosophy are not peripheral, but rather concern the core of the discipline. Kitcher is especially worried by the fact that in philosophy there seem to be no reliable methods of answering the questions pursued. He also claims that the technical questions addressed by many philosophers make no contribution to broader questions that would reveal their significance.

Thus, if Kitcher is right, large parts of philosophy are currently in a miserable state. This gives rise to the question of how to change the present situation. How can philosophy be changed into a "healthy" form of inquiry? The aim of our paper is, first, to sketch Kitcher's view of a renewal of philosophy and, second, to point out some difficulties relating to his position. These difficulties concern the integration of his naturalism into the pragmatic vision of philosophy, the role of putative philosophical experts, and the ideal status of the program of well-ordered inquiry. As we will see, the project of turning philosophy inside out is not as easy as Kitcher imagines it to be.

2 WHAT INSTEAD? – KITCHER’S VISION OF A RENEWED PHILOSOPHY

Kitcher’s positive view of what philosophy is supposed to be is predominantly influenced by pragmatism (especially by Dewey’s major works). Following Dewey, Kitcher opts for the idea that areas of philosophical inquiry are “healthy” to the extent that they make contributions to human lives (PIO, 249). Accordingly, the task of philosophy is to address significant problems, that is, problems that “emerge from the circumstances of contemporary life” (IDP, 24).

However, it remains an open question as to what it means for a philosophical problem to be significant to human needs, and how exactly this significance is determined. In his paper *The Importance of Dewey for Philosophy (and for Much Else Besides)* (IDP), Kitcher presents an answer to this question. The underlying idea is that the assessment of the significance of philosophical questions can be modeled on his extensively developed account of the assessment of the significance of questions in the sciences. That is, Kitcher extends his frequently discussed ideal of “well-ordered science” (SDS, ch. 5) to a “standard for well-ordered inquiry” (IDP, 27), which holds for both the natural sciences and philosophy. Thus, he addresses the special case of philosophy as an instance of a more global phenomenon.¹ Before we turn to Kitcher’s vision of, as we call it, “well-ordered philosophy” let us sum up the main characteristics of his ideal of well-ordered science.

2.1 *Well-Ordered Science*

In several books and papers Kitcher discusses the role of the sciences in a democratic society and develops an ideal of “well-ordered science” (STD, ch. 10; SDS, ch. 5). As resources for scientific inquiry are limited, democratic societies need a way to decide which lines of inquiry are to be pursued at the

¹ According to Kitcher, philosophy has to be considered as “one field of inquiry among many, part of a constellation that extends from art history through zoology” (IDP, 26).

expense of others. The standard of well-ordered science is Kitcher's answer to this problem, and can be summed up as follows:

[S]cience is well-ordered when its specification of the problems to be pursued would be endorsed by an ideal conversation, embodying all human points of view, under conditions of mutual engagement. (SDS, 106)

In his development of the ideal of well-ordered science, Kitcher imagines a group of deliberators that meet under the conditions of an ideal conversation about the aims of scientific inquiry and determine which research projects are to be undertaken. Kitcher identifies three conditions that ideal deliberators have to meet: First, the deliberators have to represent "all human circumstances and points of view" (IDP, 27). Second, they have to be "thoroughly informed as to the existing state of human knowledge and to the foreseeable prospects for developing it further" (IDP, 27). Third, they have to be "fully committed to mutual engagement with one another" (IDP, 27), which means that the interests of minorities are not sacrificed to the interests of the majority.

The ideal conversation Kitcher envisions involves three stages (SDS, 114 f.): In the first stage, the explanatory period, the ideal deliberators are "tutored": They learn about the status quo of current scientific investigations and about future options. On the basis of this tutoring they voice their own preferences as to which lines of inquiry should be pursued in the future. In the second stage, the deliberators compare their different preferences and modify them in the light of the preferences of the others. Finally, the consequences of the different options for society, for the inhabitants of other parts of the world, and for future generations are assessed. It is in this third stage that the testimony of experts is needed: How likely is it that a certain research project will be successful? What are the possible outcomes of certain investigations? At the end of the three stages, the deliberators try to reach a consensus about the lines of inquiry to be pursued in the future.

As Kitcher emphasizes, well-ordered science is an *ideal* that we cannot expect to arrive at in real-life (SDS, 125). But he is keen to point out that the ideal can nevertheless be of great value if we are able to envision "a path" or "initial steps" (SDS, 125) that might lead us towards the realization of this

ideal. Kitcher presents some ideas of what these first steps could be (SDS, 127-130). In addition, Kitcher thinks that, already today, certain clear cases can be decided according to the ideal, without even starting to implement the first steps (e.g., that biomedical research must not neglect diseases that mainly afflict underprivileged people; SDS, 127).

