

Why Choosing Philosophy?

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Abstract:

This paper is a letter never sent to philosopher, and friend, Ágnes Heller. In this letter I ideally discuss with her the qualities and the defaults of philosophy in contemporary world, while engaging some of her recent positions on the topic. First, I outline some epistemological issues in philosophy, and I confront them with science. Then, I deepen the distinction between academic and public aspects of philosophy, and the "Great Divide" between analytic and continental trends, and I present a possible way to overcome this Divide. Finally, I outline a possible scenario for the future of philosophy.

Keywords: Epistemology of Philosophy, Ágnes Heller, Difference Between Philosophy and Science, Analytic Philosophy, Continental Philosophy.

Dear Ágnes,

This is a letter I always wanted to write and send to you, and I never did. I never did because we all – and me in the first place – live in a sort of illusion of eternity, we do not have constantly in our mind the conscience that our time on this planet is limited, and we always procrastinate something. Imagine if we constantly thought that we will eventually end our time, sooner or later, or, even worse, imagine if

we knew the exact date of our death. This scenario is presented by a very nice movie, entitled *The Brand New Testament* (Jaco Van Dormael 2015). In this movie God is a scruffy old man who lives in a small apartment in Brussels, and who pesters his wife and tyrannizes his daughter. Well, one day the daughter has enough: she sneaks into God's bureau, accesses his ("His"?) PC, and send to all human beings the exact date of their death. Clearly, this triggers a major change in the world. I do not know if you knew this movie, but I am sure you would enjoy it very much!

Anyway, this is not our case, and maybe because of this I have procrastinated, and I have never sent to you this letter, nor I took the chance to speak with you personally on what I am about to write. So, that this letter be as a partial emendation to that mistake of mine. That said, I start again.

Dear Ágnes,

Given that you like jokes, I tell you one. A Physics Professor of a major University waits nervously outside the Chancellor's office: he is there to solicitate the University to finance a new facility for the detection of new subatomic particles. He mutters under his breath rehearsing his discourse. Finally, the door opens, some greetings, some small talks, and finally he presents his request, supported by a lengthy and complex documentation meticulously describing the scientific impact of the results and the consequential benefits for the University in terms of rankings, external funding, etc. The Chancellor knew already not only the topic of this meeting, but also that the request is perfectly reasonable and of strategic importance for the University, thus she was already willing to grant it before meeting her Physics colleague. However, as Chancellor, she does not want to ap-

pear too accommodating, thus, with a sigh, she says ironically: «Why you Physicists are not like the colleagues from Mathematics? They need no expensive equipment, but just a piece of paper, a pencil, and a litterbin». And before the other can reply, she adds: «Or even better, the colleagues from Philosophy: they need no litterbin».

I can easily imagine some of my Physics and Mathematics friends saying: “Hear hear!”. For the joke is funny because it’s true. In philosophy there is no ultimate criteria to discriminate between what is correct and what is wrong, which is equal to say that there is no method in philosophy. In fact, in philosophy, either this method is always implicit, or, when it is explicit, it is itself a philosophical statement! Let us think of the methodological sections in Kant’s first two *Critiques*. Those are at the same time methodological reflections about philosophy, and philosophical reflections about method. (Actually, I could say that the first two *Critiques* are but philosophical reflections about what a method is, and thus their methodological sections are meta-methodologies; but I will save this for another time).

So, the joke is true – that is, philosophy needs no litterbin – because either philosophy has no method (at least no explicit one), or philosophy itself is a methodological reflection.

In the first scenario, philosophy has no power to check the correctness or truthfulness or rightness of its same statements; the consequence is that, at least in principle, everything that is stated by everybody can be deemed to be correct and truth because there is no superior criteria of correctness of truthfulness. For this reason, philosophy need no litterbin: because everything is potentially acceptable and accepted.

In the second case, philosophy thinks that its duty is precisely to establish, or try to establish, this superior criteria of correctness and truthfulness: epistemology is a branch of philosophy; but the consequence here is the same: what is the criteria for the establishment of

a criteria? Therefore, also in this case philosophy needs no litterbin: from the philosophy's perspective, philosophy creates the litterbins that all other disciplines will use to discriminate between these disciplines' correct and not correct propositions; however, from a general perspective, philosophy needs no litterbin because every criteria of correctness and truthfulness that philosophy concocts is potentially valid, and therefore, once again, this criteria that philosophy concocts lacks of a superior criteria able to judge such methodological speculations presented by philosophy.

