

# The Postmortem of Philosophy

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The folklore about the demise of Philosophy is not a recent one. From essays to internet memes, the epistemological and industrial contribution of the subject is opined upon. Having to compete and prove its worth against the hard and soft sciences, the departments have shrunk and are even scrapped off. Looking like a cult of necromancers, the academic philosophical community drudges forth with jargon-filled books and seminars. At the same time, the rest of the world carelessly dismisses it for its redundancy and complexity. Scientists call it “backward”<sup>1</sup>, while the laymen call it useless. And many philosophers reach conclusions about “the end of Philosophy”<sup>2</sup> through their respective arguments. Hence, rather than defending this discipline and debunking these arguments (which has been done with much more rigour and expertise by others) this paper intends to start on the presumption held by most of the world, i.e. “Philosophy is dead”<sup>3</sup>. Hence, this title for this essay. Let us brush through the various statements of philosophers, scientists, and intellectuals who hold this stance. And further probe into the causes of this (apparent) “death”, to conclude on the note on how to dispel this myth or rather resurrect this discipline that shall thrive as long as humanity does.

### Dismissals of the Discipline

Montaigne’s diatribe from the 16th century in his *Essays* indicates how far the contempt for the discipline goes. Calling philosophers one-eyed ranters who merely quarrel, split hairs and “use the advantage of their lungs”<sup>4</sup>, he officially establishes the stereotype. Esoteric arguments for the sake of contradicting opponents, and not learning, makes Montaigne call their solemn debates as senseless as the gabbling of fishmongers. In

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the 18th century, Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*<sup>5</sup> posited ideas such as “categories of the mind” and “transcendental apperception”. He insisted on the “noumena” that was itself beyond philosophical interrogation.

The 20th century, in turn, saw a wedge in the Western canon, divided into the “Analytic” camp and the “Continental” camp. Major philosophers from both ends agreed that philosophy has reached its end. The Analysts took the linguistic turn. Ludwig Wittgenstein, among many others, hoped to solve philosophical problems through the analysis of language. He claimed that “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language,”<sup>6</sup> and its mission is “to shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.”<sup>7</sup> This diagnosis to escape the systematic delusion of language would dissolve the need for philosophy altogether, as per his opinion.

The “Vienna Circle” consisting of Wittgenstein, R. Carnap, M. Schlick, K. Gödel and many others, advertised a new philosophical idea as a standard for deciding on the legitimacy of issues. This demarcation between nonsense and sense was done by the verification principle which relied on empirical evidence to validate the legitimacy of the given linguistic claim. Alain Badiou, a French theorist, proclaiming deficiency in contemporary postmodern-philosophy, calls the analytic method “therapeutic”, curing us “of the illusions and aberrations of language that divide us, by isolating what has no meaning, and by returning to rules which are transparent to all”<sup>8</sup>.

In the Continental camp, Martin Heidegger declared the end of philosophy as the “completion of metaphysics”<sup>9</sup>. He argued that its dissolution into independent disciplines and particular sciences marks its completion, saying that Philosophy has “found its place in the scientific attitude of socially active humanity.”<sup>10</sup> Heidegger interpreted Nietzsche’s famous phrase “God is dead”<sup>11</sup> as the death of metaphysics, and hence the end of philosophy. Nietzsche

tried to expose the philosophical canon as futile and self-deceiving. He posited that the “mistrust and mockery”<sup>12</sup> of philosophers is their pretence of disinterested rational inquiry, instead of dialectical justification suited to their psychological needs.

Suber comments that “Nietzsche’s critique joined that of Marx, from another perspective, and later Freud, in stripping philosophy of its pretension to objectivity and asking it to recognize the interests served by inquiry and to take responsibility for serving those interests without claiming truth”<sup>13</sup> Richard Rorty further popularized Heidegger’s thesis, insisting that “a certain inherited self-image of philosophical practice as professional, foundational, and systematic philosophy”<sup>14</sup> must come to an end. In an interview<sup>15</sup>, Daniel Dennett, too, conceded that “Philosophy in some quarters has become self-indulgent, clever play in a vacuum that’s not dealing of problems of any intrinsic interest” and that it “doesn’t really deserve much of a place in the world.” Complaining that many of the questions discussed are idle games, Dennett says much of philosophy is little more than a “luxury decoration on society.”

With the irony of philosophers-dismissing-philosophy out of the way, the widely quoted claims of scientists can be elaborated on although their arguments revolve around the same axis. Stephen Hawking’s “Philosophy is dead” as it has “not kept up with scientific developments”<sup>16</sup> is the one parroted by scientists as well as “experts” on Quora. Despite lengthy articles that dismiss his claim, expose his theories as “metaphysical fantasies”<sup>17</sup>, and demonstrate how both science and philosophy rely on each other, this view is still echoed by many scientists.

Astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson has regularly dismissed philosophy and even told a podcast interviewer<sup>18</sup> that majoring in Philosophy “can really mess you up” along with comments like “philosophers believe they are actually asking deep questions about nature. And to the scientist it’s, what are you doing? Why are you concerning yourself with the meaning of meaning?” Bill Nye, the science edutainer, in a video<sup>19</sup>, confuses several questions belonging to different sects of philosophy. Calling these questions “interesting”, Nye goes on to say that he is “very skeptical of [it].” Trying to make a caricature of its practitioners, he asserts philosophy was important “for a while,” but then it started arguing in a circle.

### Causes of the demise

As mentioned above, this paper is not an attempt to defend the discipline, expound on its usefulness, and enumerate the number of ways it has contributed to human knowledge. Other scholars have intricately

pointed out the progress made by philosophy in the field of computer science, the benefits of having a philosophy degree when applying for a job in the stock market, and also penned down brilliant arguments referring to Aristotle to shut down the claims of Philosophy-jeering physicists.<sup>20</sup> We started with the presupposition of this apparent death and the statements of its testifiers. Now, let us probe into the possible reasons for the same. It can be proposed that the three interrelated possibilities have caused the decline: (1) The need to scientify philosophy, (2) Internal expulsions and (3) Restrictive definitions.

(1) *The Need to Scientify Philosophy*: Critchley notices how in a science-dominated world, philosophy gets relegated from Plato’s “queen of the sciences”, protecting the breeding and upliftment of other bodies of knowledge to Locke’s “under-labourer to science”<sup>21</sup>, merely concerned with epistemological frameworks that make scientific knowledge possible. Hawking’s comment suddenly does not seem that offensive considering the history of the Western Philosophical canon, where the Greeks started by questioning the origins and nature of the Universe, and as per common knowledge Newton called his work “natural philosophy”. The eventual development of the disciplines, and partial understanding of the subject, Philosophy, can lead one to think it has, indeed, come to an end having not kept up with the latest scientific and social developments. The tradition of the analytic philosophers and their criterion of empirical verifiability - although discredited - has been culturally inherited to propagate a kind of scientific elitism that does not want to talk about nonsense.

But this is not all that Philosophy is and should not be thought to be. Davis and Zabala argue: “Philosophy is too valuable and dynamic to fall prey to this imposture syndrome. Philosophy must remain committed to the logic of democracy, in which analytic clarity is a necessary aspect - but not to the point of self-mutilation, which turns philosophers into conservative police officers defending science and other potentially non-democratic agendas at the cost of marginalising creativity, political action, and social critique.”<sup>22</sup>

Massimo Pigliucci, both a philosopher and a scientist, insists that the progress of philosophy does not occur in the ‘empirical space’, that science reigns over. Rather it progresses in the ‘conceptual space’<sup>23</sup>, that people barely step into regarding their fast-paced, materialistic existence. Hence, people look for result-oriented disciplines in a science-dominated, capitalistic society obsessed with products, that science and technology generously produce. In this way, people often mistake science to be the touchstone of progress.

A few philosophers embarrassed by public opinion try to refine the subject for it to exist in mathematical and

linguistic spaces, ignoring the rest, to show philosophy to be the “science of sciences”<sup>24</sup>. While one cannot ignore the interdisciplinary advances in the academia and the interdependent relationship of both, philosophy should not be made to emulate or compete against science, for it occupies a broader space, that accommodates so much more. Or else, the argument that “philosophical issues can only be solved if a scientific response is provided”<sup>25</sup> may turn out to be true.

Doomen sums it up quite succinctly: “Philosophy can, then, be salvaged, but only if it moves counterclockwise to the sciences, whose merit consists in ever new discoveries, which carries with it the continual need to specialize and even subdivide, whereas its presence is justified by its ability to reflect, an activity that can only remain of use if one steers clear from a similar path as that of the sciences.”

(2) *Internal Expulsions*: The Heidegger-Carnap stand-off famously showed the model of the “two cultures”<sup>26</sup> in the Western canon. Carnap maliciously questioned the ‘nothing’ of Heidegger, following the Neurath formula of the Vienna Circle - ‘science free from metaphysics’, the latter being “bad art”<sup>27</sup> according to Carnap. Critchley posits that following this, analytic and continental Philosophy were seen as “expressions of opposed, indeed antagonistic, habits of thought.”<sup>28</sup> This has trickled down the generations with most universities prescribing the Analytic methodology in the English-speaking academia. This essayist also had to witness it when attending an introductory lecture on Cognitive Science, which was lauded by the lecturer as “real Philosophy”.

