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Dutilh Novaes, Catarina

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prof.dr. C. Dutilh Novaes

THE HUMAN FACTOR: DOING PHILOSOPHY IN A MESSY WORLD BY ASKING INCONVENIENT QUESTIONS



prof.dr. C. Dutilh Novaes

THE HUMAN FACTOR: DOING PHILOSOPHY IN A MESSY WORLD BY ASKING INCONVENIENT QUESTIONS

Rede uitgesproken bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van hoogleraar VU-University Research Chair Reasoning and Argumentation and their History, aan de Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen van de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam op 17 mei 2019.

The Human Factor: doing philosophy in a messy world by asking inconvenient questions

1. Introduction

When she was about 7 years old, my daughter Marie liked to read very short informative books called 'informatieboekjes', which she borrowed from the library. These were age-appropriate short introductions to all kinds of topics, which she read avidly. (I was quite surprised when she came home with one on juvenile detention centers, but she assured me it was very interesting.) Inevitably, at some point she found the 'informatieboekje' on philosophy, and so she could finally learn more about that thing that kept her mother so busy. After she read the book, the following conversation ensued:

-“So Marie, what is philosophy?”

-“Philosophy is about asking lots of questions, and when you get answers you ask even more questions.” (Touché...)

-“And what else did you learn in the book?”

-“There was also the story of a man in Greece who walked around asking everyone all kinds of questions, and eventually people got angry at him and he had to die.”

So you see, asking questions can be dangerous, especially if they are *inconvenient* questions. Good philosophical questions are always inconvenient, as they are meant to unsettle. Indeed, the same 'informatieboekje' has a definition of philosophy that I still use when I give lectures to prospective students: “Filosofen is vragen stellen bij dingen die gewoon lijken, maar die eigenlijk helemaal niet zo vanzelfsprekend zijn.” “To philosophize is to ask questions about things that seem normal, but which are actually not obvious at all.” Philosophical questions are meant to dislodge and defy common sense; they force us to see the non-obvious in what appears unproblematic. We think we know what time is, but do we really? How come I am the same person now as I was 10 years ago (presumably!), given that all the molecules that composed me then have now been replaced by different ones? Can we be sure that we are not living in the Matrix? No wonder that Socrates, the irritating gadfly, ended up irking the good people of Athens: philosophy is at heart a subversive enterprise.

2. Paradoxes

Some of the most powerful tools at the philosopher's disposal to expose the non-obviousness of what superficially seems straightforward are *paradoxes*. Etymologically, a paradox is what is distinct from (*para*) common opinion (*doxa*). But the philosophically more interesting way to define a paradox in my opinion is as an *argument* where the premises seem acceptable (true), the reasoning from premises to conclusion seems acceptable (correct), and yet the conclusion seems unacceptable (false). But how can this

be? Something must be amiss somewhere! The typical attitude of philosophers when confronted with paradoxes is well captured in the following passage by philosopher M. Sainsbury:

Appearances have to deceive, since the acceptable cannot lead by acceptable steps to the unacceptable. So, generally, we have a choice: either the conclusion is not really unacceptable, or else the starting point, or the reasoning, has some non-obvious flaw.

In other words, when we encounter a paradox, this is usually interpreted as a sign that something has to go, and there are three main options: one of the premises is not acceptable (true) after all; one of the steps in the reasoning is not acceptable (correct) after all; the conclusion is not unacceptable (false) after all. (A fourth option, which horrifies most philosophers, is that it *is* possible for the acceptable to lead to the unacceptable by acceptable steps. This possibility would entail that discursive rationality is not a reliable guide to draw sound conclusions, a scary thought indeed. But there have been thinkers who recognized and even embraced the folly of discursive rationality.)

No matter which way we go given these three options, we are forced to revise at least some of the beliefs and opinions we entertained so far: despite initial appearances, maybe one of the premises is false after all; or maybe the reasoning is not correct after all; or maybe (and this tends to be the least popular but also most the exciting option) the conclusion is not that crazy after all. Either way, a paradox shows that three of our beliefs (that the premises are true, that the reasoning is correct, that the conclusion is false) are mutually incompatible, and forces us to make choices in order to restore peace. Notice that the mutually inconsistent beliefs were there all along, doing no harm, but once the paradox brings the inconsistency to the fore, some cognitive reorganization is required. The principle of minimal effort dictates that the revision should be as minimal as possible, and indeed philosophers often discuss which of the three options would do the least 'damage', the presupposition being that the least revisionist option is to be preferred.

