Philosophy as a Normative Discipline

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Abstract

Bernard Williams contends that philosophy is part of a broader humanistic enterprise of 'making sense of' ourselves and our activities, including the activity of science. Whereas the scientific enterprise purports to offer an absolute conception of the world as it is (independently of any local perspective on it), the humanistic enterprise cannot disengage itself from the contingent history of our ideas upon which it operates. While I agree with Williams that philosophy should be more attentive to history, his account of philosophy, from which he derives this conclusion, is fatally flawed, being unable to meet three perennial challenges to any principled defense of philosophy as a discipline: i.e., the questions of authority, incubativity and peculiarity. Those challenges can be met only if we understand philosophy not as a humanistic discipline that is part of the broader humanistic enterprise, but as a distinctively normative discipline that tasks itself with finding answers to explicitly or implicitly normative questions, in contrast to various scientific and humanistic disciplines of descriptive inquiry. In this paper, I argue for the equivalence of philosophicality with normativity, explicate the theoretical and practical implications of the normative account of philosophy, and defend it against potential objections.

1. Philosophy and its discontents: authority, incubativity and peculiarity

Since the advent of modern science, philosophy has encountered a growing crisis of intellectual authority as a discipline. After all, whereas science is constantly updating our knowledge about the world and reshaping the world through technological advances, philosophy seems to stumble upon the same old questions that have been asked and answered in different ways for thousands of years, without ever producing any substantive philosophical consensus among professional philosophers. Indeed, were Aristotle to be resurrected and invited to university lectures and seminars today, he would have been dazzled by all the science stuff that he could not have imagined back in his day, such as quantum mechanics, the periodic table, genetic drift, Bernoulli's principle, and so on, but would have been baffled (while certainly flattered) by the fact that

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philosophers still assign his *Metaphysics* and *Nicomachean Ethics* to students and debate heatedly on whether his account of substance is sound or on whether his virtue ethics is superior to alternative moral theories, as if time had frozen for the discipline (Dietrich 2011: 334). As a result, not only do scientists proclaim that 'philosophy is dead' and that 'scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge' (Hawking & Mlodinow 2010: 5), but it is not uncommon for philosophers to also bemoan that 'pursuing philosophy is not a good means for discovering true answers for philosophical questions' (Brennan 2010: 1). In a nutshell, unlike science, philosophy is not an intellectually authoritative discipline.

In 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline' (PHD), Bernard Williams (2000) defends the intellectual authority of the discipline of philosophy on the basis of a 'humanistic' account of what philosophy can and should do. According to Williams, philosophy is part of a broader humanistic enterprise of 'making sense of' ourselves and our activities, including the activity of science itself. Whereas the scientific enterprise aspires to offer 'an absolute conception of the world as it is independently of any local or peculiar perspective on it' (PHD: 485), the humanistic enterprise cannot disengage itself from the contingent history of our ideas upon which it operates. In particular, the 'historical' activity of understanding where our ideas contingently came from is an inescapable part both of the 'first-order' activity of acting and arguing within the framework of those ideas, and of the 'philosophical' activity of reflecting on and making better sense of them (PHD: 491). And such an inescapability from local perspectives is precisely what makes the humanistic enterprise of sense-making distinct from the scientific enterprise of knowledge-producing. Since the humanistic enterprise does not purport to offer any 'absolute conception' of ourselves or of our activities, its intellectual authority is not tarnished by its inability to do so. To think otherwise is to fall into the trap of 'scientism' that presumes scientific authority to be the only valid kind of intellectual authority there is. Rather, philosophy should give up the scientism-inspired, illusory search for absolute philosophical (especially ethical and political) truths that transcend contingent local perspectives, and should instead take a greater interest in, and be content with, making the best (historically informed) sense of a more local 'us', for it is this latter pursuit that gives philosophy (and the humanistic enterprise in general) its intellectual authority.

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1.1 The intellectual authority of philosophy

There are certain aspects of Williams's argument I am sympathetic to, and I will return to them later. Overall, however, his humanistic account of philosophy, and of its intellectual authority, falls short in crucial ways. To begin with, consider the discipline of *history*, which is undoubtedly also part of the humanistic enterprise, and which Williams contends is of particular relevance to philosophy. In accordance with Williams's humanistic account, then, the intellectual authority of the discipline of history must be of the same kind as that of philosophy, *vis-à-vis* that of science. In particular, just as the discipline of philosophy has no hope of ascertaining any philosophical truth that transcends contingent local perspectives on philosophical matters, the discipline of history must have no hope of ascertaining any historical truth that transcends contingent local perspectives on historical matters. To think otherwise is to fall into the trap of scientism. But does this characterization of history as a discipline, and of its intellectual authority, sound right? Does the discipline of history not purport to ascertain historical truths independently of local perspectives, by way of uncovering previously unavailable historical records, debunking historical myths, pinning down various causal mechanisms of history and their complex interactions with one another in different contexts, and revising outdated historiographies that, in light of new historical records and studies, encounter 'crises of explanation' like those seen in cases of scientific change (PHD: 488)?