Since “difference of opinion is no longer regarded as a possession of philosophy”<sup>29</sup>, conflicting stances are acceptable in other subjects too. However, Montaigne’s five-hundred-year-old observation about philosophers wanting to argue for the sake of contradicting their opponents while collapsing under their very own pedantic learning hits the mark. The naturalists, coherentists, internalists, externalists, nativists, anti-foundationalists, relativists, empiricists fall right into this trap. Calling it a “cultural pathology”<sup>30</sup>, Critchley warns about a “fruitless philosophical stalemate”<sup>31</sup> which we seemed to have reached, judging by the public opinion.

Rorty’s description about the Analytic-Continental split as a “tiresome” “temporary breakdown of communication”<sup>32</sup> can perhaps apply to cases of world philosophy as well. Colonialism and cultural imperialism have often pushed non-Western discourses to the back burner. African philosophy’s origin is merely traced to the 20th Century<sup>33</sup>, Arabic Philosophers from the Middle-East are practically forgotten, and Indian or Chinese philosophy was not acknowledged as ‘proper’ philosophy till late 20th Century. Even when interpreted, they are

done usually from a Western framework dripping with Orientalist tendencies.

There are many instances of such Eurocentric rejections<sup>34</sup>. Hegel is said to have called Indian philosophical truths of the “poorest” kind, and although its birthplace, philosophy reached its fruition in the West. Heidegger declared that philosophy for him is “Western philosophy—there is no other kind, neither a Chinese nor an Indian philosophy”. Nietzsche called the Buddhist nihilism too “passive” with a “denial and hatred of life”. Derrida, calling philosophy something of a European form, had controversially proclaimed that China “does not have any philosophy, only thought” in Shanghai itself, just 19 years ago!<sup>35</sup>

Agnes Callard, as a columnist<sup>36</sup>, calls philosophy a “bubble” which “lives inside the academia” and “polices its boundaries”. Speaking out against public philosophy, which according to her is done for business or pleasure, she claims philosophy in the academia is done for its own sake i.e. “because the questions are important.” However, Natalie Wynn, an ex-Philosopher YouTuber, in her deleted video essay *Why I quit the Academia*<sup>37</sup> mentions how specialization for compulsory doctorates take the joy away from academic philosophy, which - she quotes Dennett - ‘amounts to discovering “higher-order truths about chess,” chess being a variant on chess that nobody actually plays.’ Flashing an image of Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead*, she claims that she hasn’t been taught to argue “against anything as far right as the political views that most Americans actually hold” because the academia overtly rejects it as bad philosophy. Wynn further questions how this helps the working class to sardonically state that “it’s just a bunch of upper-middle-class white people discovering higher order truths about chess”<sup>38</sup>

Wynn talking about socio-political philosophy hits a nerve: that popularly held political beliefs are barely scrutinised on the account of being plebeian and not pedantic, despite a majority of the population holding those beliefs. As academic philosophers question the legitimacy of philosophy being philosophy outside classes, it is natural to think that the discipline has withered high up in the ivory tower, ignoring gurukulas, monasteries, and, madrasas; thus making Philosophy completely inaccessible to the masses who consciously or unconsciously subscribe to some school of thought.

In reverse, public philosopher Alain deBotton, too, tries to reject the academia. In a podcast<sup>39</sup>, he mentions how universities strive to make philosophy “something difficult” to stand outside the “democratic project” of “producing mass culture ideas [which] should have following in the mass culture”. To protect their standing in universities, deBotton says the humanities have been

turned into pseudosciences that indulge into research like nuclear physics. This kind of rejection, from someone with an MPhil in Philosophy, and who has a great influence on the public, jeopardises funding, projects, and opportunities in philosophy departments which are the only formally designated spaces for the discipline.

While it's normal to have disagreements that sharpen one's arguments, it isn't healthy to oust sub-disciplines as "not philosophy", and refuse to converse at all. John E. Smith posits that "we must cease thinking of critical assessment in philosophy solely as a matter of the success with which a certain program is carried out without regard to interaction with other position. Instead, we must return to dialectical conception wherein we attempt to make critical comparisons between alternative positions for the purpose of determining how illuminating, comprehensive and coherent a given position proves to be when it is at work interpreting the world".