But sometimes, paradoxes can lead to startling discoveries. By embracing the implausible conclusion of Galileo's paradox—that the collection of all natural numbers is of the same size (has the same cardinality, to use the right jargon) as the collection of all perfect square numbers—the mathematician Georg Cantor created (or discovered, as the jury is still out on the ontological status of mathematical entities) a whole new mathematical world, that of the transfinite numbers, and thus inaugurated set theory. More recently, a number of philosophers have argued that the Liar paradox—is the sentence 'This sentence is not true' true or false?—shows that some sentences can be both true and false, unsettling millennia of Aristotelian orthodoxy (but embracing a worldview presented by the Buddhist

philosopher Nagarjuna in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD). These strange, disconcerting ideas again show us that many things are not nearly as simple as they seem.

Paradoxes can also be a lot of fun. The grandfather paradox, for example, where a time-traveller goes back to the past to kill his grandfather, is a great conversation piece for dinner parties, aside from raising deeper questions about the nature of time. When she was 7 years old (which is apparently peak age for wisdom, at least for my children), my daughter Sophie came up with a paradox of her own. The starting point is what in Dutch is known as the 'upside down world game' (omgekeerde wereld) and in English goes by 'opposite day game'. The game basically functions as a truth-value flipping operator: if you say yes, you mean no, and if you say no, you mean yes. Sophie then noted that if someone asks you 'are you playing upside down world?', all kinds of strange things happen to each of the answers you may give. If you are *not* playing upside down world, you will say no; but if you *are* playing upside down world you will also say no. So the 'no' answer is not informative, but still coherent. As for the 'yes' answer, if you are playing upside down world and say 'yes', then that means 'no', and so you are not playing the game after all. But then your 'yes' was a genuine yes in the first place, and so you are playing the game and said yes, which takes us back to the beginning. Still with me? Probably not... Never mind! Sophie's own assessment of the situation was that the question 'are you playing upside down world?', which is *prima facie* perfectly normal and innocent, turns out to be a really difficult, if not impossible, question to answer. Who would have thought?

3. Philosophy as situated and social

Let us go back to philosophy being about asking lots of questions. The focus on questions highlights another fundamental feature of doing philosophy (and in fact arguably of any intellectual enterprise): philosophy is essentially a collective, social endeavor. Asking questions and offering answers is obviously quintessentially a dialogical practice; though one can of course engage in solitary thinking, this is arguably the internalization (to use a terminology introduced by the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky) of a social practice initially learned in the public sphere. This too is an old idea, again going back at least to Plato's notion of thought as inner speech, and more recently developed in detail by cognitive linguists under the concept of 'fictive interaction'. It entails that, while it is of course possible to philosophize on your own, like Descartes by his fireplace, solitary philosophizing is not paradigmatic.

But one need not go as far as Socrates, who was suspicious of all forms of writing, and conclude that true thinking could only happen by means of actual dialogical interactions, involving physical participants. Dialogue can also occur through other media, writing in particular (which, in the day and age of whatsapp and social media, is almost a trivial observation). Indeed, the very history of philosophy across the centuries can be viewed as

different authors engaging in dialogues with their contemporaries as well as with philosophers of the past through their writings. However, for those of us who in fact like to talk, there's no better way to do philosophy than to engage in actual conversations, be they in the classroom with students, at seminars with colleagues, or informally with philosophically inclined friends.

One of the reasons why real-life dialogue is so conducive to doing philosophy is the idea, famously defended by John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty*, that engaging with people who disagree with you is the best way to improve your own epistemic position. It is the dissenters who force us to think, who challenge received opinion, who nudge us away from dogma towards beliefs that have survived critical challenge. Dissenters are of great value even when they are mistaken in their beliefs, as they compel us to formulate stronger reasons for our own beliefs. As Mill puts it: 'Both teachers and learners go to sleep at their post, as soon as there is no enemy in the field.'