To be sure, there is a sense in which the discipline of history can never *fully* ascertain historical truths. After all, historical events occur in the past and are no longer accessible to those who later decide to study them, and what historians can do is infer what happened in the past from the fragments of historical records that have survived the cruelty of time. Moreover, historical causation has to be inferred from those incomplete records as well, leaving great rooms for competing theories of what caused a particular historical event, and what causal patterns and mechanisms there might be underneath certain long-term historical trends or processes. But nor can science *fully* ascertain scientific truths in this sense (think about the scientific implications of the incompleteness of the fossil record, for example). Williams maintains, correctly in my view, that the unavailability of full scientific truths in this sense is unrelated to the question of whether the intellectual authority of science is tied up with its hopes of offering truths about the world independently of local perspectives, and that those who deny the truth-based

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intellectual authority of science, thinking this is the way to defend the humanities, are 'doubly misguided' (PHD: 485–486). By the same token, the unavailability of full historical truths in this sense is no reason for denying that the intellectual authority of the discipline of history is tied up with its hopes of offering historical truths independently of local perspectives.

To see more clearly how the intellectual authority of history is closer in kind to that of science than that of philosophy, consider the field of *history of philosophy*, sitting at the disciplinary juncture of history and philosophy. According to Williams, scientific changes are fundamentally driven by crises of explanation faced by older scientific theories, whereas changes in our philosophical (especially ethical and political) 'outlooks' are driven by 'crises of confidence or of legitimacy' faced by older world orders that might have nothing to do with philosophy itself. As a result, whereas the history of *science* is 'vindicatory' in the sense that 'the later theory, or (more generally) outlook, makes sense of itself, and of the earlier outlook, and of the transition from the earlier to the later, in such terms that both parties (the holders of the earlier outlook, and the holders of the later) have reason to recognize the transition as an improvement',[1] the history of *philosophy*, namely, 'the story of how one [philosophical] conception rather than another came to provide the basis of a new legitimacy' is not similarly vindicatory (PHD: 486, 488). Interesting, however, the history of *history of philosophy*, as a (sub)discipline, is somewhat vindicatory in this sense. For example, in recent decades historians of philosophy have uncovered previously neglected evidence of how Enlightenment-era European historians of philosophy had systematically erased non-Western philosophical traditions from their historical narratives, thereby constructing and promoting a Western-supremacist *historiography*

[1] Note that a 'vindicatory' history in Williams's sense is not the same as a Whig history. The history of science being vindicatory is compatible, for example, with the rise of scientific racism in the 19th century, as people at the time would see it as an improvement in explaining the new data on human diversity, and would assume that their predecessors would have agreed had they been presented with those data. Needless to say, nowadays we see the rise of scientific racism as an explanatory drawback and its demise as an explanatory improvement (and assume that our predecessors would have agreed, had they been presented with all the subsequent debunking researches), which means the history of science is still vindicatory for *us*, for whom it is the transition from scientific racism to *our refutation of it* that is of relevance.

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of philosophy (and accompanying philosophical 'canons') that is still dominant nowadays (Park 2013; Cantor 2022). The new decolonial historiography of philosophy not only makes sense of the earlier, Western-supremacist historiographical outlook, by explaining how it was the product of historical conditions (namely, the Western-supremacist zeitgeist of the time), but also makes sense of the transition from it to the new decolonial historiography, by pointing to the crisis of explanation faced by the dominant Western-supremacist historiography of philosophy *vis-à-vis* the newly uncovered evidence. In other words, insofar as doing *history of philosophy* is doing *history*,[2] the very history of this (sub)discipline is 'vindicatory' by Williams's standard, and its intellectual authority is therefore akin to that of science, rather than that of philosophy.

In sum, the humanistic account of philosophy fails to provide an adequate basis for defending the intellectual authority of philosophy, as the relevant contrast does not lie between scientific authority and humanistic authority, but rather between the intellectual authority of philosophy, on the one hand, and the intellectual authority not only of science but also of some humanities, such as history, on the other hand. And yet, this is not the only trouble with Williams's humanistic account of philosophy. For the question of the intellectual authority of philosophy is intertwined with two other perennial conundrums about the discipline of philosophy, which I dub the question of incubativity and the question of peculiarity. Williams's account cannot respond satisfactorily to either of them.

1.2 The disciplinary incubativity of philosophy

When Stephen Hawking declared that 'philosophy is dead' and that 'scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge', he was not merely denying the intellectual authority of philosophy in the era of modern science, but was doing so in accordance with a widespread impression of philosophy,

[2] I am not saying that doing history of philosophy does *not* involve doing philosophy. Rather, insofar as history of philosophy sit at the juncture of philosophy and history, both are necessarily involved. What I am saying is that the intellectual authority of the more 'historical' part is closer in kind to that of science than to the intellectual authority of the more 'philosophical' part. I will return to the issue of interdisciplinarity, as well as the relations between philosophy and history, below.