2.2 *Well-Ordered Philosophy*

In his recent work, Kitcher suggests that in philosophy a similar procedure for evaluating the significance of questions can be established. According to the standard of well-ordered inquiry, a group of deliberators engage in an ideal conversation and decide which philosophical questions are significant and should be included into the research agenda. The overall question the deliberators have to ask themselves is whether a certain philosophical question constitutes a real problem for many people, and whether answering that question helps to solve a problem that matters to human lives.

But what exactly are the consequences of implementing this ideal of well-ordered inquiry in philosophy? What does it mean for different philosophical projects and fields that the significance of questions is determined by the contribution they make to satisfying human needs? In *Philosophy Inside Out*, Kitcher gives further hints on what the renewed, well-ordered philosophy should look like. He thinks of philosophy as having grown out of “an impulse toward understanding nature and the human place in it, an impulse that was present long before the invention of writing” (PIO, 252). Based on this characterization of philosophy Kitcher identifies two axes along which philosophical inquiry was directed in the past and should also be directed in the future: the “knowledge-seeking axis” (PIO, 254) and the “value-axis” (PIO, 256).

The knowledge-seeking axis represents the search for knowledge of nature. Kitcher emphasizes that the aim of philosophy is not to produce new knowledge about the natural world (this is the task of the sciences). Rather, philosophy can be seen as systemizing and integrating the results from different fields of inquiry into an overall picture of the world. In this way philosophy can satisfy the human need for orientation in, and an understand-

ing of the natural world (PIO, 254). Furthermore, Kitcher identifies a second important task of philosophy that is directed along this first axis: Philosophy can assist the sciences in their search for knowledge of nature; for instance, by clarifying and refining the methods that are applied and by enlightening the social constraints of research (PIO, 255f.). Since the sciences are in a continuous flux, the philosophical questions that are significant for a certain age will change, too.

The second axis, which is called the “value-axis”, is directed towards the values and norms of society. Along this axis, the task of philosophy is to reflect on and to improve the state of human moral, social, and political practices. This includes, for instance, exploring how people can engage in reflection and conversation about the meanings of their lives. Also, with regard to this axis, the significance of philosophical problems changes in response to new challenges of social life. Thus, Kitcher presents a dynamic model of philosophical inquiry that does not focus on certain fixed “core areas”, but rather is responsive to contemporary issues on nature and human life.

3 OBSCURITIES IN AND CHALLENGES FOR THE PRAGMATIC-NATURALISTIC VISION OF PHILOSOPHY

3.1 *Where Does Naturalism Come In?*

Kitcher’s vision of philosophy is based upon the assumption that philosophy is only healthy if it is concerned with answering questions and solving problems that matter to human lives. As we have seen, he rejects the position that there is something like a shared method or language that binds together healthy forms of philosophy (PIO, 259). However, Kitcher himself argues that philosophy should be pursued in a certain manner (that is, by a certain philosophical method), namely in a *naturalistic* fashion. In his earlier work, he presented some arguments in favor of naturalism that focus mainly on the putative deficiencies of the “linguistic turn”, and of what he calls “expansionist tendencies” in philosophy (PN). For various fields of philosophy, he

attempted to show that the appeal to supernatural entities and to a priori reasoning is misleading, and that empirical work is crucial to philosophical inquiry (see for instance NR, GDD, and EP).

As Kitcher himself recently calls his philosophy *pragmatic naturalism*, one might wonder, what is the relation between the pragmatic and the naturalistic component of his approach. In a brief manifesto, Kitcher claims that his naturalistic reconstruction of philosophical inquiry is indeed linked to his pragmatic vision of philosophy: The turn to pragmatism is understood as beginning “the task of integrating the naturalist approach (...) within a more general philosophical view” (PN, 3). But how can this integration be spelled out in detail? How is the naturalistic demand related to the pragmatist demand and to the program of well-ordered philosophy?

In the subsequent considerations we focus on naturalism as a methodological rather than an ontological thesis. Methodological naturalism, as we understand it here, is a thesis about what the adequate methods of gaining knowledge are, including knowledge in philosophy. A methodological naturalist claims that “philosophy and science [are]... engaged in essentially the same enterprise, pursuing similar ends and using similar methods” (Papineau 2009). Thus, a naturalist states that there are no distinct philosophical methods like a priori reasoning, or thought experiments invoking philosophical intuitions, etc. In a more moderate version, which we assign to Kitcher, methodological naturalism involves the thesis that good or healthy philosophy cannot be pursued without relying heavily on empirical knowledge; for instance knowledge about how science is actually carried out, how human morality in fact evolved, or what the actual problems of a present political system are.

