

Kvantifikator för en Dag

Essays dedicated to Dag Westerståhl on his sixtieth birthday



Naturalist Farewells to Philosophy: A Note

Christian Munthe

Abstract

A recurring theme in philosophy is the suggestion that there are philosophical reasons to stop doing philosophy. This general idea is briefly sketched with regard to its various versions, other reasons to abandon philosophy, proposals regarding revisions of philosophy and possible paradoxical implications. Three uniting sub-themes of otherwise very different suggestions on what is the alleged reason to abandon philosophy are discerned. Of these, implied ideas of what philosophy is are subjected to some brief critical comments in connection to peculiar naturalist versions of the farewell to philosophy theme.

1. The Farewell Theme

There is a peculiar theme to be found in philosophy that aims to demonstrate in some way or other that time has come to bid philosophy farewell. The proposed demonstrations take quite different form at the hands of different thinkers and connect to very different (sometimes even incompatible) traditions. However, they still tend to be cast in more or less the same dramaturgical and thematic mould. Usually acknowledging the importance of philosophical reflection for its role of creating an intellectual path through history up to the point in time at which the idea of such a farewell has emerged, these lines of thought are united by the proclamation of a philosophical insight alleged to be the last worth reaching: For whatever reason philosophy has appeared to be an activity worth pursuing, following this very reason to its final destination has now demonstrated that this is not the case. For philosophical reasons, philosophy should be abandoned for something else.

1.1 The Farewells

The different versions of the farewell to philosophy theme are more or less outspoken. Sometimes the farewell is more of a corollary to some grander claim, in certain cases

perhaps not even noted by the philosopher in question. In other cases, however, the farewell is cast in bold letters.

This is certainly the case with the *naturalist* farewells to philosophy, which will be subjected to some scrutiny below.

What may be called, the *activist* farewells, perhaps best represented by Karl Marx's slogan that philosophers should stop pondering the nature of things and go about changing them instead, is also quite explicit, although not very clear on what change should be aimed for.

Less explicit, but still clearly discernible, is the *moralist* farewell, which fills in the gap in the activist's "do something" regarding what one is to do. In the moralist case, conclusions about what is required in order to live a morally decent life imply things that seem very likely to be practically incompatible with pursuing philosophy in any serious or professional way. Examples of this can be found, for example, in recent writings of Peter Unger, who claims that the average westerner should do very much more to assist destitute and otherwise needy people.

More implicit, even subtle, are the farewells of those who advocate an ideal of the good life – the *be gooders* – that seems very difficult to combine with the life of a philosopher. Spinoza, for example, preaches the virtue of letting go of any tendency to be puzzled or troubled by the nature of things, but instead accept them as they are (and like them). This, it seems to me at least, is hard to reconcile with philosophising. Even more clearly, when Schopenhauer recommends the life free of desire, doing philosophy is ruled out, since doing anything is ruled out.

1.2 The Neighbours

Admittedly, anyone can become fed up with philosophy. Most philosophy students – however dedicated – do certainly not pursue their philosophical interests throughout their lives with the same intensity as they did during their university days. They find other things to do instead, and presumably these things are more worthwhile. Similarly, during my own rather short career as a professional philosopher, I have already come to know a number of professional philosophers that have chosen to move their interests elsewhere, be it inside or outside the academic world – again, presumably for good reasons. None of that is very

strange, but neither is it very interesting from a philosophical point of view. In most cases, such shifts of focus or interest do not appear to be motivated by some elaborate piece of philosophical argument. Of course, people initially interested in philosophy may become bored with it or simply find more joy in other areas of life, just as may happen with regard to any activity. However, such default cases stand in sharp contrast to those few ones where the reason to stop doing philosophy is not presented as merely personal, but as a universally valid conclusion of a philosophical argument. It is this idea of a *philosophically motivated* farewell to philosophy that is the subject matter of this short note.

A half-sibling to the theme of a farewell to philosophy is that of a *radical revision* of philosophy. This theme typically follows the same initial dramaturgy as the farewell theme, but differs in its final proclamation. The point is not that philosophy has been shown to have lost its point (or to have no point), but rather that it is on the wrong track altogether and should radically change its ways. Philosophers should address wholly different issues than what they have thought before (as Martin Heidegger once claimed with regard to metaphysics and Bernard Williams more recently has suggested with regard to ethics), or they should limit themselves to some highly restricted technical task in order to be of service to those who are supposedly much better fitted to actualise the goals of philosophy than philosophers themselves (as several of the early analytic philosophers, such as Alfred Ayer or Rudolf Carnap, seem to have believed at times). As will be implicitly demonstrated below, there is no sharp demarcation between such revisionists and the propagators of the farewell to philosophy theme. For, perhaps, the envisioned revised philosophy is not philosophy at all and, in that case, the revision amounts to a farewell. Alternatively, the other way around: perhaps that which substitutes philosophy when it has been abandoned is also philosophy, in which case the farewell theme turns into revisionism.