So, on one hand, there is the risk that philosophy considers itself a sort of supreme discipline, the Queen of all forms and expressions of human intelligence, because philosophy has the task to establish the method that lies at the very foundation of those forms and expressions; and on the other hand, there is the risk that philosophy is but an arbitrary reflection (worst case scenario) or an amateurish reflection (best case scenario) on the methods and the foundations of the disciplines on which philosophy claims to have something to say methodologically – I say “amateurish” because sometimes philosophy knows little about these other disciplines, for the simple reason that those disciplines are so complexes, that it would require a double education (that is, an education both in this discipline and in philosophy) to speak philosophically about them.

Actually, I would add that these two points of view – that philosophy has no method and that philosophy's task is to establish the methods for the other disciplines – are just two perspectives on the same fact, or, more precisely, the two affirmations imply each other. The fact that philosophy has no method implies that philosophy's task is to ask what the method is and consequently to establish the method (for itself and other disciplines), because philosophy is a discipline, it is an expression of human intelligence, and, as every other disciplines and expressions of human intelligence, it requires a meth-

od, thus, the fact that it has no universally accepted method is the evidence that the object of this discipline is to find this method – for itself, and then for other disciplines. Vice-versa, the fact that philosophy's task is to establish the method implies that philosophy has no method because otherwise we would have a *regressio ad infinitum*, so that every philosophical establishment of a method needs another philosophy to establish the method of this method establishment, and so on. Therefore, the only solution is that philosophy has an epistemological status that is self-established.

The evidence of this is before our very eyes: it is the *philosophical* relevance of the history of philosophy. More precisely: the evidence of philosophy's «self-established epistemological status» is the fact that history of philosophy is relevant for *doing* philosophy – not only for *learning* it. It is enough to open a philosophical text – both ancient and modern. We see references to Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Stoic paradoxes, Descartes, Leibniz, works from thinkers temporally quite distant from the writer, and yet still considered inescapable references for any philosophical text deemed to be taken seriously.

On the other hand, if we open a scientific book, we see references to past authors only in special “history sections” of the books: those sections are quite useful didactically, because they help to reconstruct the path that led to a specific scientific discovery, or to explain why a theory or a theorem bears its name, e.g. “Galois theory” or “Lagrange's theorem”. But it is unnecessary to *read* and quote from Galois's or Lagrange's works (for instance), in order to write a text in group theory. This is at best a duty for a historian of mathematics. So, while in a scientific text history is utterly secondary and what counts are the references to the very actual research, on the other hand in a philosophical text history of philosophy is utterly central and necessary in order to give substantiality of this text.

I can reformulate this important difference in the following way: science is cumulative, philosophy is (somehow) recursive. The scientific production of today is based on the scientific results of yesterday, while the philosophical productions of today is based not only on the philosophical research of yesterday, but also on the philosophies of the very past. Therefore, science always asks new questions, or, better, scientific questions have a content that changes at every new discovery and progress: in fact, the questions of tomorrow are built on the results of today; for this reason history is not that relevant, because the questions of the very past are already included in the answers of yesterday, and therefore they are no longer the questions of today: today we ask different, new questions, because there today questions are the result of the cumulation of past questions and answers, and, thus, of cumulation of scientific knowledge.

On the other hand, philosophy always asks the same questions, with different terms or different rephrasing, or different elements to include in the answer, or different ways of organizing the answer. For instance, since its birth philosophy asks the questions "What is true" (methodological question in epistemology), "What is good" (methodological question in ethics), "What is beauty" (methodological question in aesthetics), "What is right" (methodological question in jurisprudence and politics), etc. Sure, the way of answering those questions varies from time to time, in particular because new scenarios are present: new scientific discoveries, new systems of morality, new aesthetic creations or canons, new political systems, etc. Therefore, history is important for philosophy for two reasons: first, because philosophy necessarily follows historical changes – since it reflects on these changes –, in this sense philosophy comes always last, and this perfectly confirms Hegel's motto that philosophy starts its flight after a new moment in history has risen. Second, history is important for philosophy because there is a strong continuity between our philo-

sophical questions today, and the questions of the past philosophies, therefore from the history of philosophy – that is, from the answers of the past to the same questions – the philosophy of today can always learn something, in spite of the temporal distance.