Instead of critical analyses of other positions and agreeing to disagree, a complete rejection of complex schools of thought on ideological differences weakens this body of knowledge in comparison to others, which compare and cross-pollinate ideas from different paradigms, cultures, and contexts. Public or academic, empiricist or rationalist, foundationalist or pragmatic, occidental or oriental, philosophers should allow other philosophers to be so and respect their positions enough to consider it to be debatable. This civil war, which hinders actual progress, makes it appear as such as problems remain unresolved and hair gets split, not braided.

(3) *Restrictive Definitions*: From the above two conjectures, one can infer that philosophy is limited by the definitions it poses on itself. Etymologically defined as the love for wisdom, philosophy has traversed far from its broad enquiry - perhaps partly due to the development of other disciplines, and partly due to the boundaries it draws. Telling philosophy apart is a difficult task as philosophical predilections pull in different directions, with little consensus as to what makes something philosophical. Bhowmick even contends that "when we use the word "philosophical" we are not using it with any precision but it is largely minted out of historical coinage. It holds together, without much reason, some stray problems that various personalities called philosophers have continued to grapple with. They are important problems, serious problems, difficult problems, hard problems but no light is thrown on them by calling them philosophical."<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps it is this lack of criterion, or the inability to find one, and sticking to dogmatic concepts that result in unresolvable conflicts and impostor syndromes. Divided into sects of epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics, and logic it branches out to deal with things regarding

economics, science, art, magic, language, love and so much more. Traditional definitions are reformed in terms of postmodern waves, and brought back for hermeneutical consideration, while new ones emerge to fill in the gaps. How do we define a criterion then? Philosophy is said to be dealing with the world in its absolute generality and abstraction, trying to cover everything but also the concept of nothing.

In the personal opinion of this essayist, the simplest definition she has come across would suffice i.e. "Philosophy is an activity of thought, a type of thinking"<sup>41</sup> as said by Philip A. Pecorino. He adds that it is "the most critical and comprehensive manner of thinking which the human species has yet devised." And while these notions of systems of thought have been policed by a dogmatic, imperialist, patriarchal, objective worldview, gaps are being filled and new discourses are starting.

But a major roadblock to the resolution of this issue is the need for "a definite intellectual apparatus"<sup>42</sup> resulting in epistemological spirals one cannot escape. Doomen posits that "As long as philosophers utilise their notions of 'truth' and 'knowledge', they will remain confined to the conceptual prisons they have fabricated for themselves." As they take their teeth out to define the methodology, apparatus, language, etc., the spirals get tighter. Smith argues that since "one never succeeds in putting epistemological house in order", as ways in which reason, truth, knowledge are defined differ contextually, "the questions postponed in the process remain indefinitely postponed; all our energy is spent in working our way to the starting line and real philosophical race never begins."<sup>43</sup> Such limited scope for defining the apparatus of enquiry, acts as an obstacle for resolving philosophical issues and puts the credibility of the discipline at stake.

## Resurrection

Hence, to bring Philosophy back to vibrant life, we must stop measuring it with the wrong yardstick, asking it to do what a mother (of all subjects) does - bring in line the other disciplines. Besides that, the schools within philosophy need to work with each other for a fruitful dialogue and venture out towards the cross-pollination of ideas harboured by the ever-changing humanity. With issues of technology and artificial intelligence rising, terrorism and social justice being talked about, and the Internet being a fabricated epistemological system, there are lots of topics to decipher and deconstruct, to understand what it means. But there are also the age-old fundamental questions about how to live a good life, how to be a good person, and how to serve the community.

If the academia and the public philosophers work their differences out and communicate it well with the rest of

the world, Philosophy shall have its Lazarus Syndrome. Instead of priding itself about intellectual superiority regarding semantic tail-chasing, Philosophy should try to reach to its origins - the streets where Socrates questioned it all while continuing the tradition of Plato's Academy for a philosophical communion. In doing so, it must not neglect some of its parts - for health comes with the overall care of a body. And it can do so only via communication among itself and the world. After all, people listen to the Philosophy-jeering physicists as they popularise science while maintaining an academic demeanour. There are science journalists who break down concepts and feed it to the public. While people do not understand quantum mechanics, they value the physics behind a tap. And while they might not understand the Tractatus, they may value a lesson in Stoicism. For philosophy is for the advancement of the entire humanity, not just a select few. As long as there is humanity, there will be philosophy until humans' have "lost their ingenuity, curiosity, troubles, contradictions, and hopes."<sup>44</sup>

Before ending this essay, here is a quote from Bertrand Russell: "contempt for philosophy, if developed to the point at which it becomes systematic, is itself a philosophy"<sup>45</sup>, to confirm the resurrection. After all, don't we possess the philosopher's stone?

## Notes

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