1.3 The Value

One may, of course, ask whether there really is any reason to spend time pondering the farewell to philosophy theme as a serious suggestion. After all, its advocates often seem to be driven by rather pathetic megalomania, or an ill-tempered love for drama, or both. If that is the case, do we not have good reason to view the theme itself as a *prima facie* ill-considered body of thought not worthy of closer inspection? The history of philosophy is

full of wishful thinking that, when the surface has been scratched even so little, has turned out to offer mostly implausibility, triviality or outright inconsistency.

It is tempting to hold out the idea of a philosophically motivated farewell to philosophy as a paradox. If philosophical reasoning is pointless, how can such a piece of reasoning that leads up to the idea of a farewell to philosophy be anything else than pointless? Wittgenstein for one, having made the first of his farewells (to be elaborated below), proclaimed this to be the case in the very last few paragraphs of *Tractatus*. If that is right, any idea of a philosophically well-founded idea of a farewell to philosophy could likewise be said to embody an outright inconsistency.

My business is not to make boring claims of this type. Of course, we may have good reason to believe that we should stop reasoning, and this applies to philosophical reasoning as well. This is not to say that several of the arguments made for a farewell to philosophy cannot be rejected or at least criticised. Of course they can, this goes with the territory. Still, several of these farewells appear to me as either reasonably well supported from a philosophical point of view or highly understandable from the perspective of a fellow human being, or both.

In all, then, I see no reason for picking a quarrel with the general idea of a farewell to philosophy or with any particular version. Rather, I tend to find this recurring tendency within philosophy as an intriguing and rather exotic part of that which makes philosophy special and particularly attractive. What other intellectual ‘discipline’ or ‘area’ has ever come up with the idea of itself being futile or essentially misguided? Rather, human intellectual endeavours tend to be pompously self-serving both in their proclamations and in actual function. The arts and sciences are far from being the only examples of that, although they are perhaps the ones most easily spotted.

1.4 The Unity

As initially mentioned, the farewells to philosophy are distinctly different in various ways. Nonetheless, they share some uniting similarities, apart from their dramaturgical form and thematic endpoint.

First, they suggest or, at least, employ some particular idea of what philosophy is.

Second, they suggest reasons for abandoning philosophy in this particular sense.

Third, they formulate or at least hint at some idea of what should be the substitute of philosophy in this sense once it has been left behind.

It would be an interesting meta-philosophical task to investigate thoroughly all these uniting sub-themes in order to better understand how the different farewells to philosophy work and compare to each other. In this short note, however, I will just make some brief observations with regard to the first one: the view of what philosophy is.

Proposing that we should bid philosophy farewell has to involve some idea of what we are to say farewell to. More exactly, such claims have to at least hint at some view of where the borders of philosophy are located – what makes an activity into something that is certainly *not* philosophy. In order to make such implied views more clear, it is necessary to spell out more specifically some particular versions of the farewell to philosophy theme. Below, I will restrict myself to naturalist versions and explore – in a rather sketchy manner at that – their implied views of what philosophy is.

2. The Naturalist Farewells

A modern classic of the farewell to philosophy theme is the naturalist version. Philosophical naturalism tries to establish, in one way or another, that all there is to know can be cast in a naturalist language. Alternatively, that all there is are natural facts. Sometimes the latter version is put up as support for the former, sometimes the other way around. The important point in this context is that knowledge about natural facts is supposed to be reached by empirical means (this follows either from the very definition of the concept of a natural fact, or from this definition combined with some epistemological assumption). Thus, the reasoning goes, it is the empirical sciences alone that may provide us with those insights about the world and humanity that philosophers for such a long time has struggled to deliver.

Several of the so-called logical empiricists underwrote philosophical naturalism. However, as touched on above, most of them tried to still find a place for philosophy, albeit a rather different one than before. Philosophers should content themselves with assisting the sciences with technical expertise in logical and conceptual matters and, thus, most naturalists would best be viewed as revisionists (unless one believes that putting ones technical skills to practical use cannot be philosophy).