Based on this understanding of naturalism, we think that there are at least two possibilities as to how the naturalistic character of Kitcher’s philosophy relates to his pragmatism and to the idea of a well-ordered philosophy: First, the naturalistic demand could be located on the same level as the pragmatist demand. That is, they constitute two distinct criteria for what good or healthy philosophy is – the former singles out a certain philosophical method as appropriate, while the latter singles out certain philosophical questions or problems as significant. However, if Kitcher were to choose this option, he would have to presuppose that the adequacy of philosophical methods can be judged separately from the significance of philosophical

questions. But the assumption of a strict separation of methods and questions in philosophy seems to be implausible. Philosophical questions and topics are often shaped by methodological paradigms, and vice versa. Furthermore, this option threatens to conflict with Kitcher's claim that healthy philosophical projects do not share a certain philosophical method. The naturalistic method would unify those projects, and this is what Kitcher rejects.

Second, the naturalistic demand might be subordinate to and (at least partially) included in the pragmatist demand. That is, Kitcher could argue that those philosophical problems that matter to human lives and are thus significant *need* to be addressed in a naturalistic manner. This second option seems to be best in line with how Kitcher himself practices philosophy and with his idea of philosophy as being pursued along the knowledge-seeking axis and the value-axis. As we have seen, Kitcher argues not only that philosophy should be concerned with, for instance, clarifying and refining scientific methods and improving human moral practices. He also insists that these tasks require an exploration of the actual scientific and moral practices. If one follows Kitcher on his pragmatic route, it seems as if it is inevitable to pursue philosophy in a naturalistic fashion. Thus, according to the second option, the pragmatic impulse leads to a metaphilosophical defense of naturalistic projects as well as the arguments given on the philosophical level.

Although this option seems attractive, it is also problematic with regard to Kitcher's program of well-ordered philosophy: It is far from obvious how and why a democratic consensus will rule out any non-naturalistic philosophical inquiry in favor of naturalistic ones. The decision process of the program of well-ordered philosophy could be instantiated in two different ways: First, the deliberators could decide which philosophical topics and problems should be pursued, without reflecting on the methods used to deal with these problems. In this case, Kitcher could argue that the choice of the relevant research projects simply implies that these projects have to be dealt with in a naturalistic framework. However, this is a very strong assumption for which Kitcher does not provide any further argumentation. Second, the deliberators could judge the questions and topics, on the one hand, and the methods of lines of inquiry, on the other hand. In this case, it is not clear why all the people

involved in the decision process should be convinced by the naturalistic method.

Thus, both options are problematic. In the light of these considerations, we think that Kitcher's suggested integration of naturalism and pragmatism remains obscure. In particular, the question of how the naturalistic demand relates to metaphilosophical questions needs more attention.

3.2 Philosophical Experts

As we have seen, the process of assessing the significance of philosophical questions through an ideal conversation requires that the deliberators are informed by experts. But if philosophers do not share reliable methods or languages, as Kitcher tells us, how can philosophical experts (if they exist at all) be identified?

For the case of ethics, Kitcher explicitly denies that experts exist. As he puts it:

Ethics is a social technology, one for which there are no experts. There is only the possibility of conversation, ideally free of factual mistakes and imbued with mutual sympathy. (SDS, 12)

According to Kitcher, it is simply a "myth" to think of philosophical or religious experts who can answer ethical questions (PIO, 257). But also with regard to other philosophical disciplines, he seems to reject the idea of experts. As we have seen, he denies that philosophers aim at distinct knowledge related to certain research fields. The role of knowledge in philosophy is said to be different from that in other areas. He states:

Philosophy is not a discipline for those who are proud to know nothing but for people who aspire to know something of everything so that they can propose (and the modest word is appropriate here) a broader perspective. (IDP, 39)

The apparent non-existence of philosophical experts seems problematic because Kitcher's standard of well-ordered inquiry explicitly requires experts at the first and third level of the conversation: In the first stage, the delibera-

tors have to be tutored in order to be able to understand “how the various fields of inquiry are currently constituted, in the sense of seeing how significance is taken to accrue to projects researchers have undertaken in the past and a range of options now available.” (SDS, 114) It seems that this tutoring of the deliberators can only be done by people who are, in some sense, experts. In the case of the sciences, Kitcher is very explicit concerning the involvement of experts in the third stage of the deliberating process.

As [the deliberators] look toward the future, their assessment of consequences, for themselves and for others, will sometimes require judgments about the likely outcomes of pursuing various investigations. Here they will need the testimony of expert witnesses. The pertinent experts are selected by following chains of deference: all participants initially defer to the community of scientists; within this community, there is deference to fields, subfields, and ultimately to individuals. Sometimes, of course, there will be serious controversy, and the chains will bifurcate. When there are rival “experts” making incompatible forecasts, the entire package is presented to the deliberators, together with the grounds on which the various estimates are made, as well as the track records of those who make them. (SDS, 115)

This passage suggests that experts are very important when it comes to the assessment of the possible outcomes of investigations. Indeed, not only do we need *some* experts, we seem to need a whole network of experts from several subfields, connected through chains of deference. So how can Kitcher assign his standard of well-ordered inquiry to philosophy if there are no philosophical experts?