A possible counterexample would be claiming that also physics always answers the same questions: what is the origin and the fundamental structure of the universe? But this is not correct: those are metaphysical questions. Physics answers very specific questions that *somehow* can be connected to those metaphysical questions, but again, this connection is object of philosophy of physics, and not of physics itself. In other words, physics aims to answer *indirectly* those questions, by focusing on more specific problems because these answers must be *testable*, which is the only condition in order to provide answers that corresponds to reality and not the vague, untestable and thus arbitrary outbursts of the metaphysician. At the same time, physics answers these specific problems by formulating *laws* for the (specific) phenomena it studies – laws that mathematically formalize the regularities of these phenomena; laws, not words or speculations. In sum, the questions physics try to answer are much more limited, and they are always provisional, precisely because of the accumulation I mentioned before: because the answers of today are the basis for the questions of tomorrow. As such, physics *needs* litterbin – litterbin is the symbol of the success of physics, of its constant ability to improve itself and the answers it formulates. Therefore, physics, as much as the other sciences, are much humbler intellectual efforts than philosophy, because they seek to provide not with abstract answers, but with formalized answer to specific questions.

This difference between scientific research and philosophical research is strictly connected with the fact that philosophy has no

method, and, thus, requires no litterbin. This connection is based on two factors.

First, given that philosophy has no method, then no answer to any philosophical question can be objectively and unanimously rejected, and therefore the whole totality of philosophical productions is philosophically valid – at least in principle: of course each philosophical author will eventually take side in the history of philosophy, by agreeing with a school, way, or trend of doing philosophy and refuting other ways (principally, nowadays, to take side between the great division between continentals and analytics); however, in principle, that is, a priori, before taking position, every school or way, every possible positions is valid. The evidence of this is precisely the plurality of ways, schools and trends of doing philosophy. This is why the whole history of philosophy is relevant for philosophical research today. Of course, it is possible for some philosophical writings to be censored because they do not respect some dictate or tenets (for instance, anti-communist writings in a communist regime, or atheistic/nihilistic writings in a confessional/religious community) – but this censorship does not make these writings wrong for *philosophical* reasons, i.e., for reasons internal to the philosophical community. The proof of this is that censored writings are indeed read and studied, either clandestinely or in places where this censorship is not in place.

The second factor is that, given that philosophy has no method, then each and every author has to present her/his own methodological analysis on all philosophical production – and this is done and redone from scratch *every single time*, that is, for every single new author in philosophy. Each new philosophical author must state, in an explicit and reasoned way, which authors of the history of philosophy are deemed to be criticized and which authors are deemed to be taken as reference upon which building one's own position. This is connected to what I have just stated on taking position within the history

of philosophy: clearly, the distinction between good and weak authors, authors of election and of rejection, is one with explicitly manifest one's alignment with a trend in philosophy. And all this is connected with the fact that no cumulation of data is possible in philosophy: if one has to do the whole methodological work all over again – at least the first time when one settles to which philosophical trend one aims to belong – then no methodological work is ever considered universally valid and generally shared and sharable. Again, this is remarkably different from science: the whole community shares the same methodological tenets, and this contributes to speed up and simplify the contribution in scientific production – moreover, this is also the confirmation that, contrary to science, philosophy always asks the same questions.

Another evidence of this lack of method and of the complex and often negative consequences it arises is the style of philosophy. Again, we look at science first. Generally, the stylistic differences between scientific papers concern the discursiveness of the paper, whether more concise or more explicative, and this is also related to the organization of the content. For instance, a book in linear algebra is clearer than another one because of the way it presents its material – which is basically the same – (and only very secondary because of the presence of historical subtopics).

On the other hand, philosophy is composed by a multitude of *styles*, that is, of ways of presenting a content. The spectrum can be very wide: it can run from formal demonstrations of theorems to dialogues between fictional characters, from historical reconstructions of publication, debates between philosophers, or lives of authors, to (fictive or real) epistolary conversations – precisely like this letter to you, Ágnes. I am rather skeptic about this liberality concerning philosophical style, for several reasons. First, because this means that philosophy is not identifiable with a unique genre, with the consequence

that a book that one recognizes as genuine philosophical production, another one would rather consider part of poetry, or literature, or mathematics, or history, etc. Second, because there is the risk of overlapping between genres: philosophical authors like Kierkegaard or Nietzsche belong to literature or philosophy? And literary authors like Thomas Mann or Dostoevsky or Hölderlin belong to literature or philosophy? And which book from these authors belong to which genre? Third, because this plurality of styles further enhances the ambiguity of philosophy: the fact that each author can establish her/his own way of writing philosophy contributes to the idea of a fundamental and ineradicable arbitrary of philosophy, of a complete lack of common method and canon.