But a few naturalists has taken the line of thought one step further and applied the naturalist diagnosis also to these remaining shards of philosophy. Perhaps Quine could be counted among those – combining his various views on how science (i.e., physics) will show us all there is to know about the universe, knowledge, logic and language. In my book, however, Wittgenstein stands out as the most radical and outspoken naturalist farewell bidder. Having accepted the naturalist conclusion to the fullest, the ‘early’ Wittgenstein ends *Tractatus* with the proclamation that *all* philosophical questions and ideas are nonsensical and thus unable to provide any of that which they have aimed for. We philosophers have tried to speak about things we cannot speak of and those things, therefore, as the famous formulation goes, “we must pass over in silence” (§7). Alternatively, we may instead start to do empirical science, but that “has nothing to do with philosophy” (§6.53)

The ‘later’ Wittgenstein is not a naturalist in this scientific sense and, presumably, there are ways to interpret him that does not make him into a naturalist in any sense. However, in *Philosophical Investigations*, he does paint a picture of how the ability to speak (or think) about anything, and thus to attain knowledge or understanding about anything, is necessarily bound to the actual participation in a social ‘language game’. Thus, meaning and knowledge are natural phenomena occurring in particular types of social settings. He would, I believe, have accepted that philosophy might very well be seen as such a game. But that does not by far justify the claim to a particularly profound, supreme and universal knowledge or understanding that has been so typical of philosophy and that seems to be scorned by the later Wittgenstein as much as the earlier.

2.1 The Naturalist View of Philosophy: First Version

Now, what picture of the nature of philosophy is at least tacitly implied by the naturalist farewell? What, for example, is it that Wittgenstein in *Tractatus* is so enthusiastically waving goodbye to? Knowledge or understanding seems to be the key words, but not only that, obviously, since empirically underpinned knowledge about natural facts is still allowed (though not the business of philosophy). Rather, the philosophy that the naturalists bid farewell seems to be the attempt to know something about the world by other means than the methods of empirical science. To this, I have two remarks and after that, I will return to the later Wittgenstein.

First, why cannot philosophy employ the methods of empirical science? In spite of Wittgenstein's insistence in *Tractatus* that employing the language of science "has nothing to do with philosophy", I have never encountered any good reason why not. Especially in these days of coherentist epistemology, where empirical descriptions of all kind of things may interplay on equal footing with a multitude of highly theoretical claims, the notion should be far from absurd. Suppose, for example, that we develop a theory of meaning according to which the meaning of a sentence or utterance is determined by the behavioural patterns of some group of language users. What would be so unphilosophical about employing this theory in combination with the methods of behavioural science in order to find out the meaning of philosophically contested word such as "truth", "freedom" or "ought"?

Second, as many people have observed, there may very well be other types of knowledge than the kind of 'knowing that' that seems to be at the centre of the naturalists' attention. Practical knowledge, or 'knowing how', is perhaps the best example. What the naturalists seem to assume is that all knowledge is formed by sentences or descriptions and what they argue is that attaining such knowledge is the business of the sciences. But a lot of knowledge is not like that and can presumably never be. Knowing how to execute a piece of music well, knowing how to transplant five different organs to one and the same patient, knowing how to ride a bike, knowing how to get on with people, knowing how to speak well – in all these cases, while some parts of the knowledge may consist in the well-founded belief in some descriptions, most of them do not. The full content of the knowledge cannot be described, although it may be attained or communicated by other means, such as the classic methods of showing and doing.

None of this contradict the naturalist tenets that all facts (including facts about how to do things) are natural facts and that knowledge of such facts has to be empirical. What it contradicts, though, is the idea that the *scientific* methods are uniquely fitting for attaining knowledge. Hence, while not employing scientific methods, philosophy may still have a role to play if it can be demonstrated to provide knowledge about how to do some specific thing; and the typical thing done in philosophy is to reason. That is, the naturalists seem to have disregarded the possibility that the point of philosophy may not be to attain true and well-founded descriptions about its subject matters (these are like accidental by-products), but

rather to be an activity through which knowledge about how to reason well is pursued, attained and communicated.

