

Philosophy Will Go On Going Out On Limbs

Daniel Dennett

Philosophy, like natural selection, is a prodigious amplifier of noise, so I doubt if any unconditional prophesying is worth much attention. Who knows what “trivial” happenstance, random mutation or lightning bolt will strike next and set off a new wave of productive philosophical activity! Philosophy ought to be that volatile, and it seems to me that it is. But like the products of natural selection, new waves of philosophical creativity tend to have clear patterns of growth and development, juvenile and mature and senile phases, with some hardy perennials and some evanescent flashes of activity and insight. Most of its products lapse into oblivion quickly, and that’s not a bad thing.

One of the most stable features of philosophy over the last fifty years (and – it seems to me – over the last two millennia, but I’m not enough of a scholar to make the case in detail) is its penchant for overdoing good things. Defining your terms is often a good thing, but Defining your Terms can become an obsessive hunt for essences (snarks for philosophers), creating cottage industries of counterexample-mongering. Realism is a good thing readily turned into what I have called *hysterical realism* when realists go overboard (as in “let’s not confound metaphysical issues with epistemological issues; maybe we *can’t tell* when day turns to

night, but there still might be some as yet unimagined scientific discovery that could show that there really *is* a fact of the matter about exactly when day turns to night!”). Responsibility is a good thing, but Absolute Responsibility is a distracting mirage. Practical unpredictability is a good thing, but the *in principle* unpredictability of indeterminism offers agents no bonus worth wanting. I could go on, but will settle instead for an old joke: the philosopher is the one who says “We know it’s possible in practice; we’re trying to figure out if it’s possible in principle!”

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My prediction is that whatever topics or methods or perspectives achieve prominence in the next half century, they will include among their champions attention-grabbing overstaters. After all, an overstated claim makes a popular syllabus item in undergraduate courses, and an almost

irresistible target for ambitious young philosophers to practice their skills on.

To close on a more positive note, I think I can see a salutary growth in the desire by young philosophers to tackle socially and morally important topics, across the spectrum from logic (via "critical thinking" and its kin) to epistemology, and of course political philosophy and ethics. Peter de Vries has a character in one of his novels who says "Oh, superficially he's deep, but deep down, he's shallow," and philosophers have a long-standing tradition of exposing the shallowness of *poseurs* and demagogues, but they also have lapsed into periods of sustained celebration of politically inert, innocuous superficiality: nitpicking as a way of life. Ordinary language philosophy, for instance, was comically hypermodest, but it had a few giants among the many dwarfs. Analytic metaphysics, to take a more recent example, is often technically brilliant but so far as I can tell, it is as remote from the philosophical tasks of opening minds, shattering preconceptions, or relieving perplexities as the more arcane branches of pure mathematics. I am sure analytic metaphysicians will survive, and should survive, in their ivory tower above the flood of relevance, much like the cosmologists who don't expect their work to contribute to space colonisation and the biologists who aren't claiming to find

cures for cancer. You never can tell when highly abstract explorations will turn out to be of value in unimagined ways. Meanwhile, there is plenty of work to be done by well-trained and well-informed philosophers working on the inquiries and projects of other disciplines, clearing up confusions, dismantling ill-examined presumptions, and opening eyes to possibilities that really can make a difference.

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