Philosophy is indeed very much a 'game of giving and asking for reasons', a phrase coined by the philosopher R. Brandom. The thought is that each assertion must be accompanied by a suitable justification, a reason, and that everyone is entitled to request for the reasons supporting a given assertion at any given time. But Brandom thinks that the wide majority of conversational interactions in real life *also* take the form of games of giving and asking for reasons, and that seems wrong. Once humans are past the infamous 'why?' phase in their toddler years, for the most part we don't go around demanding that people justify their assertions to us all the time. Indeed, a big chunk of what constitutes philosophical training consists in inculcating in budding philosophers the idea that nearly everything can be contested by means of why-questions (which are requests for reasons), as everything is in principle debatable. (Remember, doing philosophy is questioning the obvious.) By contrast, in real life, asking too many why-questions may become annoying and in fact often also plain rude—which is probably one of the reasons why philosophers are not the most popular dinner party guests.

To make matters more delicate, philosophical training (at least in the analytic tradition) also places much emphasis on formulating *objections*; in fact, there is often the expectation that one *should* find objections even if one by and large agrees with a position being defended by an interlocutor. This tendency can be taken too far: philosophical arguments can become baroque and convoluted if they need to address all kinds of actual as well as possible objections; there is an incentive to give philosophical pieces of discourse uncharitable interpretations; the search for objections may evolve into aggressive confrontation. A number of feminist philosophers such as Janice Moulton and Phyllis Rooney have warned us against the risks and pitfalls of combative philosophical engagement. While their points are well taken and constitute a sobering warning against

overly combative philosophy, even within certain boundaries of decency, doing philosophy will always entail a mild degree of discomfort. Having your deep-seated views contested is generally speaking not a pleasurable experience, but this is precisely what makes philosophy *philosophical*, and thus different from more mundane forms of dialogical interactions.

Aside from being essentially social, knowledge in general (and philosophy in particular) is also essentially *situated*. What this means is that what a knower does and does not know is very closely related to her social location/situation in the society where she lives, and in particular to cultural and political aspects of this context. Doing philosophy is best understood as something that people do in time and space, through their bodies, interacting with their environment and with other people. This means that philosophical ideas and positions are products of their time and place, in particular in that they are answers to questions that are salient and relevant in these specific contexts. This point is aptly captured in a famous passage by Hegel (who, in other respects, was no fan of the embodied conception of philosophy that I am sketching here):

As far as the individual is concerned, each individual is in any case a child of his time, thus, philosophy, too, is its own time comprehended in thoughts. (Hegel 1820/1991, 21)

Different times and contexts will give rise to different instantiations of philosophical concepts; these concepts themselves will change over time, following more global, sociocultural changes. Analytic philosophers tend to underappreciate the importance of temporality, historicity, and the sociocultural background that gives rise to theories, concepts, and ideas. Continental philosophers, by contrast, as a general rule are more sensitive to the need to take these aspects into account. My work as a philosopher belongs primarily to the analytic tradition, but the importance of historicity has been inculcated in me during my years as an undergraduate student at the University of São Paulo, at a philosophy department strongly influenced by the French structuralist, historicist tradition in philosophy.

4. The role of history of philosophy

In fact, I started my academic career as a historian of philosophy, a historian of Latin medieval logic to be specific. Back then, I would spend great lengths of time focusing on minute details of specific, often anonymous texts, many of which are only available in Latin. It was a fun period, during which I had to rely on rigorous skills of textual analysis (though I never learned how to read medieval manuscripts, to my regret). Even now that the bulk of my work is much less historical, history of philosophy remains crucial for me, as to understand a particular philosophical question or concept, one must attend to its history,

i.e. the developments which led to its formulation. And so, while we can of course engage in dialogues with authors from the past, as I mentioned earlier, it is also essential to approach philosophical theories and ideas from the past in their own terms, i.e. taking into consideration the questions and theoretical or practical needs they were a response to.