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one that sees it as the incubative proto-scientific precursor of modern science, with 'the torch of discovery' being passed on from the former to the latter. Or as philosopher of science Peter Godfrey-Smith puts it, 'philosophy is a place where ideas are developed in speculative and broad form, in theory-sketches and schemata, that often then make their way into an empirical form within some science, or into a mathematical form, or some other more focused form' (Godfrey-Smith 2013: 2). While Godfrey-Smith himself does not take this 'incubator' role to be the only role (nor the most important role) philosophy can play, he does think it a somewhat unique role played by philosophy (*vis-à-vis* other disciplines). Meanwhile, others like Hawking would take a step further, insisting that philosophy is *merely* a temporary refuge for proto-scientific speculations awaiting relevant new disciplines, especially new branches of natural or social sciences, to emerge and take over. Accordingly, just as philosophy has historically ceded territories to physics, chemistry, biology, economics, sociology and so on, whatever remains in contemporary philosophy simply are incubative speculations that lay the grounds for new future disciplines. For example, the rise of 'experimental philosophy' in recent years, which uses methods and techniques developed in psychology to investigate, among other things, how people understand certain moral concepts or respond to certain moral prompts, is construed by some philosophers in this light, namely, as part of the process of hatching full-grown empirical moral psychology from speculative moral philosophy (*e.g.*, Hämäläinen 2016: 37–47).

The Williamsian account of philosophy as part of the broader humanistic enterprise cannot explain why philosophy has historically been the incubator of various new branches of inquiry. In fact, it cannot even dispel the skepticism that the Williamsian philosophical program of 'making sense of a local "us"' is itself merely an speculative precursor of something akin to cultural anthropology, which would systemically investigate, by empirical means, how different cultures or societies in different historical periods have different norms, customs, practices and ideologies that ground the ways in which different philosophical (especially ethical and political) concepts are formulated, understood and received by members of the respective culture or society, and how transformations of philosophical 'outlooks' are foregrounded in their light. In other words, the humanistic account of philosophy cannot answer the question of the incubativity of philosophy as a discipline.

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1.3 The disciplinary peculiarity of philosophy

Furthermore, the questions of authority and incubativity are both linked to a third question, that of the apparent peculiarity of philosophy *vis-à-vis* other disciplines. As we have seen, the intellectual authority of philosophy, if there is any, seems distinct in kind from the intellectual authority of both science and other humanities; and as a discipline it plays, or at least has played, a uniquely incubative precursor role for other disciplines. But philosophy is widely perceived, among both its defenders and its detractors, to be peculiar in many other crucial aspects as well. For example, skeptics about philosophy note that, although disagreements are common in other disciplines, philosophy is the only discipline where there is 'radical dissensus' on even the most basic questions among its most able practitioners (Brennan: 2010).[3] In return, some defenders of philosophy contend that this is because philosophy addresses questions that are more fundamental, and therefore more intractable, than those in other disciplines; or that it is because philosophy is unique in aiming to provide a synoptic view of, as Wilfrid Sellars put it, 'how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term', and is thereby uniquely positioned to be the 'integrative' hub for all other disciplines (Godfrey-Smith 2013: 1, 3). Others hold that unlike other disciplines, philosophy is defined 'neither by its subject matter, nor by its method, but by its spirit: unbridled criticism', and that the reason why there is radical dissensus in philosophy is 'precisely that there is nothing that may not be challenged' in the discipline, as opposed to other disciplines in which 'one is not encouraged to question well entrenched and established parts of the [disciplinary] corpus' (Priest 2006: 201, 202, 206–207). One way or another, for better or for worse, philosophy is treated as a peculiar discipline. But what exactly is it that makes philosophy so peculiar, or at least seemingly so?

Granted, not everyone thinks philosophy is peculiar. Williams, for one, frowns upon the suggestion that 'philosophy as an enterprise [is] utterly peculiar compared with other enterprises', and berates that 'some of the deepest insights of modern philosophy, notably in the work of Wittgenstein, remain undeveloped – indeed,

[3] As my favorite philosophy joke goes: 'First Law of Philosophy: For every philosopher there is an equal and opposite philosopher. Second Law of Philosophy: They are both wrong.'

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at the limit, they are rendered unintelligible – precisely because of an assumption that philosophy is something quite peculiar, which should not be confused with any other kind of study, and which needs no other kind of study in order to understand itself' (PHD: 478–479). The beratement is unfounded, however, as it is premised on Williams's mistake of confusing disciplinary *peculiarity* with disciplinary *insularity*, a point I will return to later.

In the meantime, Williams fails to realize that even his own 'humanistic' account of philosophy assumes implicitly that philosophy is peculiar in crucial respects. For example, despite his insistence that the 'philosophical activity of reflecting on [our] ideas at a more general level and trying to make better sense of them' is 'in various ways continuous' with the 'historical activity of understanding where [our ideas] came from' (PHD: 491), the fact that he assigns exclusively the role of 'reflecting on' our ideas to philosophy, but not to history, betrays a tension within his account. For does the discipline of history not 'reflect on' our ideas in some ways? If so, what makes philosophical reflections different from historical reflections? Is it that, unlike other disciplines such as history, philosophy is defined by the 'spirit' of 'unbridled criticism' as Priest puts it? But if so, in what sense are criticisms in other disciplines 'bridled', and what is it about the philosophical enterprise that makes philosophical reflections or criticisms peculiar? In fact, this tension circles back to the abovementioned problem with Williams's answer to the question of the intellectual authority of philosophy. The intellectual authority of the philosophical enterprise of sense-making cannot be understood simply on the basis of it being part of the broader humanistic enterprise of sense-making; for the intellectual authority of history, which is also part of the broader humanistic enterprise, is actually closer in kind to that of science than to that of philosophy. In other words, philosophical sense-making is in some crucial way a peculiar kind of sense-making, even if it is in various other ways 'continuous with' the activities of other disciplines.

