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24. Philosophy and the Quest for the Unpredictable

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An 'adventure of ideas'?

Philosophy delights in being mischievous and somewhat sceptical. To ask its advocates to explain the social and economic return on their research can invoke ribaldry from die-hard conservatives along with a degree of not unjustifiable derision. Three questions immediately arise.

1. What does philosophical research mean? Is it like research in physics or medicine?
2. What is a quantifiable output in philosophical terms? Is it a proven technique, a new concept, or does it achieve a fresh interpretation of a classic text by Marcus Aurelius or Arthur Schopenhauer?
3. How is the reception of philosophical work to be judged? The number of times it is cited on Radio Three discussion programmes or is the timescale completely different? A Chinese adage would have it that 2,000 years would be too soon to judge!

Each of these questions invites a variety of responses. On the negative side, if philosophy is more an 'adventure of ideas' rather than a verifiable form of experimentation, how can insight and understanding ever be articulated in terms of predictable, let alone reliable, returns? Is not the social impact of a philosophical work extraordinarily difficult to assess accurately? On the positive side, protagonists of the discipline will cheer Plato's and Nietzsche's appraisal of philosophers as value-makers and legislators, moulders of world views. Who, after all, could reasonably doubt the continuing impact of John Locke on American constitutional and liberal thought, of Karl Marx on the development of social history or of Wittgenstein on the understanding of how language shapes how we think about the world? Fair point, it might be conceded, but none of these thinkers filled out a grant form and only one of them worked in a university and only for a very short time. Yet, the impact of their work has been immense and on a scale that certainly was not predictable. Perhaps history might settle these questions but that is no help to those who, in increasingly stringent economic times, must anguish over decisions as to what research ought to be publically supported. Is work on the concepts of terror and the sublime more or less urgent than understanding the operational contexts from which scientific judgements gain their legitimacy?

Perhaps our problem should be reformulated. Is the substantial question not whether it is socially preferable to support research into an ethics of

state torture as opposed to issues in modal logic, but what is to be gained by promoting a certain type of research culture *per se* whose chosen topics, whatever they may be, are but a means to the broader and more substantial end of promoting the skills and values of that culture? It is a poor view of research activity that defines it solely in terms of advancing knowledge in a specialism. Knowledge may be power, as Francis Bacon once suggested, but that power is a promiscuous one. Advances in one discipline often promote the serendipitous transfer of new insights into other disciplines. Martin Heidegger's impact on modern theology, Walter Benjamin's influence on the development of visual studies or Michel Foucault's indirect shaping of much contemporary social thought suffice to make the point. The demonstrable transfer value of philosophy research is hugely underestimated.

To some, the transfer value of research into the history of philosophy or the arguments concerning virtue in ancient philosophy may seem contentious. What relevance can Plato's view of the just society have to us today, we who live in entirely different social and economic circumstances? Of course, there is an immediate and obvious relevance to scholars in the classical community but to chide the impact of this research as narrow is to fall into the trap of thinking that most philosophical research is, or ought to be, monological, i.e. that it approaches a specific problem with a well-defined method of analysis. The virtue of such single-minded and rigorous research is that it is in fact dialogical. Getting to grips with voices and arguments shaped by intellectual parameters that are very different from our own is far from being an exercise in accommodating strangeness but rather allows the strange, and the historically distant, to bring us up short against our intellectual assumptions about pressing contemporary problems.

One of the largest obstacles to creative thought is overcoming the prejudices of what is regarded as acceptable current good practice. We fall all too readily into the convenience of habitual assumptions. An important virtue of research into the works of previous philosophers is not the increase in knowledge about the past that it brings (important though that is) but how it challenges the scope and adequacy of our present intellectual orientation. By indirectly informing public debate, the dialogical dimension of philosophical research has a social relevance that reaches well beyond the definition of a specific project. The dialogical consequences of philosophical research reveal something of the distinct character that such research achieves.

