

Philosophy - What's the Point ?

by Ann Long

In my half hour I want to make five points. And since – to put it mildly – that's ambitious, I'd better get down to things pronto.

First point: we need to notice the *tense* of our question. We've asked ourselves 'what *is* the point of philosophy', not 'what *was* the point of philosophy'. And that means considering *not* what was the point of an irritating Ancient Greek wandering the streets of Athens asking people questions, and then tying them up in knots when they gave less than satisfactory answers; *not* the ruminations of a seventeenth century Dutch lens grinder on 'the intellectual love of God'; *not even* the twentieth century marmoreal sentences of a great intellect telling us not to comment on things about which it would be better to be silent. Now is now. Our question is in the *present* tense.

And there's no way out of this constraint on our deliberations via 'essentialism'. It's very unlikely that even all the people in this room, let alone all practising philosophers, let even-more alone all thinking people, could agree on a 'something done' that was *essentially* 'the doing of philosophy': something such that wherever and whenever in the long march of history we found someone 'doing that', we could say he or she is 'doing philosophy'. What's more, in the vanishingly unlikely event that those sorts of agreements could be found, 'essentialism' still fails. For doing the same thing but in different circumstances is doing a different thing. Defending the validity of metaphysics *then* – in arguments in the Agora, say – is not doing the same thing as defending the validity of metaphysics *now* – in discussions in the Cavendish Laboratory, say. Propounding dualism *then* – in seventeenth century France, say – is not doing the same thing as propounding dualism *now* – in a conference on the latest developments in neuroscience, say. And so on. No. Doing the same thing at different times is doing a different thing. And we have asked ourselves to think about philosophy *now*.

Second point: we need carefully to notice the *subject* of our question. Our subject is 'what's the point of *philosophy* now', not 'what's the point of *me studying philosophy* now'. We have asked ourselves to think not about the various reasons which we and others might give for *studying* philosophy now – this is not a biographical question – but about the point of 'the thing in itself', whether we have individual reasons for studying it or not. For those of us here, now, the individual 'point' might be anything from 'it gives me something to do in my retirement', to 'it helps me to think straight', through 'it enables me to study for a higher degree within the constraints of my earlier education', to 'it keeps me off the streets'! But whether any one of us 'does it' for this or any other individual reason is not the issue. The issue is what is *now* the point of philosophy *in itself*, regardless of who does or doesn't study it.

Philosophy now is an institutionalised social practice, with what, for academic disciplines, is a well recognised social structure. It has its professionals and its amateurs; its trends and its fully-fledged schools; its conferences and its journals; its vocabularie and its conventions; its leading lights and its foot-soldiers. And so on. And it's the point of philosophy *as this institutionalised social practice* to which we need to turn our attentions. What role does it have in an intellectual culture? What function does it serve in a society? And I want to approach an answer to *such* questions via a brief look at just one very specific topic within that academic discipline.

So third point: 'stories and explanations'. An extract from the entry on this topic in the Oxford Companion to Philosophy reads as follows: 'Narrative understanding is our most primitive form of explanation. We make sense of things by fitting them into stories. When events fall into a pattern which we can describe in a way that is satisfying as narrative then we think that we have some grasp of why they occurred'.

The Fall is a story: a story which tries to make some *patterned* sense of the fact that, when it was created, most men spent most of their short lives in hard labour, and most women gave birth to too many children in great pain. The *story* of the Fall suggests that this was because God wanted to punish not just Adam and Eve but all their descendents for not obeying him.

Psychoanalysis is a story: a story which, among other things, tries to make some *patterned* sense of the fact that while boy babies have their mothers as their first love object, they nonetheless transfer that love to their fathers at about the age of seven. Why? Well because they fear castration. They are tiny males with tiny penises who love a woman. Their fathers are large males with large penises who love the same woman. If big daddy found out that little Johnny lusted after 'his woman', little Johnny would be for it: his father would castrate him. So: to avoid that fate, he rejects his mother and identifies like mad with his father. If dad shaves, he stands behind him 'pretend shaving'. If dad lies under his car to mend it, he lies under his toy car and 'pretend mends' it. What he's really saying, says the story, is 'look I'm just like you, so please don't hurt me'.