To wit, any principled defense of philosophy as a discipline need to confront three interrelated conundrums about it, that is, the questions of its intellectual authority, its disciplinary incubativity, and its disciplinary peculiarity. Williams's humanistic account of philosophy, which defends the intellectual authority of philosophy as a mere instance of the intellectual authority of the broader humanistic enterprise, not only gives a flawed answer to the question of authority, but is also unable to address the questions of incubativity and peculiarity. By contrast, as I will argue below, those three challenges can be met only if we understand philosophy not merely as a

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humanistic discipline that is part of the broader humanistic enterprise, but as a distinctively *normative* discipline that tasks itself with finding answers to explicitly or implicitly normative questions.

2. Philosophicality as normativity

Roughly speaking, a question is normative (as opposed to descriptive) if it concerns genuine 'ought-ness' instead of mere 'is-ness': for example, what one ought to believe, how one ought to act, how things ought to be, which things are (*i.e.*, ought to be taken as) good or bad, which actions are (*i.e.*, ought to be appraised as) right or wrong, and which moral principles are (*i.e.*, ought to be accepted as) true or false.[4] Likewise, we may also say that normative questions concern 'justification' instead of merely 'causal explanation', 'evaluation' instead of merely 'factual description', and so on. It is worth noting, however, that whether a question is genuinely normative or not is different from whether the question is framed in a way that invokes apparently normative terms. On the one hand, apparently

[4] There are people who hold that genuine normativity (*vis-à-vis* descriptivity) does not exist and that, at the end of the day, all apparently normative questions can be reduced to, or replaced by, purely non-normative questions through a rigorous process of 'naturalization'. In recently decades, even the quintessentially normative branches of philosophy, *i.e.*, moral and political philosophy, are subject to calls for such naturalization, in the hope that any apparently normative moral and political question can eventually be reduced to or replaced by a set of purely non-normative questions, say, about the psychological mechanisms by which one's desires, beliefs and attitudes develop, motivate and rationalize, or about how various moral norms, social conventions and political institutions adapt, or fail to adapt, to changing circumstances throughout the history of human evolution. While I believe in the irreducibility of the normative to the non-normative, I will not argue for it here due to limited space, but will instead make two remarks as follows. First, the claim that genuine normativity does not exist is itself a normative claim inasmuch as it is an empirically non-adjudicable metaphysical claim (see more on this below). Second, even if genuine normativity does not exist, the normative account of philosophy *per se* is unaffected, which merely holds that philosophicality equals normativity; rather, its implication would be that genuine philosophicality does not exist either, and that the discipline of philosophy must eventually be subsumed into various disciplines of descriptive inquiry through respective programs of naturalizing philosophy.

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normative terms such as 'normative', 'ought', 'justification', 'evaluation' and so on can all be, and have in fact all been frequently, used in descriptive senses, referring, for example, to the degree of acceptance of a given 'norm' (about how one ought to act in a given circumstance, for instance) by a given person or group, and to the accepted norm's causal efficacy in regulating the beliefs and behaviors of that person or group (*e.g.* Taylor 2009). Needless to say, this is not the sense in which the term 'normativity' is used in this paper. On the other hand, many apparently descriptive questions framed in terms of 'is-ness' (such as 'does god exist?' or 'are transwomen women?'), if they are to have meaningful answers at all, must be construed as genuinely normative questions. I will return to this point later.

Most disciplines of inquiry[5] inquire primarily into descriptive questions[6]: what are the things that exist in our world (understood broadly to encompass the natural world, the social world

[5] In this paper I only focus on disciplines of *inquiry* (or *inquisitive* disciplines), that is, various branches of intellectual pursuits and activities that systemically inquire into a particular subject matter by asking and answering relevant questions, in order to acquire and advance knowledge on the subject matter. By contrast, some disciplines (such as various *artistic* disciplines) may be *expressive* (or *creative*) rather than *inquisitive* in nature, aiming to train their practitioners to express their views, desires, feelings, understandings and imaginations through the process, or the product, of relevant creative activities, such as painting, composing, dancing, filming, story-telling and so on (even if there may also be systematic inquiries *about* artistic pursuits and activities, in order to acquire and advance knowledge with regard to, say, what makes some artistic products more enjoyable than others and how to create those artistic products more efficiently). Some people might believe that philosophy is similarly an expressive or creative (rather than inquisitive) discipline, even if philosophizing is a less artistic and more pedantic form of creative expression than painting, composing, dancing, filming, story-telling and so on. However, this is an evidently implausible view (given the expansive list of philosophical questions that are being asked and answered), and is certainly not Williams's view. Therefore, I leave non-inquisitive disciplines out of this paper due to limited space.