Beyond problem solving

A great deal of philosophical research can be undervalued if it is understood just as problem solving. A problem in logic or mathematical reasoning disrupts a certain line of thinking. If a solution can be found, the hindrance can be overcome and a thought procedure can resume. However, many of the problems which philosophy deals with are not properly to be called problems but are issues which, like questions concerning justice, goodness

or the meaning of loyalty, will never permit a technical solution. Far from being non-problems, they involve normative questions which can only ever be better or more deeply understood, rather than resolved in any technical fashion. The questions are far from abstract. They involve the socially strategic issues of how human life is to be understood and the meaning of childhood, and concern the appropriate direction for education. By bringing different analytic and historical skills to these concerns, philosophical research extends social and political awareness of what is at stake and at the same time increases the repertoire of possible practical responses. The difference between problem solving and achieving a greater reflective understanding of an issue highlights the nature of these two modes of research. In a great deal of philosophical and humanities research knowledge is 'accumulative' rather than 'progressive'. It does not progress by overcoming the problems of previous generations but rather thickens and extends an understanding of the issues involved. Once again, such research contributes to extending the informed nature of public debate and, hence, to the generation of new responses to canonical issues such debate can engender. Research into the character and nature of human rights and especially the rights of women over the last twenty years has indeed been game-changing.

Accumulations of insight in philosophical research can often be serendipitous. The history of ideas demonstrates that solutions to problems are not always achieved in a conventional manner, nor do they always emerge from expected professional sources. Indirect approaches can prove more productive. And so, at first glance, philosophical research into the language of religion or the nature of artificial intelligence may not seem relevant to a hard-pressed economy or to a society whose conventions and self-understandings are under constant pressure to change and adapt. There is still a quaint and no doubt endearing perception of the philosopher as a quite useless and impractical person, a reputation of ancient pedigree. It allegedly starts with the contemporary scorn heaped upon Thales, a pre-Socratic philosopher, for being more enamoured of the celestial beauty of the stars than the earthly charms of an amorous admirer. 'Useless' is a not an uncommon description of much modern art but few hard-headed politicians now dispute the utility of new urban art centres for the rejuvenation of depressed communities. Does the analogy work for philosophy, too?

The demand for social utility is not always a philistine call. If the public purse underwrites higher education, philosophical academics must expect to justify their salaries and research funding. Residues of a long-standing and mutual suspicion between, on the one hand, academics who see calls for justification for their research as an unwarrantable attack on academic freedom and, on the other hand, administrators who can regard research funding as money for relieving overspent budgets continue to have a negative influence on university communities. There is, however, a serious point that anxious philosophers and predatory administrators tend to overlook. Calls

for demonstrations of the worthwhile nature of research investment are often myopically short-sighted. It is not long ago that 'Useless!' summarized the consensus judgement concerning the productive economic value of research in the humanities.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the economic mandarins of both principal political parties started to doubt whether there was a demonstrable connection between the high cost of public investment in higher education and research, and the general level of economic productivity. Against the background of worldwide student unrest not just over the Vietnam war but also concerning the political complacency of post Second World War Western society, the Japanese industrial model of hiring staff at eighteen and training them for life in a company ethos seemed to promise a stable economic return. Deliberate government attempts were made to draw potential students away from university and into the workplace by diminishing the graduate employment premium. State postgraduate research grants were very hard to come by.

Events, of course, then intervened. The major OPEC oil price increases after the second Arab-Israeli conflict and the extraordinary collapse in city office rental values, brought about by the computerization of office procedures, initiated what has now become the familiar culture of 'rationalizing', whose practices quickly pervaded private and public sectors. The anarchic independence of free-thinking individuals, which had just previously been anathematized, once again became a highly tradable commodity. Their open-minded flexibility held precisely the qualities major economic players found themselves urgently needing: the ability both to think independently outside conventional boundaries, and to draw and utilize insights from a wide variety of economic and political sources. During this period philosophy graduates and researchers became one of the more employable groups of graduates and researchers. Useless? The reasons are obvious: philosophy's research skills require an ability to grapple with the logical structure of complex problems, to review unfamiliar ideas with an open mind, to acquire the patience for both listening and for long-term reflection, and to examine issues in a multi-perspectival way. Does history repeat itself? Perhaps, only for those who have not learned its lessons. The Higher Education Statistics Agency and major US employers all recently reported on the current economic relevance of philosophical skills of analysis.