Later, I became interested in what can be described as *longue durée*, diachronic history of philosophy, and found in genealogical methods as developed by Nietzsche and Foucault, among others, the suitable tools for this approach. A genealogy of a concept or practice consists in tracing its different steps of historical development across time, focusing both on what changes at each step and on what stays the same. In particular, at least in its Nietzschean-Foucaultian variants, a genealogy highlights the *contingency* of practices and concepts, given that they arise against the background of specific sociocultural factors that could just as well have been very different. Of course, this brings us back to the idea of doing philosophy as essentially amounting to questioning what appears to be obvious and inevitable, but is not.

Genealogical analysis is actually *especially* suitable as an instrument to question the obvious. The work of Foucault in particular is a great example of this potential. For him, the primary task of philosophy is what he called “problematization”, which involves the critical-historical work of clarifying the problems at the heart of practices and projects we would otherwise see as unproblematic. This can be done either by exposing the ‘shameful origins’ of certain practices and projects such as in Nietzsche’s critique of Christian morality; or more neutrally by explaining and highlighting the contingency of the relevant historical processes, as done by Foucault. What is taken to be obvious and necessary is then shown to be non-obvious and in fact contingent; things could just as well have been different.

So far I’ve described philosophy as essentially amounting to relentlessly asking inconvenient questions. But what about the answers? Is philosophy also capable of offering substantive answers, both in terms of describing a deeper reality that escapes the inattentive eye, and in terms of concrete proposals for how to change aspects of reality that may be improved, in particular social reality? The jury is out on both questions, and I now discuss each of them in turn.

5. The possibility of philosophical knowledge

Many philosophers, including Socrates and Wittgenstein, thought that philosophy is unable to produce substantive theories; all it can do, Wittgenstein would say, is elucidate concepts and help dissolve misunderstandings. For these philosophers, there is no such thing as philosophical *knowledge*, but only philosophical *practice*, which is essentially therapeutic. Others are less pessimistic, believing that philosophy can in fact provide substantive answers to questions pertaining to ethics and morality, metaphysics, epistemology,

language, by means of distinctively philosophical methods. These are traditionally conceived as non-empirical methods such as thought experiments, conceptual analysis, formalization, reflective equilibrium, and reliance on so-called philosophical intuitions. These methods would be particularly suitable to investigate how things *ought* to be rather than how things really are in the messy world. Going back to Plato once again, he famously claimed that true knowledge is exclusively knowledge of the Forms, which constitute an independent, a-temporal reality that the messy world ‘down here’ is only a poor simulacrum of. While most philosophers now would reject the existence of these Platonic Forms as the object of philosophical analysis *par excellence*, it is still very common to encounter the view that philosophers need not concern themselves with the unruly details of reality that typically occupy empirical researchers (both in the natural sciences and in the social sciences). This is why the aprioristic methods that they rely on would be entirely adequate for philosophical investigation. Thus, against philosophical skeptics such as Socrates and Wittgenstein, this vision of philosophy entails that there is such a thing as substantive, philosophical knowledge, which is quite different, both in subject matter and in methods, from knowledge produced in the empirical sciences.

Of course, the conception of philosophy as aprioristic and as concerned exclusively with normative rather than descriptive issues has also been forcefully contested. For example, in the second half of the 20th century, there has been a push towards ‘naturalizing’ philosophy, meaning that philosophy should position itself in a continuum with the empirical sciences. More recently, the emergence of so-called ‘experimental philosophy’ further challenged the purely aprioristic conception, which is described with the revealing moniker ‘armchair philosophy’. But if philosophy goes all the way empirical, both in its methods and its subject matter—the messy world down here, not the Platonic forms up there—then it is no longer clear what counts as distinctively *philosophical*, as opposed to investigations in the empirical disciplines.

After years working mostly as a historian of philosophy, some ten years ago my research took an ‘empirical turn’, as it were. It became apparent that, to address the questions on human cognition that I was interested in, I had to engage substantially with the empirical sciences of the mind, in particular psychology and cognitive science. My monograph *Formal Languages in Logic*, published in 2012, is the result of this empirical turn, not in the sense that I conducted empirical research myself (though a number of philosophers in fact do that too), but in the sense that I relied extensively on empirical findings to formulate answers to the questions I was interested in. The precise term to describe this approach is ‘empirically informed philosophy’. To be clear, not everyone embraced this ‘empirical turn’: on many occasions, while giving talks on this material, I often got the remark: ‘it is all very interesting, but this is not philosophy’—to which my reply was: I’d rather be doing something interesting that is not philosophy than be doing something philosophical that is

not interesting.