[Incidentally, if you read Freud, you'll get the distinct impression of a man who – perhaps because he lived in a culture which merrily called both females and males 'he' – simply forgot that half the human race was female. I like to think of a sly critic whispering in his ear: 'but Sigmund, little *girls* reject their mothers for their fathers at the same age - - - what's *that* all about?' And of Freud, cursing under his breath, hurriedly scribbling on the back of an envelope the following. Well, little girls also, of course, have their mother as their first love object. But upon examination they soon discover - - - that their mother has *already* castrated them! So they too abandon her – well, who wouldn't! – and like the boys, transfer their love to daddy. This is the tomboy phase. But it's no good. Sadly they come to accept that, without a penis – oh the envy! – they will never be proper boys. *However*, if they revert to identifying with mummy, they *can* grow up to be proper women, have babies, *some of whom will have penises*. Hurrah!]

What these stories, indeed all stories, have in common is (1) that they create narrative patterns - - - which are made out of intentions and motives; (2) that they are local - - - in other cultures the stories explaining the same things are different; (3) that they are teleological - - - everything happens for a purpose; (4) that they are works of art - - - remembering Coleridge's distinction, sometimes 'imaginative', sometimes 'fantastic'. What then about explanations?

Explanations also look for patterns. But they look for *non*-narrative patterns; patterns which are *not* based in intentions, motives, purposes; which are *not* teleological. And they look not for local but universal patterns. In brief: they are works of science. And the most commonly observed relationship historically between the two is this: that *when* explanations become available, *stories* tend to fade.

Think of the two examples I've just used. In time, the local-to-Christianity *story* of the Fall gives way to *explanation*. When men spend less of their rather longer lives in hard labour, and women give birth to fewer children with greater medical understanding and assistance, we come better to understand that the past hideousnesses were not the result of punishment by a vindictive God, but of relative human ignorance and under-development. Similarly, in time, the local-to-Freud *story* of an Oedipus complex gives way to *explanation* also. When reliable birth control and the emergence of theoretically sophisticated versions of feminism arrive, we come better to understand that past *stories* were rather more patriarchal than empirical.

And for a very much 'now' example of *story* giving way to *explanation*, consider a book published this year by the Cambridge professor of developmental psychopathology, Simon Baron-Cohen. In this country its title is *Zero Degrees of Empathy*: in the US edition, and against the author's wishes, it's *The Science of Evil*. It offers an hypothesis replacing the *story* contained in the concept of evil – sourced originally in the idea of possession by the devil, and thought of even recently as some sort of 'intrinsic badness' – with an *explanation* contained in his term 'lack of empathy'. The current consensus in neuroscience is that empathy is mediated by about ten interconnected brain areas: Baron-Cohen calls this 'the empathy circuit'. And he argues that an *explanation* of 'zero empathy' can be based in empirical study of that circuit. Its inputs and outputs are measurable. The risk factors influencing whether there will be more or less neural activity in that circuit are some of them known already, and all of them knowable. This is science.

So what then is it that stories *lack*, which results in their being replaced by explanations once these latter become available ?

There have been many attempts to *explain* explanation: that is, to come up with a scientific model of explanation. There's 'Hempel's model', 'the Hempel-Oppenheim model', 'the deductive-nomological model'. A summary name which perhaps could be given to all of them might be 'the covering law model'. An explanation, as opposed to a story, needs to be able to be read off from a general law: or maybe better, to have at least one universal law among its premises. Now while there are contested concepts concerning the detailed working out of the scientific method, the accumulating relationship which leads us from observations, to hypotheses, to experiments, to theories, *to laws* is of the essence of the process in more or less anybody's book. So how does philosophy measure up on what we might call a 'story-to-explanation' scale ? Is it story, or explanation ? And in thinking about that, remember the distinction between philosophy then and philosophy now. Because to tell a coherent, compelling *story* when an *explanation* is not yet available is one thing: to tell the same story when an explanation *is now* available is quite another.

Fourth point. When I first began to attend Rewley House philosophy weekends, and however difficult it might be for some of you to believe, I was speechless. Coming from scientific psychology, I did not get my bearings in this strange territory maybe for almost a couple of years. There would seem to be terms in common: 'beliefs'; 'desires'; 'reasons'. But they were used completely differently. Scientific psychologists would ask what *caused* a person (or group of persons) to entertain this belief rather than that one; to have this desire rather than that one; to offer this reason rather than that reason for an action; to propose this state of affairs rather than that state of affairs as being how things were. And would design often quite ingenious experiments to try to come up with explanations. In other words, 'beliefs', 'desires', 'reasons' were the *explicanda* - - - the things which needed explaining.