In any case, the fact that philosophy asks the same questions, and the fact that there is no explicit, univocal, and unambiguous methodology to address such questions, can indeed convey the idea that philosophical questions cannot be ultimately answered. As I hope to have shown, asking the same questions goes together with having no clear and univocal method to answer them: one is the consequence of the other. Philosophers ask the same questions because no answer to those questions is considered definitive, and no answer is considered definitive because there is no clear, universally-shared method to distinguish between right and wrong answers. Vice-versa, philosophy has no method because it seeks to formulate the method each discipline should satisfy when answering their specific questions, and therefore philosophy has no method to answer its own questions, thus, the validity of each question depends on the philosophical position within which it is formulated, and therefore each philosophical position answers in its way, and thus philosophy asks the same questions.

So, the unity between answering the same question and not having a univocal, universally-shared method conveys the suspicion that

philosophical questions cannot be ultimately answer. The next question is: then why keeping asking those questions? Why not simply acknowledging that there is no answer to those questions, that the effort of providing an answer to those questions is an enterprise doomed to fail, that it is a waste of time and intelligence to address such questions?

And I address this question to you, Ágnes. Because after high school you wanted to study physics. And then you went with your future first husband, student in philosophy, to a class by Lukacs, you did not understand a word that was said, and you decided that you would have spent your life to understand it. And you did: you devoted your life to philosophy.

Have you ever regretted this decision of philosophy to the detriment of physics? Have you have asked yourself all these questions and have you ever had yourself all these doubts about philosophy, its meaningfulness, its relevance? Have you ever questioned philosophy? And your choice of it? Would it be meaningful to still choose philosophy, today?

In fact, it is true that the face of philosophy has changed a lot since the time you made your choice. The main change concerns the progressive separation between two main "practices" or "places" of doing philosophy: academia, and the public forum. Usually the two were closer to one another than today: Lukacs was simultaneously a professional philosopher (a philosopher of academia) and a public thinker, and the same was for many – mainly European – philosophers, such as Sartre, Russell, Cacciari, Jaspers, Arendt, etc. And yourself, of course. But today, it seems to me that the situation is slightly changed, because the political arena has changed: the bar has lowered at the point that the public would be unable to keep the attention to complex philosophical arguments concerning politics, society, aesthetics... The world of today is dominated by a communica-

tion that is more and more quick (the numbers of characters of a Tweet) and visual/oral rather than written (videos on Youtube, meetings on Facebook, conferences on Zoom) – and this trend will develop even further due to the current CoViD-19 pandemic.

This means that the public forum expects and is ready/able to receive discourse and discussions that are simple and fast. And this can actually be provided by anybody – any youtuber – with no specific philosophical training. This is actually connected to another trend in modern, “internet” time. This trend is the generalized illusion or supposition of culture, of having the right and the duty to speaking one’s own mind even on topics that require a high degree of specialization. For instance, vaccines. The No-Vax movement is a flea of our time, fruit of intellectual arrogance and ignorance that, unfortunately, the internet helps to legitimate and to spread, by providing with an ideal sounding board. So, the public figure of the philosopher is losing its relevance because no special authority is attributed to this, or, this special authority is interpreted as the legacy of a past and, thus, as unable to understand the present.

The nature of the academic place of philosophy has also changed. You recognize this yourself, in many of your books, such as *An Ethics of Personality*. You write that the current situation in academic philosophy is defined by the tendency of publishing works of philology rather than of philosophy: works that dissect in a very precise, very rigorous manner works by famous philosophers, thinking to find new interpretations of it or new connections with other works. Such works are richer in footnotes than in original ideas: they might contribute to the understanding of the history of philosophy, but they do not contribute significantly to the philosophical understanding of our world. The problem is that publishers and committees for academic positions are keener to value those technical books for insiders, rather than more original books that can have a wider impact.

(But hasn't it always been the case, somehow? Spinoza had no position in academia, and no philosopher professor contemporary of Spinoza is studied today as much as he is). In some ways, this professionalization of philosophical research and publishing presents a remedy to the lack of methodology I have analyzed in the previous pages. However, maybe the remedy is worst than the problem; maybe the remedy simply hides the problem without really facing it. In fact, this professionalization concerns the productions of works of "philological philosophy", and not of "philosophical philosophy".