Empirically informed philosophy has now become more mainstream than it was some 10 years ago. But then the question of what exactly differentiates philosophy from other disciplines becomes all the more perplexing. Purely aprioristic approaches in philosophy, which rely exclusively on intuitions and thought experiments and so forth to make claims about how the world is, are problematic for a number of reasons; indeed, they may rightly be seen as a bit arrogant, epistemically speaking. Traditional metaphysics, for example, seems to be in trouble when it comes to explaining how we could possibly have epistemic access to the most basic facts of reality while not ever leaving one's armchair (not even to fetch a book providing some empirical data). But philosophical skepticism, according to which philosophy, or philosophers, can never produce substantive knowledge about reality, is also unsatisfying and epistemically overly modest.

One way out of this dilemma is to explore the *synthetic* potential of philosophy. The philosopher (and my old friend) Eric Schliesser has recently published a paper where he describes in detail what synthetic philosophy amounts to, discussing the concrete examples of Daniel Dennett and Peter Godfrey-Smith; Kim Sterelny is another notable synthetic philosopher. The idea is that the philosopher is ideally placed to converse with a number of different disciplines, to identify problematic presuppositions in how these disciplines operate, and to aggregate findings from disciplines that do not normally engage with each other into a 'grand narrative', one that offers a unified answer to questions that these different disciplines investigate but from different perspectives.

I aspire to be a synthetic philosopher myself. The monograph I am currently working on, *The Dialogical Roots of Deduction*, is an attempt to synthesize findings coming from a number of different fields—psychology of reasoning, cognitive science, social psychology, education studies, history, logic, mathematics—and make sense of it all by means of one hypothesis, namely that deduction is essentially a dialogical affair. (For details, stay tuned! The book should appear in 2020.) But the grand narratives of synthetic philosophy are never as neat and smooth-edged as aprioristic philosophical theories, simply because the messiness of the real world barges in anyway as soon as empirical elements become part of the story. And this is exactly as it should be, if we are to do justice to an unruly reality and the complexity of human experience.

6. The human factor

Indeed, what has fascinated me more than anything in my philosophical career is how and why people do the things they do. For example, in the philosophy of mathematical practice, rather than investigating the ontological status of mathematical entities such as sets, some of us are more interested in examining what mathematicians do *qua* mathematicians. Here

too we ask lots of questions: How does a mathematician develop new ideas? How is mathematical knowledge co-produced and shared in the relevant communities? But here again there is often pushback: philosophers of mathematical practice are often told that what they are doing is at best sociology of mathematics, not really philosophy.

In other words, it is *the human factor* that captivates me above all. *The Human Factor* is the title of a novel by the English novelist and spy Graham Greene (he was an agent for the MI6, the British Secret Intelligence Service). It is the story of a secret service agent in London, Maurice Castle, who acts as a double agent for communist Soviet Union. He does so out of gratitude towards communist agents who rescued him, a white man, and his black African wife Sarah from apartheid South Africa. In many senses, becoming a double agent is not at all a rational choice for Maurice, in fact it is a rather stupid decision. He and Sarah live a quiet life with their son in the countryside, biding their time until he reaches retirement age. But his love for Sarah runs so deep that he cannot but feel profoundly indebted to his communist friend who organized the escape from South Africa, and by extension to communists in general. It is thus the human factor, most crucially love, rather than some cost-benefit calculation that prompts Maurice to make this choice.