What is often unsettling about demands for justifying research in the humanities is that the defining criteria for output and research productivity are inappropriately set. This is not the place to revisit the C.P. Snow's 'two-cultures' debate, but it is clear that within many aspects of humanities and philosophy research reasoning is not always demonstrative in the deductive sense. Knowledge in the humanities is not universally advanced by the scientific model of reasoning ably articulated by Karl Popper as 'conjecture and refutation'. In philosophy and other humanities subjects the procedure can be both more speculative and serendipitous. Many great

philosophers from Immanuel Kant to Ernst Cassirer freely admit that the full conceptual entailments of an idea are rarely if ever grasped by their authors. The limitations of a particular discourse often blind researchers to what is held within a central concept.

Creative enquiry is rarely able to predict, prior to commencement of research, the extent and significance of its anticipated outcomes. What is held within a concept often only becomes apparent when it is placed alongside other interpretations. I remember very well how the limitations of something I was researching in its own right – Nietzsche's rather romantic and individualist concept of language – suddenly became apparent not because of an internal analysis but because of a chance exposure to a study of Hans-Georg Gadamer's analysis of the cultural foundations of language. To borrow an image from Wittgenstein, to get an idea as to what wheels a concept can turn, see what work it might do in a different framework. In philosophy and, indeed, the humanities generally, diligence in constantly maintaining sound research practices, reading widely and being open to new discourses will be rewarded by those *eureka* moments in which the really useful insights will spring forward as an unexpected consequence of the main investigation. This is also the great advantage of interdisciplinary research. A pattern of argumentation and an association of ideas in one discipline can expose previously unseen analogous structures of reasoning in another. What is of significant value in an enquiry is often a consequence of maintaining the momentum of a research practice rather than pursuing a predefined goal. Three further points can be made in this context.

First, senior scientific researchers have become sensitive to the negative aspects of research defined and supported by predictable outcomes. The latter tend to constrain enquiry within the predictable and attainable, reward the cautious instead of the adventurous and tend to 'embroider' known territories of operation rather than discovering access to new ones.

Second, the more serendipitous nature of humanities research (especially when in an interdisciplinary format) actually creates circumstances capable of generating new and unpredictable transformations of insight. Given the strong tendency of research in well-defined communities to talk only to itself, a great deal more support should be given to interdisciplinary research, not just in its own right (though desirable that would be), but also because the bringing together of two research frameworks has a greater chance of generating provocative new understandings.

Third, research in philosophy and the humanities is, in a certain sense, capable of being more objective than work undertaken in the sciences. Rarely does scientific research lead to a radical questioning of the methodological paradigms supporting it. However, in philosophical research those *eureka* moments of sudden and abrupt insight often bring the researcher up short against the very presuppositions of the inquiry itself. A research project in philosophy that does not lead to a serious questioning of its grounding

assumptions does not really pass muster as a philosophical project. Philosophical research is always in search of the unpredictable. Once again, we see why the results of philosophical research are difficult to predict. Yet, there is some wisdom in this. That significant shifts in understanding are achieved serendipitously suggests that we should be very cautious about placing our faith too exclusively in administration and management systems. Good research should disrupt and alter expectations. What matters is not a devotion to a method but the willingness to methodically engineer those circumstances either in a discipline or between disciplines that might induce the sudden eruption of those *eureka* moments which can transform understanding of a problem. The encouragement of research with no obvious outcome may, in the present climate of severe financial restraint, seem rather fanciful. However, we should look for and need research impacts that reach well beyond current fiscal horizons.

Public debate

Striving to manage the economic determinants of a society is clearly necessary for its health and well-being. Power and wealth are, however, merely means and not ends. It is important that the voices that raise the question of values either in book form or in open debate continue to be audible. Without values management systems are blind and directionless. Values determine the direction of travel. Once again, it is not the specifics of a given research project that matter but more that such research keeps the debate about guiding values alive. It is said, 'Judge a philosopher by his or her attitude to death!' There is no morbidity here, merely an appraisal of what it means to live a healthy life. Apart from the question of whether the maintenance of life at all costs is a contradiction in terms, recent philosophical work on assisted death and on the ethics of non-intervention in terminal circumstances raises at least two important questions. Should a life, no matter how painful and compromised, be maintained in all circumstances? Some are fearful that humans should not assume the power of gods over the life and death of individuals. Others protest that this is agnosticism of the worst order, abnegating the power of decision to chance or to a divine will. In the mind of some thinkers this is indicative of a failure to face up to what it means to be human, i.e. taking responsibility for our judgements no matter how agonizing or painful. If control over the quality of life is of greater value than life at any cost, the autonomy of a healthy life carries a greater premium than mere existence. If so, the debate may favour the classical Roman virtue of *choosing* to fall on one's own sword once the threat to autonomy or well-being becomes intolerable. Whatever the ethical, legal or political resolution (and it will be an instance of Cicero's uncomfortable description of politics as the art of having to choose between two unpalatable options), the emergence of this debate and the sizeable ethical research informing it indicate a reassuringly healthy aspect of our community. There is, perhaps, something unsettling