Philosophers, by contrast, seemed to think that those same things – those same 'beliefs', 'desires', 'reasons' – were the *explicans*: the things which explained. Indeed, philosophy seemed to be just the systematisation of what scientific psychologists frequently called 'folk psychology'. They proceeded like this: take for granted, take as given, the 'fact' that actions are teleological; that they are caused by purposes; that intentions, and the reasons given for intending, are causal. And then, not by experimenting but by Thinking Very Hard about it, build your systematisation on that basis.

Of course there were exceptions, and in time I encountered some of them. They seemed to be called 'eliminative materialists', and were usually roundly excoriated or laughed at by the mainstream. They did *not* behave as though 'folk psychology' was sacrosanct: they did *not* assume that third person *explanations* had to be answerable to first person *stories*. But they were the exceptions. Almost everybody seemed to take it for granted that the data of first-person experience cannot possibly be accounted for by facts about neurological processes. The procedure went something like this.

[1] Let the so-called subject of experience, the first person, define the constitutive characteristics of its conscious experience: 'my conscious experience is like this'.

[2] Require these characteristics to be the data to which facts about neurological processes are answerable.

[3] And if necessary by the (potentially endless) revision of those unable-to-be-questioned characteristics, ensure that there can always remain a mysterious residuum beyond the reach of neuroscience !

But the way out of this impasse is surely just to refuse the first move. There is just no reason at all to grant incorrigible epistemic authority to the first person concerning the salient features of its own conscious experience. After all, it is the very status of all these oh-so-slippery characters – the Self, the Subject, the First Person, the Conscious Self: all of them leading actors in what has been an essentially idealist story for centuries – which is what is at issue. They are not givens, they are takens. And they are all the takens of the very story which is supposedly being validated by their use.

Philosophy is now that story. It has all the ingredients. Its patterns are made out of beliefs, desires, motives, intentions. It is local, not to say parochial: in other places, its content is different. Think of

British and American philosophy versus French and German philosophy - - - not to mention significant differences of approach even within those camps. Think of the Chinese mixture of Confucius-plus-the-little-red-book versus existentialism. And as for works of art, imaginative or fantastic, think of Oxford's 'many worlds' - - - and say no more. Whatever it has been in the past, philosophy is now a story. Or more carefully, philosophy is now fast becoming a story - - - which brings me to my last point.

Five: what then is the point of a philosophical *story*, when a scientific *explanation* is becoming available? And if you thought I was revving up to say 'there *is* no point', you couldn't be more wrong. There's a point alright. And I think that it's this.

Dan Dennett recounts the following domestic episode. He came home one day in a thoroughly grumpy mood, complaining about his colleagues. He'd had to spend yet another day, he said, among bloody idealist dualists. The response of his less than sympathetic (scientist?) wife was swift. Given that there's no longer much of a place for such views, in either the natural or the social sciences, what did he expect. It's just self selection. It's his own fault for choosing to work in such an old-hat discipline.

Between them – and at now a very great rate of knots – scientific psychology, cognitive science, neuroscience are making any form of dualism, even when disguised as 'anomalous monism', redundant. And now that theology is less respectable than it has ever been before in the history of academia, philosophy has very largely taken its place

- - - as the last refuge of a dualist. This of course is *not, not, not* to say that every last philosopher is an idealist and a dualist: far from it. Instead it is to say that the ideological, social and *yes political* role of the discipline – as opposed to the individual views of all its practitioners – is as that refuge.

It was back in 1908, in his philosophical text *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, that Lenin wrote:

'Anyone in the least acquainted with philosophical literature must know that scarcely a single contemporary professor of philosophy (or of theology) can be found who is not directly or indirectly engaged in refuting materialism. They have declared materialism refuted a thousand times, yet are continuing to refute it for the thousand and first time.'

I think this is still substantially true today. The only difference is that the numbers (and the relative influences) of the professors have changed. The voices of the theologians and philosophers who refute have grown weaker, less confident, and much less numerous. The voices of the scientists who support have grown stronger, more confident, and much more numerous. I think it was ever (and often painfully) thus when a story was giving way to an explanation: when, as in Andrew Marvell's seventeenth century words, what had been 'the sacred Truths' are being 'ruined to Fable and Old Song'. And your handout, which is a slightly modified version of the postscript to my 2007 book, *Making God*, is my attempt to situate the current story-to-explanation shift in the context of what I take to be its two most significant precursors.