In his memoir *A Sort of Life*, Greene compares the novelist to the spy: “Every novelist has something in common with a spy: he watches, he overhears, he seeks motives and analyses character, and in his attempt to serve literature he is unscrupulous.” (p. 103) On the conception of philosophy that I have been sketching here, where human practices take pride of place, the philosopher too is a bit like the novelist and the spy: she observes humans as they go about their business, and attempts to explain these practices. But unlike the spy and the novelist, the philosopher need not be unscrupulous; in fact, the philosopher may well be deeply committed to certain values and use philosophy as a means to promote these values. Philosophy may be subversive not only by asking inconvenient questions, but also by offering disquieting alternatives. In this sense, the philosopher not only observes and overhears social reality, but she may also interact with and modify this reality.

7. Philosophy for (social) change.

Socially and politically engaged philosophers are not content with only investigating how things ought to be in some abstract sense—normative analysis—or how things de facto are—descriptive analysis. These philosophers are also, or even primarily, interested in how to improve the status quo, thus bridging the gap between the normative and the descriptive; they engage in *prescriptive*, or *ameliorative* analysis. These are philosophers who think that they can not only ask inconvenient questions and problematize the status quo; they can also offer alternatives where our current practices and concepts are defective or suboptimal. Growing up with a communist father, the idea of politically and socially engaged philosophy was fed to me very early on, and later as an undergraduate I followed

courses on various Marxist philosophical strands. But to my late father's dismay, as I moved more and more towards logic, social and political engagement became less salient early in my career. He would be pleased to see that I'm back to my roots now! In my current research project, I focus on argumentation and deliberation. My goal is to identify ways in which our argumentative practices can be improved, especially in public discourse, by formulating a realistic social epistemology of argumentation.

An *engagé* conception of philosophy is most readily associated with the philosophers of the French Enlightenment such as Voltaire, Diderot, and d'Alembert. Their ideals can be described as "the ambition of shaping individual and social development on the basis of better and more reliable knowledge than the tangled, confused, half-articulate but deeply rooted conceptual systems inherited from our ancestors... improved knowledge can be an instrument of individual and social liberation." (Carus 2008, p. 1) These philosophers believed in the boundless power of knowledge to liberate minds and change social realities, an idea epitomized in the *Encyclopédie* project. They also used satire and other means to criticize the political and social status quo of their time. As is well known, their ideas have been enormously influential, and have inspired a number of revolutions around the world.

In the first half of the 20th century, Enlightenment ideals greatly influenced one of the most interesting philosophical movements of the century, namely the Vienna Circle. The Vienna Circle is perhaps best known for its commitment to scientific rigor, and to the project of extending the methods of the natural sciences—experimentation, mathematization—to all fields of knowledge. But at its core, the Vienna Circle was also a political movement, at least as personified by some of its most prominent members such as Rudolf Carnap and Otto Neurath, who formed what became known as the 'left' Vienna Circle. Neurath in particular spoke of 'social engineering' as the project of improving lives by means of scientifically and philosophically grounded interventions. One of his main 'practical' legacies is the development of a picture language, Isotype, which was to be used for educational purposes, but is now mostly known as the origin for widespread pictograms such as the conventional signs for male and female public toilets.

While perhaps less outspoken on his political motivations than Neurath, Carnap's vision of philosophical practice was also deeply embedded in social ideals. One of his key methodological tools, the concept of explication, might *prima facie* be viewed as exclusively aimed at greater formal precision, but is in fact essentially a *pragmatic* notion. Indeed, explication embodies the value of intellectual liberation from the shackles of paralyzing traditions. A passage by one of Carnap's students, Richard Jeffrey, illustrates this aspect particularly well:

Philosophically, Carnap was a social democrat; his ideals were those of the enlightenment. His persistent, central idea was: "It's high time we took charge of our

own mental lives”—time to engineer our own conceptual scheme (language, theories) as best we can to serve our own purposes; time to take it back from tradition, time to dismiss Descartes’s God as a distracting myth, time to accept the fact that there’s nobody out there but us, to choose our purposes and concepts to serve those purposes, if indeed we are to choose those things and not simply suffer them. [...] For Carnap, deliberate choice of the syntax and semantics of our language was more than a possibility—it was a duty we owe ourselves as a corollary of freedom.