about a society unwilling to confront the question of death for, ultimately, that unwillingness betrays a reluctance to face up to the difficulties of life.

Research in favour of assisted death and moral debate about the irresponsible burden placed on others by maintaining a life that lacks all autonomy raises difficult and uncomfortable issues. However, no community can afford to be complacent about its values. In this respect the broad responsibility of philosophical research is to challenge and probe the foundations of established attitudes, especially when they are called upon as a justification to intervene in other communities. Philosophical research can remind us of the great need for caution when we make practical judgements which influence the lives of others. Recent research in political thought has started to question the Western world's rather unthinking response to what has been misleadingly described as fundamentalist religious terrorism. It suggests that this response needs to be tempered by the realization that the West's own secularist faith also promises a Utopia, albeit a secular one and one which, as recent events show, is rarely implemented without violence. Contemporary philosophical research into the notion of the community is also being invoked against the tendency of centralist governments to take unto itself the management of education and welfare. In the latter instance, medieval conceptions of community are being revised to challenge the lethargy that has settled around the question as to whether issues of individual responsibility are properly the concerns of state. As our society questions the dominant liberal values of recent years, influential philosophical research is exploring the paradoxical if not contradictory notion of progress. If progress requires peace and stability and if the latter requires a major investment in potentially highly destructive defence systems, the pursuit of progress in a world of diminishing resources may indeed be a road to annihilation. The thesis invites an exacting debate about guiding social and economic values.

Philosophical research will not itself settle these questions but it can rightly unsettle the complacent and self-satisfied disregard of their urgent nature. More important is the ability of philosophical research to enrich wider debates about community, society, individual responsibility and legitimate aspirations, questions which the 'unacceptable face' of capitalism, as a former Conservative Prime Minister (Edward Heath) once described it, has now made so urgent. Useless? Apart from the obvious observation that the facts speak otherwise, what Theodor Adorno and Jean Paul Sartre once said of art and the imagination equally applies to the philosophical imagination and its researches. In the ability to think in ways that refuse the current ideology or belief, and in the power to speculate about the different and the otherwise, lie the seeds of political freedom, the seeds of a belief in the possibility of real and significant individual engagement and intervention and, most important, the seeds of a faith in a future where things can indeed be made otherwise.

The encouragement of 'blue sky' research with no predictable outcome is in the present climate of severe financial restraint perhaps rather fanciful. Yet

in times of crisis it can be more damaging not to adopt a long-term view. A species such as ours, which most likely as not has no predetermined nature, relies for its survival upon what it learns not just directly but also indirectly from experience. The value of such lessons is never timeless. Environments change and change calls into question long-standing operating assumptions. What has proved useful to a community in the past can prove a liability in the future. The role of scepticism in philosophical research is important precisely because it deliberately probes and tests those experientially acquired assumptions which habit and convenience can persuade us are actual truths. The skill of questioning is central to promoting the cultural powers of innovation and adaptation well beyond the walls of the university.

In addition to the productive promotion of scepticism, it is just as important for an experience-dependent community to nourish those 'blue sky' buccaneer channels of creative and imaginative reflection which push at the tried and tested. In times of social and economic difficulty, experience-based communities can ill afford to disinvest in innovative research but rather should accelerate investment in their stock of creative resources. Within any community there is always the need for a balance between consolidation and innovation. Research insights do not emerge *ex nihilo*. They require the long-term consolidation of research practices. Yet consolidation can breed self-satisfaction and complacency. Adventurous research into the more speculative dimensions of thought is equally needed. Philosophical creativity can not only challenge complacent assumptions within consolidated social practices but it can also offer a repertoire of alternative thought frameworks. Whether the research involves Buddhist logic, medieval conceptions of beauty or seventeenth-century notions of the individual, there is no telling when and where such frameworks will achieve their full application.