Addendum: Handout from Members Day

An outline of the talk

- [1] Concerning the *tense* of our question: what *is* the point of philosophy *now*, not what *was* the point of philosophy *then* - - - this is not an *historical* question
- [2] Concerning the subject of our question: what is the point of *philosophy* now, not what is the point of somebody *studying* philosophy now - - - this is not a *biographical* question
- [3] To illustrate the significance of these two constraints, a brief outline of just *one* of the questions exercising current philosophy - - - that of the difference between 'stories and explanations'
- [4] So: how does philosophy itself measure up on a 'stories-to-explanations' scale - - - an

assessment

[5] And therefore: the point of philosophy now is - - - ?

And a further point

‘This is a record of three ‘epistemological breaks’ - - - in the order in which they occurred.

Break one. Up until a few centuries ago, we most of us thought that the earth was ‘first planet’ in a universe which was ‘out there’ and Other, and which spun around it for its benefit. Then came Copernicus, Galileo, Newton and the rest. And the place of the earth in the universe was decentred for ever. Though of course it made no difference to how things seemed. The sun still ‘rose’ in the morning, and ‘set’ in the evening, even at the Meteorological Office. And only with the technology of flying, and later of space travel, could we get the ‘common sense’ which gave us a flat-and-still earth finally to give totally away before the evidence to the contrary.

Break two. Up until a few decades ago, we most of us thought that humans were ‘first creatures’ in a biosphere which was ‘out there’ and Other, and which was made for our succour. Then came Darwin and his ilk, and the place of *Homo sapiens* in the biosphere was decentred for ever as well. Though of course it again made no difference at all to how things seemed. Long after evolution had shown us otherwise, human animals still seemed to be of a totally other order than all the rest. Only with the technology of gene sequencing, could we get the ‘common sense’ which told us that neither a carrot nor a parrot had anything much in common with a *Homo sapiens* finally to give totally away before the evidence to the contrary.

Break three. Up until now, we most of us think that ‘I’ am ‘first person’, in a world which is ‘out there’ and Other, and which is there for me to make my way in as I choose. But now comes - - - well, let’s just call it ‘the train’. If you put your ear to the track, you can hear the train coming. It’s the *neuroscience* train, the *cognitive* science train, the *psycholinguistics* train. It’s the train which, when it arrives, will carry away all our old conceptions of what it is to be a person. And the place of ‘I’ in the world will be decentred for ever as well. Though of course, once again, it will make no difference to how things seem. It will still seem as though ‘I’ am ‘in here’. And that I am in here either looking *out*, upon you who are ‘out there’: or looking *in*, upon my own thoughts, which, hidden from you, are in here with me. Only with the technology of – well, perhaps it will be the increasing sophistication of brain scanning – will we get the ‘common sense’ which tells us that ‘I’ am the free-willing originator of ‘my’ actions finally to give totally away before the evidence to the contrary.

The revolutionary nature of the decentring of the earth in the universe meant that it took many centuries to achieve: and was not without some heartache (and some burning flesh!) for those who lived (and died) through it. The even more revolutionary nature of the decentring of the human in the biosphere took two or three centuries to achieve: and in some places – for example, among creationists and in the resurrection of ‘the argument from design’ – is not yet achieved. And continues to create considerable angst for those who still cannot understand and accept it. But the most revolutionary decentring of all, that of the ‘I’ in the world, will be the hardest by far to accommodate. It will probably take place more quickly than either of its two predecessors: scientific progress does seem to be exponential. But for those who live through it, for us and our immediate descendents, it will be the hardest of all for us to get our heads around. **We will need all the compassion and tenderness we can muster for each other in our joint attempts to understand it.**

But for them: for those who, in the not-too-distant future, will start to live comfortably in the full knowledge that it is so, it will, quite literally, change their world. When as a consequence of the changed perspectives they will then command they can at last replace philosophy with science, maybe particularly *moral* philosophy with *moral* science, then they will understand why Doris Lessing, at the end of one of her futuristic novels, has one of her characters look back to us, in compassionate anguish, and exclaim: ‘oh you poor animal humans!’

[A slightly modified version of the postscript to my book *Making God* (2007)]