We think that the right way to address this problem for Kitcher is to argue that philosophical experts do indeed exist although they differ from experts in other academic fields. He could refer to philosophical experts as people who have – due to their academic education – gained the aforementioned “broader perspective”, and are therefore privileged to communicate philosophical problems to laymen. But now two problems emerge, each relating to one of the stages in the process where experts are needed.

First, if experts are to inform the deliberators about the state and prospects of philosophical research, they have to be selective. It seems to us that this is a problem especially in connection with Kitcher’s own verdict concerning the fate of philosophy. As he points out, philosophical debates do not

have the merit of some natural sciences of being able to produce stable paradigms that can simply be passed on to the next generation of researchers (PIO, 251). There is no consensus among “philosophical experts” (if there be any) on the relevant methods and questions, let alone answers, that would have to be highlighted in a tutor program for the deliberators. Of course, philosophers can try to be as neutral as possible when they explain rival positions including their own. They can try to bring out the advantages and drawbacks of each position respectively and let the deliberators decide on their own. But since disagreement is, according to Kitcher, much more widespread in philosophy than in the natural sciences, tutors would indeed have to be *highly* selective concerning the topics they choose for the tutoring program and it could turn out that the different ways of dealing with this “selection problem” simply mirror the personal preferences of the respective tutor.

Second, in the third stage of the process the situation seems even worse: When it comes to the assessment of the consequences of certain research projects, it is very likely that philosophical experts will disagree. As Kitcher points out, the experts could just present the reasons for their different judgments to the deliberators. In the case of philosophy it could turn out that this will be a package of enormous size. It seems to us that for the deliberators to be able to handle that package, they would have to be fully educated philosophers themselves.

3.3 *How Ideal is the Ideal?*

Some of the points that we have raised in our discussion could be circumvented by Kitcher if he simply announced that the standard of well-ordered inquiry is *just an ideal*. There are some passages that point in this direction, for instance:

There is, of course, no easy algorithm for testing extant or proposed lines of research against the standards of well-ordered inquiry. Often, it will be hard to decide how an ideally-informed and mutually-engaged discussion among a fully representative sample of human beings would set priorities. Not always, however. (IDP, 29)

This passage seems to suggest that we can start to judge lines of inquiry by the standard of well-ordered inquiry without institutionalizing the public decision modus in the first place. The idea seems to be that the implementation of the standard works hypothetically, so to say; for instance, by performing thought experiments (“What would the ideal deliberators say?”) each time we choose a new field of inquiry. This interpretation is supported by the fact that Kitcher points out that at least some clear cases can be judged according to the ideal without a real implementation.

On the other hand, Kitcher seems to aspire to an implementation of at least some initial steps of the ideal envisaged:

[M]eaningful ideals are those for which we can envisage a path that might lead us toward them, and a philosopher who proposes an ideal should be able to point to the initial steps we might take [...]. (SDS, 125)

In the case of the sciences, Kitcher seems to have in mind at least two steps that we might take in the near future: First, he encourages scientists to popularize the major ideas of their field via books that are addressed towards a general public. Second, according to Kitcher, groups of citizen representatives could be tutored in certain scientific fields, approximating the tutor program for the ideal deliberators in the first stage of well-ordered science (SDS, 128 f.). All in all, Kitcher’s vision seems to be that of a considerable extension of the idea of Enlightenment.

So our question is: How much of the ideal do we really have to implement? This is of course a delicate matter: Obviously, an implementation of the public tutor program would use up many resources. Of course Kitcher is right when he says that “[t]o scoff at philosophical ideals on grounds that they require a lot of changes would be a serious mistake” (SDS, 125). But let us remember that the whole problem of deciding which lines of inquiry are to be pursued arises exactly *because resources are limited*. We have to weigh the resources that are lost through “unhealthy” research against the resources that would be bound by an implementation of the standard of well-ordered inquiry.

All in all, it is not clear to us how far Kitcher wants to go towards an implementation of his ideal.

4 CONCLUSION

Without any doubt, Kitcher addresses a very important, and often neglected, question concerning the relevance of contemporary philosophy. We agree with Kitcher that philosophy should not become a useless indulgence for the academic elite. However, we think that his suggestion of a renewal of philosophy faces various problems that should be addressed. In particular, the relations between his naturalism and his metaphilosophical considerations remain obscure. Moreover, given the differences between philosophy and other sciences – which Kitcher himself acknowledges – it is not clear what the program of well-ordered philosophy will look like, and if it is practically feasible in any relevant sense at all.

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