[6] To be sure, in the process of inquiring primarily about descriptive questions, all those disciplines would inevitably touch on related normative questions from time to time, as reflected in their respective debates on methodological as well as other foundational issues within respective disciplines. Interestingly, those debates are widely seen as having a somewhat 'philosophical' nature, even if most participants in those debates are not professional philosophers. In other words, even in disciplines other

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and the mental world), what are the events that have occurred in the past or will occur in the future, what are the physical laws, causal mechanisms and statistical rules that underlie the existence of those things and the occurrence of those events, and so on. This is the case not only of natural and social sciences, such as physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, economics and sociology, but also of some humanities, such as history, as is discussed above. By contrast, according to the normative account of philosophy I outline here, philosophy is – or, for that matter, ought be understood as – a fundamentally and distinctly normative (*vis-à-vis* descriptive) discipline of inquiry, asking and answering explicitly or implicitly normative questions, such as what we ought to believe, how we ought to act, and what kinds of reasons and arguments we ought to provide when thinking about what we ought to believe and how we ought to act. To be sure, many philosophers would dismiss the normative account of philosophy as outright ridiculous. After all, the term 'value theory' has been widely used in contemporary academic philosophy as a catch-all label for all branches of philosophy that supposedly have some 'evaluative' (or, for that matter, normative) aspect (such as moral philosophy, political philosophy, aesthetics, and so on), which implies that other branches of philosophy that are not thusly labelled (such as metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, and so on) are mostly non-normative, even if some of their sub-branches can be normative (such as epistemic injustice).[7] This conventional distinction within philosophy is, however, delusive.

2.1 All normative questions are philosophical questions

To begin with, consider the various ways in which normative and non-normative dimensions of inquiry may interact with each other in our asking and answering a question. First, sometimes a question

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than philosophy, there is a prevalent folk view that implicitly equates philosophicality with normativity.

[7] The case of epistemology is worth noting, as there seems to be a rising awareness among its practitioners lately that it is the entire field of epistemology, and not just some of its subfields (such as epistemic injustice), that is normative by nature; for epistemological questions are fundamentally questions of epistemic normativity, that is, normativity about what to believe, how to weigh evidence, what to count as knowledge, and so on. Apparently, this view is entailed by my normative account of philosophy.

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straightforwardly *aggregates* a normative inquiry and an empirical, descriptive inquiry. For instance, the question, 'Do minimum wage laws promote social justice?', calls both for empirical investigations on the short-term and long-term effects of (various versions of) minimum wage laws (under various social and economic conditions) on growth and redistribution, and for normative analyses on which conception of social justice is the most reasonable and what it prescribes in light of the empirical investigations on the effects of minimum wage laws. But what if different empirical studies on minimum wage laws reach opposite conclusions, some claiming they undermine long-term economic growth under certain conditions while others claim they enhance it under the same conditions? To be sure, we need to scrutinize their respective data and methods and see if some are more reliable than others. That being said, data are more often than not incomplete and contested, and various methods offer competing ways to approximate (imperfectly) real-world economic implications on the basis of incomplete and contested data. As a result, the questions of what we ought to believe and how we ought to act in the face of those descriptive contestations are inevitably *entangled*, in every step of the relevant empirical inquiry, with the non-normative dimension of the latter. Such entanglements between normative and non-normative dimensions of inquiry can be seen in various methodological disputes across disciplines, as well as in philosophy's long history of raising proto-scientific speculations, to which I will return later. Finally, in addition to aggregation and entanglement, it is often the case that the normativity of an inquisitive question is *embedded* in the posing of the question itself. For example, questions such as 'is a foetus a person?' or 'are transwomen women?' are decidedly normative questions despite being framed in apparently descriptive terms, as different categorizations inherently implicate different ways of assessing or assigning normative status across groups, with various practical implications.

In a sense, *all* inquisitive questions are normatively entangled or embedded; and some might worry that this would trivialize the distinction between the normative and the non-normative. In reality, however, the same inquisitive question can be *problematized* in different ways depending on the context, and it is the specific problematization of an inquisitive question in a given context that picks out certain dimensions or aspects of the question as of immediate inquisitive relevance, while *suspending* the inquiries into other entangled or embedded dimensions or aspects for the time being. For example, even though the question 'is the platypus a mammal?' is, in a sense, as normatively embedded as the question 'are

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transwomen women?', under most circumstances we would simply treat it as an entirely descriptive question ('yes, because it has the following characters shared by mammals…'); that is, unless and until we problematize the normative presumptions underlying this descriptive treatment, and ask a series of related questions ranging from why some taxonomical approach is preferable to others, to why we should believe in evolutionary theory (upon which the modern cladistic approach to biological classification is based) at all, and so on and so forth. In doing so, we actually travel from the realm of biology to the realm of *philosophy of* biology. Indeed, insofar as the entangled or embedded normative dimensions of an inquisitive question are problematized in the relevant context, instead of being suspended from the inquiry at stake, the question falls under the purview of philosophy, rather than being merely of concern to some other scientific or humanistic discipline(s). Simply put, all genuinely normative questions are, as such, philosophical questions.