Those who regard such research as a privileged indulgence miss the contemporary point. Understanding how the Greeks thought about *aletheia* (truth) or how Chinese philosophy grasps the interdependent nature of all things does not only introduce us to a different way of thinking (always an intellectual challenge) but enables us to think differently about our own ways of conceptualizing the social and cultural challenges we face. Twenty years ago, funded philosophy research into the concept of emptiness (*sūnyatā*) and the related non-essentialist notion of 'dependent origination' may have seemed a liberal indulgence. Now it appears as commendably prescient. This philosophical research into Buddhist conceptions of the interrelatedness and dependence of all living beings assumes a pressing urgency as we learn more and more of the horrendous consequences of having treated our environment over the last four centuries as a mere resource. If there is any degree of certainty here, it is this. It would surely seem unwise for an experience-dependent community to demand an immediate economic justification for all of its research outputs. Who can be certain of the eventual worth of such investments? Are such wagers defensible? Let us remember

this. The corridors of power that tend to demand such justifications utterly failed to predict the dramatic demise of the Eastern Bloc and were almost criminally negligent in their inability to foresee the recent world banking crisis. If a community is unprepared to trust in the possible transformative outcomes of its research activities, that community betrays its faith in its own future. Such a lack of a faith undermines the ability to respond to the challenges of the contemporary world, and compromises the material *and* spiritual health of our community.

The genius of public debate is that it can give rise to ideas that its participants would not have anticipated before the discussion started. The quality of those emergent ideas depends in large part upon the information that shapes the debate. It is of paramount importance for an open community that it be as well-informed as it can about significant ethical, environmental and legal issues. Philosophy contributes to the broad exchange of ideas. A community that does not regularly expose itself to the risks and challenges of this exchange has little hope of adapting to the rigours of social change. For that exchange to be of consequence, 'free spaces' are needed for reflection to generate transformative ideas.

Philosophers who teach in universities are subject to the increasingly dominating bureaucratic pressures of all professions. Yet the promotion of research establishes those free spaces within which reflection can be nurtured. The individual projects are not as important as the research habits and practices that surround them for it is these that will, for the most part, generate new ideas and insights. The justification of such spaces lies, then, not just in the scholarly worth of the work produced, but in what the production of such work enables beyond the individual researcher; its contribution to the discipline of philosophy, its serendipitous impact upon other discourses, and the way it shapes and informs the public debate and exchange of ideas. Philosophical research may indeed generate the unexpected but that is the point; only the unexpected will prove transformative within and outside the discipline.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that the skills philosophers and their research bring to the social economy are highly relevant and have, in previous crises, been proven to be so. Intellectual flexibility and an innovative capacity for creative analysis and judgement are primary assets for any community whose material and spiritual resources are put to the test. This much is known. What is not fully appreciated is both the nature and transfer value of the practices of philosophical research itself. The worth of a research practice often lies in its manner of operating rather than in its planned results. Research into the works of leading philosophical figures of the past is not an arcane excuse for an antiquarian escape from the intruding pressures of the contemporary world. To the contrary, it offers to a community, by way of comparison with previous modes of thought, a route to challenge the advantages and limitations of contemporary prejudices about its primary cultural values. It

would be irresponsible to judge a piece of research by its most immediate outcomes. There is no way of predicting its eventual consequences.

What is clear, however, is that the research practices that support individual philosophical projects do bring an immediate return. Nurturing informed enquiry, strengthening patient reflection and enhancing powers of critical analysis represent an investment in the ability of society to respond creatively to times of test and trial. Philosophical research celebrates the serendipitous and the willingness to be open to the strange and unusual. It bolsters a spirit of intellectual adventurousness precisely because it has learned from its own experience of the untold insights that are held within the unexpected. In this respect, philosophy research addresses contemporary anxieties about the conservatism of output-driven scientific research. Philosophical research as an adventure of ideas is always in search of the unpredictable. This is because it seeks not just to challenge the predictable, the habitual and the customary, though this does have the virtue of establishing what is of genuine worth within everyday practices. Philosophy pursues the unpredictable insight precisely because of its transformative power. The new understanding it brings is indeed the proper reward for sustained and open inquiry, virtues without which any experience-based community such as ours is unlikely to rejuvenate itself, even to survive.