2.2 The Naturalist View of Philosophy: Second Version

Wittgenstein was close to the idea sketched above at the very end of *Tractatus* when he wrote about how his own text (and philosophy in general by implication), while nonsensical, could still communicate something by ‘showing’. However, at that time, his idea about what could be thus shown was merely that philosophy is nonsense and other “mystical” things. Besides making his own ideas appear overly puzzling, for some reason, it never crossed his mind that all kinds of indescribable *natural* things could be shown without ever violating the imperative of passing them over in silence.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, however, he seemed to have become much more sympathetic to such ideas. The picture there painted is, as I read it, one long story about activities (i.e., languages) and how we learn things by participating in activities, rather than reflecting on the products of these activities (sentences, descriptions etc.). But philosophy is still a problem, since its ambition to provide very general and/or especially profound knowledge appears to go against the spirit of the idea of a multitude of equally valid language games and ‘forms of life’. If not claimed by Wittgenstein himself, this has most certainly been a theme among his followers in later times, such as Peter Winch, who have complained about the imperialist ambitions of western conceptions and discourses of rationality. I have three remarks with regard to this.

First, could it not be philosophy even if the alleged claim to generality or profoundness was dropped? I fail to see why not. This should be particularly easy to accept for anyone sympathetically inclined towards the later Wittgenstein, since, on his view, philosophy’s own claims to generality or profoundness surely must be interpreted according to the internal rules of the language game of philosophy. So, what is viewed as general and profound within philosophy need not be seen as such from the perspective of other language games. In effect, it is hard to see any imperialist function of the ambitions of philosophy.

Second, alternatively, why cannot philosophy simply be the form of life where claims to extreme generality and profoundness (that is, seen as such also from the perspective of other language games) are cultured and nurtured? Perhaps all such claims are false, but that

should not make the language game of philosophy invalid in any interesting sense. As for the possible imperialist function of such a language game vis-à-vis other language games – that is, the possibility that its ambitions may influence other forms of life – I fail to see anything wrong with that from the perspective of the ideas of the later Wittgenstein.

Third, maybe these claims need not even be false. Even viewed as a separate form of life, philosophy, viewed as an *activity*, can be granted its highflying ambitions. That is, perhaps philosophy's claims to generality and profoundness can be harmonised with the 'late' Wittgenstein after all.

Philosophy may be that form of life where attempts to bring different forms of life together, to transcend the borders of different language games, take place. Of course, the way to do this is not to set out some description and dogmatically claim it to be universally valid and more basic than anything else. In effect, philosophy's claims to generality and profoundness need not be imperialist at all. Rather, we may again point to the role of philosophy as a practice of reasoning. Encountering foreign or very unfamiliar ways of reasoning, the way to go forward is simply to attempt to reason with them and have them do the same with regard to us. True enough, such a project may present many obstacles and be very difficult at times, but that does not contradict that pursuing this activity may very well be what philosophy is for.

3. Philosophy as Empirical Science and Practice

My conclusion in this short note, then, is that what the naturalists said farewell to was philosophy defined as a particular set of descriptions and questions answered by these descriptions. Above, I have set out two alternative views of philosophy that seem to survive the naturalist attack: philosophy as an empirical science and philosophy as a practice of reasoning. Perhaps these views are revisionist (especially the first one), but they may equally well be seen as undercutting not only the naturalist farewells, but also the type of naturalist revisionism mentioned above. One may wonder, though, to what extent they are necessarily *alternatives*: would they be possible to combine? I believe so.

It is, I take it, the experience of anyone who has been deeply involved in learning some activity – to acquire knowledge of how to do something – that some of the lessons learned can sometimes be formulated in the forms of descriptions. Moreover, even if that is not the

case, some descriptions may help to explain why one had to learn a certain lesson. For example, learning how to reason well may make one able to describe some of the aspects that make a piece of reasoning a good piece of reasoning. Likewise, a description of why certain mistakes in one's reasoning tend to appear repeatedly may be of great use in anyone's attempts to learn to reason well. Both types of descriptions may be used to investigate, improve or be tested against the perceived quality of various lines of reasoning, methods for improving that quality or, for that matter, alternative practices of reasoning one encounters.

Christian Munthe

Department of Philosophy, Göteborg University

Box 200, SE-40530, Göteborg

Sweden

Christian.Munthe@phil.gu.se

References

Ayer, A.J. (1952). *Language, Truth, and Logic*. New York: Dover Publications.

Carnap, R. (1937). *The Logical Syntax of Language*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Heidegger, M. (2000). *Introduction to Metaphysics*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Marx, K. (1845). *Theses on Feuerbach*.

Schopenhauer, A. (1819). *The World as Will and Representation*.

Spinoza, B. (1677). *Ethics*.

Unger, P. (1996). *Living High and Letting Die*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Williams, B. (1985). *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. London: Fontana Press.

Winch, P. (1988). *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*. London: Routledge.

Wittgenstein, L. (1961). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.