2.2 All philosophical questions are normative questions

But is it true the other way around? Are all philosophical questions, as such, normative questions too, contrary to what the conventional distinction between 'value theory' and other branches of philosophy suggests? What about, for example, all those metaphysical claims about the way the world *is* (*vis-à-vis ought to be*), such as whether numbers *are real*, whether fictional characters *exist*, whether god *exists*, whether *there is* grounding, and so on? In response, compare those (purportedly descriptive) *metaphysical* claims with (purportedly descriptive) *scientific* claims about the way the world is, such as whether luminiferous aether exists, or whether schizophrenia is real. When we make a descriptive claim about the way the world is, access to verify the claim (or its denial) may or may not be available, for a variety of reasons. Empirical adjudication of the existence of luminiferous aether had long been inaccessible before conditions for conducting the Michelson-Morley experiment were made available by other scientific and technological developments, but became accessible afterwards (provided, of course, a set of normatively entangled ontological and methodological commitments on which modern science is itself premised). The same goes with schizophrenia in medical psychology. In other words, empirical adjudication of scientific claims, about the way the world is, is *in principle* accessible, even if *tentatively* inaccessible in some cases.

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By contrast, empirical adjudication of metaphysical claims about the way the world is appears to be *in principle* inaccessible. Sometimes it is because empirical adjudication is simply beside the point. Of course, we use numbers all the time: this is not something unbeknownst to those who nonetheless deny that numbers are real. Of course, fictional characters do not exist physically as we do in the actual world: this is not something unbeknownst to those insisting that fictional characters nonetheless exist. Thus, when metaphysicians dispute over the reality of numbers or the existence of fictional characters, they are disputing over the appropriateness of different *conceptions* of reality or existence as applied to different subjects, a fundamentally normative question on which readily available facts about those subjects has no bearing at all. On the other hand, there are also metaphysical claims that might appear to be subject to empirical adjudication at first glance, but actually are immune to empirical adjudication upon closer examination. Take the claim that the world has an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent creator. Even if all the purported instances of god's manifestation in the world (such as reported revelations and miracles) are bogus,[8] believers in god's existence can always explain away the lack of any minimally credible trace of god's manifestation by claiming, for example, that god intentionally withdraws itself from the world for reasons beyond human comprehension, a claim that is immune to empirical adjudication. As a result, philosophical debates on god's existence inevitable fall back on conceptual clarifications, logical fallacies and, most importantly, moral arguments, such as on whether an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent god is compatible with there being gratuitous sufferings in the world, and whether claiming no suffering is gratuitous is itself morally acceptable.

To wit, despite the appearance of descriptivity of metaphysical claims about the way the world is, what distinguishes them from the descriptive claims about the way the world is that fall under the purviews of scientific or humanistic disciplines other than philosophy, and makes the former distinctively philosophical, is the fact that there is no non-trivial way to problematize the descriptive dimensions of those claims for meaningful empirical adjudication, and to suspend their entangled or embedded normative dimensions for the

[8] Needless to say, whether we ought to give any credence at all to self-reports and hearsays of revelation or miracle, or should instead assume them to be resulted from various tricks, exaggerations or hallucinations, is itself a normative question.

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sake of such adjudication. In other words, insofar as the questions at issue are distinctly philosophical questions, it is because they are problematized not as empirically adjudicable descriptive questions, but rather as explicitly or implicitly normative questions.

2.3 The intellectual authority of philosophy as a normative discipline

Hence the normative account of philosophy. Philosophicality and normativity are one and the same. All genuinely normative questions are, as such, philosophical questions, and all distinctively philosophical questions are, as such, normative questions. The conventional distinction between 'value theory' and other branches of philosophy wrongly implies that the latter are non-normative in nature; on the contrary, the latter are as fundamentally normative as the former, except in sometimes more implicit ways. Graham Priest (2006) was wrong to claim that, unlike other disciplines, philosophy cannot be defined by its subject matter; on the contrary, the subject matter of philosophy, as a distinctly normative discipline, is the infinite set of explicitly or implicitly normative questions that cannot be answered merely by empirical inquiries carried out in all the other scientific and humanistic disciplines. And Williams's humanistic account of philosophy, which defends the intellectual authority of philosophy as a mere instance of the intellectual authority of the broader humanistic enterprise, misses the mark as it fails to see that it is the unique role of philosophy as a discipline of normative inquiry that really grounds the intellectual authority of philosophy, and distinguishes it from the intellectual authority not only of natural and social sciences, but also of other humanities such as history: that is, from the intellectual authority of various disciplines of descriptive inquiry.