Ágnes, you have lived both places of philosophy, the public and the academic one. Some of your books satisfy the expectations of the academic community: *The Power of the Shame*, *Beyond Justice*, *General Ethics*, *Can Modernity Survive?*, *A Philosophy of History in Fragments*, *A Theory of Modernity*... They reconstruct the historical development of a debate about a philosophical topic, or they discuss a topic by engaging what other authors have said on this. In sum, they have a place within the philosophical debate. Other books defy those expectations, try to force the boundaries: I would say, more or less all books since *An Ethics of Personality*. Those books have barely any footnotes. Sometimes they formulate sentences that belong more to the declamation than to the argumentation. They make a strong use of primary sources (Plato, Aristotle, Shakespeare, Bacon, Hobbes, Pascal, Descartes, Kant, Hegel... the importance of the history of philosophy!), by interpreting them in a free, spontaneous way, as if you read them *ex novo*, thus, without taking into account the huge amount of literature on these sources – in some of this literature you could even have found some criticisms to your interpretations.

An answer to both the double issue of a too arid philological philosophy, and a fresher but not so rigorous original philosophy, might be represented by the style and the aims of analytic philosophy. Pa-

pers in analytic philosophy – and logic – aim indeed to present new ideas and contributions; they aim to make a progress in the knowledge. As such, analytic philosophy can interact with hard sciences – especially mathematical logic – in a more fruitful way than I know that you, Ágnes, are critical vis-à-vis of analytic philosophy. I know that you see in it something a bit sterile, all based on thought experiments and thus detached from the political and social reality we all live in. I somehow disagree with this, because I disagree with the preservation of the “Great Divide” between analytic and continental philosophy. In fact, both “styles”, both trends, have positive aspects: the continental has the worth of being attentive to the history of philosophy and, thanks to this, they can avoid the mistake of repeating what has already been said in the past; the analytic has the worth of presenting contributions that are not merely philological, but that investigate new ways of addressing and solving problems – for instance by working on programming languages or using mathematical formulations. Therefore, today I see a future for philosophy which maybe you missed: the possibility for philosophy to overcome this “Great Divide” between continental and analytic by integrating the positive elements from both styles. And this is indeed possible, thanks to the presence of both trends in most Universities, today.

But I see another element for the development – and relevance – of philosophy. This is the work side by side with other disciplines, such as, for instance, jurisprudence, medicine, ethology, biology, and mathematics. This interdisciplinary collaboration satisfies the requirement of philosophy to present the methodology of the other disciplines; in this context the vague term of “methodology” has a special and precise interpretation and frame for any discipline: it is the problem of the foundations in mathematics; the problem of the relationship between the powers in political systems; the problem of deontology in medicine (e.g. euthanasia)... At the same time, this in-

terdisciplinarity satisfies in a *rigorous* way philosophy's aim to provide a methodology, because it *forces* philosophy to understand firsthand what the other disciplines really are. It forces philosophy to "get its hands dirty" from the real contact with other specialists, with the issues and method and procedures of other disciplines, with experiments, calculation, analysis of data.

This requires from the philosopher a constant disposition and willingness to learn, to develop an interpersonal reflection and not just a personal one, to produce outputs and publications that are four-, six-, eight-handed, and not just two-handed. This is a philosophy that preserves its aim and mission: by working side by side with the specialists of those other disciplines, the philosopher can develop, foster and give new impulse to the methodological reflections that are *already* developed by those disciplines, via the tools of conceptual analysis, theory of argumentation, mastery of various theoretical approaches to general, methodological questions. And this is a philosophy that realizes its mission in a non-arbitrary, non-vague, non-univocal, non-irrelevant way, because everything the philosopher produces is issued by real problems that the discipline (with which the philosopher works) encounters within itself (e.g. mathematics) or in its relationship with society and the shared world (e.g. medicine or jurisprudence); everything the philosopher produces is shared with the specialists with this discipline; everything the philosopher produces is *tested* by the specialists of this discipline. Potentially, this can be a revolution for philosophy.

In sum, I have no answer to the question whether it would be meaningful or not to choose philosophy today. If I could turn back time, I do not know if you chose philosophy again. Probably not.

Would this mean that – using your terminology, Agi – would it mean that I am an existential failure? I think I am the least person who is entitled to answer this question.

I just know that I have some doubts that philosophy, as it is today, can indeed be able to be relevant, up-to-date, *zeitgemässig*, in the long run. And doubts are the best possible starting points – for helping things advancing.

Love and gratitude,

Andrea