The Enlightenment project of intellectual emancipation thus understood again exemplifies the general idea of philosophy as contestatory and revisionary, as an incentive not to take anything for granted and a license to question institutions and the status quo. However, such projects of ‘social engineering’ and emancipation also came to be seen as inherently authoritarian and oppressive by later critics such as Adorno and Horkheimer. More recently, the political philosopher Charles Mills has argued that the Enlightenment ideals of equality were restricted to *some* humans, namely white humans, and that racial hierarchies were not a by-product but rather central to the whole Enlightenment project. Feminist thinkers have made similar points on the Enlightenment’s insensitivity to gender oppression.

Be that as it may, these philosophers all agree on the potential for social change of philosophical theorizing thus understood, thus going beyond merely descriptive goals of understanding and explanation. While it is fair to say that for large chunks of the 20th century most analytic philosophers did not consider political engagement to be part of their core activities, in the last 10 years socially conscious analytic philosophy has become a much more central part of the discipline. This is exemplified by the influential work of Sally Haslanger on social categories such as race and gender, which combines themes and conceptual tools from feminist critical theory with a characteristically analytic approach. Haslanger introduced the term *ameliorative analysis* to refer to the kind of philosophical inquiry that is not merely concerned with describing our concept of X, or with describing phenomenon X in reality, but rather examines and critiques concepts currently in use, and proposes a reformulated version of a given concept that is more likely to help us achieve our considered goals. These goals are, for Haslanger, to promote egalitarian values and thus promote equality among humans of all colors and genders.

8. Conclusions

Naturally, our track record as philosophers is far from perfect. There are a number of instances of philosophers defending truly abhorrent positions—Heidegger is perhaps the most salient recent example. What I’ve described so far is what I take to be philosophy at its best: questioning the obvious, not overlooking the messiness of the world, focusing on the

human factor, bringing together different disciplines, proposing solutions to the problems it identifies. I've also stressed that, on this conception, philosophy cannot be a solitary endeavor. But as with everything that is human, philosophy is also fallible, and what might seem like a really good idea at first may turn out to be disastrous.

At the end of the day, it is the human factor that makes philosophy, and ultimately life, all worth it. Etymologically, philosophy is about love, love of wisdom, but love of wisdom cannot in fact be separated from love for our fellow human beings. Socrates, the irritating gadfly of Athens, makes this point clearly in the *Gorgias* when he refers to his love for Alcibiades as continuous with his love for philosophy; wisdom is a common good, and as such it is best acquired and enjoyed in the company of others, in particular our loved ones.

Philosophy has brought me many meaningful connections over the years, with numerous colleagues who then became friends, in many different places of the world. Interacting with students is another constant source of joy; sharing my curiosity and enthusiasm with them is a fantastic experience. There are a number of specific people I wish to thank for their friendship and dedication. I begin with the mentors who shaped my philosophical personality in the early years: my doktorvater Göran Sundholm, from whom I inherited the coolest academic genealogy—I have Turing as my academic great-grandfather! Stephen Read, who came 13 years ago from Scotland as an external examiner for my PhD defense and is now here again today. Martin Stokhof, possibly the wisest person I know, who taught me so much about the rules of the game in academia and much more. I also want to thank my former colleagues in Groningen for seven fabulous years together, and my new colleagues at the VU who offered me such a warm welcome. In particular, it's wonderful to be colleagues with Marije Martijn again, after our years as fellow PhD students in Leiden, and our continuous friendship since. More generally, I thank the VU for the trust conferred upon me with this University Research Chair; I promise to do my utter best to use this privilege wisely and responsibly.

But of course, outside philosophy there's also much love to be found, and I'm lucky to have some amazing people in my life. I want to thank Reinout for believing in my potential at the very beginning, when the world seemed to conspire against me. Jan Roel, who came into my life recently but has already made such a big difference, and brought me so much joy. My mother Maria, who has always been and remains my main role model not only academically but also as a person, in her infinite kindness and generosity. It was she, together with my late father Ricardo, who first instilled in me and in my brother Frederico, another fellow nerd, a love for knowledge and an insatiable curiosity. In turn, I now try to transmit the same ethos to my daughters Marie and Sophie, though in the end, as with all parents, I'm pretty sure I learn more from them than they learn from me. They bring joy to my life and make me proud everyday. After all, the human factor is what it's all about. Ik heb gezegd.