2.4 The disciplinary incubativity of philosophy as a normative discipline

But what about philosophy's long history of raising speculative proto-scientific claims, many of which would make their way into various (newly branched) disciplines of natural and social sciences, such as modern physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, economics, political science, sociology, anthropology and so on? Aren't those speculative proto-scientific claims empirical, rather than normative, in nature? How is this incubative role of philosophy compatible with my account of philosophy as a normative discipline? In response,

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recall that empirical adjudication of apparently descriptive claims about the way the world is may, in some cases, be *tentatively* inaccessible for a variety of reasons. Sometimes we don't really know if the adjudicatory inaccessibility at issue is tentative or not. After all, many questions in the history of philosophy once believed to be empirically non-adjudicable metaphysical questions, such as whether the material world can be divided infinitely or whether it consists instead of basic quantum units, turned out to be the kind of questions resoundingly answered by novel scientific disciplines. *Ex ante*, however, the only possible way to ever discuss those questions was to speculate on them *as if* they were metaphysical questions. By contrast, there are other times when we do believe that certain proto-scientific claims are *eventually* adjudicable as empirical matters, but also acknowledge the lack of appropriate conceptual schemes, reliable methods or crucial technologies that tentatively impedes such adjudication. In those cases, philosophy has to bear the burden of making relevant speculations, while at the same time helping clarify relevant assumptions, until the conditions are ripe for those speculative proto-scientific claims to be fully taken over by the respective disciplines of empirical inquiry. Either way, it is the tentative adjudicatory inaccessibility of the descriptive correspondence of a proto-scientific claim, in combination with the epistemically and practically normative demands for at least some tentative appraisal of the claim, that necessitates its philosophical speculation as a tentative form of epistemically and practically normative inquiry. Seen in this light, the 'incubator' role of philosophy is both unavoidable, on the one hand, and only secondary, on the other hand, as it is parasitic on the more fundamental role of philosophy as the unique discipline of normative inquiry.

2.5 The disciplinary peculiarity of philosophy as a normative discipline

Indeed, it is this uniqueness as a normative discipline that explains the various disciplinary peculiarities of philosophy. To begin with, whereas the various disciplines of descriptive inquiry pursue empirical knowledge that describes and explains the way the world is in increasingly greater details and with increasingly greater degrees of accuracy, the pursuit of philosophy pertains to the development and refinement of arguments and counterarguments in relation to competing normative positions (or 'outlooks', in Williams's terms), and it is this expanding list of normative arguments and counterarguments that constitutes the body of philosophical 'knowledge'

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acquired, accumulated and advanced in the discipline of philosophy. In contrast to scientific disagreements that can be adjudicated by means of empirical processes of observation and experimentation, philosophical inquiry into normative disagreements, which cannot be empirically adjudicated in terms of their descriptive correspondence to the way the world is, has to resort eventually to intuition pumps, conceptual analyses and reasoned arguments in support of a given normative position (even though empirical data can and must be introduced from time to time in the process of normative argumentation, as the normative and non-normative dimensions of an inquiry are frequently entangled with each other). Given the virtual inexhaustibility of potential arguments for and against any normative position, however, philosophers are rendered incapable of claiming any disciplinary consensus over any normative issue at any given time. In other words, the discipline of philosophy is constantly in the frustrating state of 'radical dissensus', with philosophical disagreements being notoriously intractable. Meanwhile, unlike the various disciplines of descriptive inquiry, including natural and social sciences as well as history, the discipline of philosophy cannot have a 'vindicatory' history in the Williamsian sense. For the quality of arguments is but one factor among many in determining or changing the normative stances of most people, and the question of *how* some philosophical 'outlooks' came to prevail over other philosophical 'outlooks' in the course of history – that is, of what *caused* a certain historical transition of the dominant philosophical 'outlook' within a given society – is itself a *descriptive* question, not a normative one. As a result, the normative discipline of philosophy can never explain its own history in a 'vindicatory' manner, even though the (sub)discipline of history of philosophy, *in its capacity of* carrying out *historical* – and hence *descriptive* – inquiry, can be 'vindicatory' in this sense, as illustrated by the aforementioned example of decolonial historiography of philosophy.

By the same token, the proclaimed 'fundamentality' of philosophical questions, the 'integrative' role many have attributed to the discipline of philosophy, and the perception that philosophy is defined not by its subject matter but by the 'spirit' of 'unbridled criticism', can all be explained (away) with ease through the lens of philosophicality as normativity. Recall Wilfrid Sellars's infamously vague pronouncement that philosophy uniquely aims to proffer a synoptic understanding of 'how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term' (Godfrey-Smith 2013: 1). According to the normative account of philosophy, it can do so precisely because it is tasked

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with unveiling the implicit (and fundamental) normative assumptions entangled with, or embedded in, all the apparently empirical descriptions about various 'things in the broadest possible sense of the term', and bring them together in search for the most reasonable and coherent normative stance, through a holistic and never-ending process of normative reflection and argumentation. As the process of normative inquiry cannot be confined within any given discipline of descriptive inquiry, it gives philosophy the appearance of having no definite subject matter whatsoever. The truth, however, is that philosophy has no definite *descriptive* subject matter; for its subject matter is the infinite set of explicitly or implicitly normative questions that cannot be answered merely through descriptive inquiries carried out in all the other disciplines.

