The Pursuit of Philosophy
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Philosophy in Non-Philosophy Departments

The summer before I was about to begin my Ph.D. in the Faculty of Philosophy at Cambridge, I became interested in the presence of philosophy in faculties other than the homonymous one at the University of Cambridge. Did philosophy matter outside the Faculty of Philosophy? If so, what form did it take? Having been an undergraduate there I already knew that at Cambridge ancient Greek philosophy was studied primarily in the Faculty of Classics and that philosophy of science took place under the umbrella of the Department of History and Philosophy of Science (HPS). I was surprised, however, to find at least eight departments and faculties besides the Faculty of Philosophy that included philosophers or people whose work involved the close study of philosophy: HPS, Classics, History, Divinity, Political Science, Modern and Medieval Languages, Law, and English.¹ In fact it became apparent that there were at least as many, if not more, academics involved in the study of philosophy outside the Faculty of Philosophy as there were in it. I was so intrigued by this discovery that I wanted to organise an event where all these philosophers would be brought together. But what would they discuss, given their quite different backgrounds and interests? What could function as the common ground they all shared? Well, philosophy! So the theme of the meeting came to life: How did these people, from nine different faculties and departments in the same university, think of philosophy? The primary aims of the conference were:

¹ This is also the case in many other universities in the English-speaking world, but Cambridge instantiates this institutional structure to a much greater extent.
To allow people who work on philosophy at Cambridge to exchange ideas on their area of common interest and stir up some interesting conversation.

To provide a map of what philosophy is considered to be in Cambridge in the early twenty-first century, about a hundred years after the “founding fathers” of analytic philosophy reigned.

To provide insight into the question “What is philosophy?”

The main question that speakers were asked to respond to was “What is your conception of philosophy?” The speakers were also given a list of “guiding” questions that they could address while answering that question. They included:

What is the role of the history of philosophy in the study of philosophy?
What role, if any, should the empirical sciences and other disciplines play in philosophy?
What is the relation of philosophy to life?

Definitions and Wittgensteinean Themes

The idea was to ask questions that were relevant to all of the participants, but also questions that could have radically different answers, perhaps depending on which department one came from. The aim was also to see whether there was anything identifiable as “Cambridge philosophy” at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Around a hundred years ago the movement that was to become analytic philosophy was beginning to emerge, and there was a distinguishable tendency regarding which philosophical questions should be asked and how one should go about answering them. It would be interesting to see whether there was any such identifiable trend in Cambridge today, say at least one sentence that all could agree on regarding what philosophy is (or what it should be).

It quickly became clear, however, that agreeing on definitions was not going to be the order of the day. Even Wilfrid Sellars’s broadest possible definition, “The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term” (Sellars 2007, 37), was not something all cared for. Tim Crane, for example, pointed out that Sellars’s definition, even though the most plausible, is at the same time too broad. Jane Heal, on the other hand, offered a different possible definition, closer to the etymology of the word “philosophy” and its origins in ancient Greek thought. As she puts it in Chapter 2, “Philosophy and Its Pitfalls,” “There is (or may be) such a thing as being wise.

2 One should note here that this attitude of the analytic school towards philosophy, believing that only certain questions should be asked in philosophy (implying therefore that some questions should not be asked) is expressive of a new philosophic ethic.
Being wise is a matter of having a good (or the right, or some admirable) stance to the world, such that one apprehends, feels, acts in ways that are good (or right, or somehow admirable); what is more, Heal adds, philosophy is the activity of the discursive pursuit of this right stance towards the world. This disagreement was not necessarily a surprise; when philosophers give definitions of philosophy they are not usually offering descriptive definitions, definitions of a cultural practice that a sociologist or anthropologist might have given. When philosophers give definitions of what philosophy is, they usually give normative definitions, that is, they put forward statements about what philosophy should be, what it should be aiming at, how it should be aiming at it, and so on, and as we know, answers to normative questions are the most controversial kind. It is not clear, however, that philosophy is something that can be given a definition, that there can be a statement of necessary and sufficient conditions for something to count as philosophy, because of the very nature of this practice. Echoing Nietzsche, who claimed that only things without a history could be given a definition (Nietzsche 1998, 53), Tim Crane in Chapter 1 asserts that “in understanding any complex phenomena, very little is achieved by giving definitions.” Indeed, it was an earlier Cambridge philosopher, Wittgenstein, who also tried to undermine the whole Socratic project of philosophy as the aim of defining elusive concepts. Raymond Geuss in Chapter 7, “Goals, Origins, Disciplines,” follows the Nietzschean version of this project against definitions and expands it. Instead of looking for definitions, Geuss investigates in his chapter what philosophy is by using a method that according to him philosophy itself sidelined: the genealogical method. He searches for the numerous origins of the practice that we call philosophy. He does that primarily by looking at the genealogies of philosophy that philosophers themselves have offered, in particular Aristotle’s (and Hegel’s) and Plato’s. Summing up the findings of the genealogical research, Geuss finds at least three, relatively disjointed, sources for philosophy: a concern with nature, questions about what the good is, and an interest in logical structures.

My aim for the conference, however, wasn’t to see how many different definitions of philosophy people could come up with. My suspicion before even the participants’ papers were presented was that this event was not going to be about arriving at definitions. What I thought was that the Wittgensteinian observation concerning aspect seeing would more accurately capture the landscape painted by the Cambridge philosophers, and that’s where the name of the conference came from: “Aspects of Philosophy at Cambridge.” The title served both as an indication that the conference wasn’t aiming at representing philosophy at Cambridge in its totality but only certain parts of it, and as an allusion to the famous duck-rabbit drawing in Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations (Wittgenstein 1953). The premature diagnosis was that depending on which aspects of philosophy at Cambridge one focused one’s gaze on, the image one would be presented with could be very different. But I think the conference itself showed that perhaps this way of thinking about