Finally, think about questions like these: 'Scientists nowadays don't need to read Nicolaus Copernicus or Isaac Newton in order to do good science. Why are philosophers still reading Plato and Aristotle?'; or 'Why care about non-Western philosophy at all? There isn't anything called "non-Western science" in science, right?' – How does a normative account of philosophy respond to them? A brief answer is: unlike the accumulation of scientific knowledge, the descriptive correspondence of which to the way the world is can be empirically adjudicated, normative arguments and counterarguments are primarily developed with an eye to reflective coherence, even though empirical facts are often invoked as data points in normative reflections. As a consequence, normative inquiry faces a serious danger analogous to that of *overfitting* in machine learning: a normative 'outlook' that seems perfectly reasonable and firmly supported by the strongest possible arguments may turn out to be the result of all those arguments fitting so well into a *dominant* yet *parochial* reflective equilibrium that those who share the normative outlook become oblivious of the fundamental deficits shared by all those arguments. Historically remote or culturally alien texts, however fallacious their specific *arguments* might be, could from time to time bring in forgotten *insights*, disturb our reflective equilibrium in case it overfits, and serve as antidotes to the hazard of philosophical parochialism. Consequently, both *history of philosophy* and *comparative philosophy* are crucial to the long-term progress of philosophy as a discipline of normative inquiry. Seen in this light, not only does the normative account of philosophy provides a better explanation than Williams's humanistic account on why philosophy should be attentive to history, but it also redresses Williams's implicit Western-centric parochialism (as he tasks philosophy to make better sense of a more local 'us' – referring implicitly to the modern West in his text

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– by being attentive to its own history – namely Western history) and advocates the broadening not only of philosophy's *temporal* (*i.e.*, historical) horizon, but also of its *spatial* (*i.e.*, cultural) horizon.[9]

3. Is the normative account of philosophy too radical? Is it too conservative?

Given radical dissensus in the discipline of philosophy, there are bound to be philosophers unconvinced by the normative account I have outlined above, and there are bound to be disagreements among them over why my account is objectionable. In this section I consider two contrasting objections: one of them (the Professional View Objection) contends that the normative account is too radical, and the other (the Boundary Policing Objection) contend that it is too conservative. By discussing and refuting those objections, I hope to clarify some important aspects of the normative account, as well as its theoretical and practical implications.

3.1 The Professional View Objection

To begin with, the Professional View Objection argues that the normative account is too radical, failing to respect how professional philosophers themselves understand the nature of their work and of the discipline. Note that this is different from the contention that many branches of philosophy have *in fact* been concerned mostly with questions about 'is' instead of those about 'ought': for example, metaphysics asks what reality is, epistemology what knowledge is, philosophy of religion whether god exists, philosophy of mind whether artificial intelligence is able to have consciousness, and so

[9] To be sure, just as there are good and bad ways of doing philosophy in general, there are also good and bad ways of doing either history of philosophy or comparative philosophy in particular. For example, certain ways of doing comparative philosophy arguably embody the dynamic of 'celebrating mere spectacles of postcoloniality at the expense of a genuinely decolonized global academia' (Lin 2022: 222), and hence cannot serve as useful antidotes to philosophical parochialism. In any case, the questions of what make good and bad ways of doing philosophy in general, of doing history of philosophy, or of doing comparative philosophy, are themselves normative questions – and thereby philosophical questions.

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on. For, as I have argued above, insofar as those questions are problematized as philosophical questions, it is because of their embedded normative dimensions; and as philosophical questions, they can and should all be reformulated in genuinely normative terms. Rather, the objection here is about the fact that a lot of metaphysicians, epistemologists, philosophers of religion, philosophers of mind and so on *regard* themselves as inquiring into purely non-normative questions. Shouldn't this fact count for something, when it comes to the debate on the nature of philosophical questions?

In response, notice first that whether, when, and to what extent, a meta-philosophical account should respect the beliefs of actual philosophers about the nature of their inquiries is *itself* a normative (and philosophical) question. Karen Bennett, in her discussion on the nature of metaphysics, succinctly summarizes this point along with its underlying methodological tension:

> … characterizing metaphysics is not a purely descriptive task, but also partly a normative one. The question is not just 'what does the discipline in fact concern itself with?', but rather 'what *ought* the discipline concern itself with?' This question might get a revisionary answer; it might be the case that some topics that have been traditionally considered metaphysical are not ones that metaphysicians ought to worry about at all. Nonetheless, even a revisionary answer is constrained to a significant extent by the actual practices of actual metaphysicians. If we ignore all of the sociology and history, if we ignore what is and has been called 'metaphysics', we risk changing the subject entirely. For example, I cannot claim that staircases ought to be the sole topic of metaphysics; that is a clear nonstarter. (Bennett 2016: 30)

Unfortunately, here Bennett fails to go one step further and realize that the normativity of appropriately characterizing metaphysics (or, *mutatis mutandis*, philosophy in general) lies not only in its revisionist part, but also in its conservationist part. We ought to avoid ignoring the sociology and history of metaphysics (or, *mutatis mutandis*, of philosophy in general), precisely because we have relevant *normative* reasons that advise us to avoid such ignorance, including a normative imperative to not 'risk changing the subject entirely'. The search for a proper balance between methodological conservationism and revisionism in characterizing metaphysics (or, *mutatis mutandis*, philosophy in general) is not the weighing of some purely descriptive socio-historical facts *per se* that are (erroneously) thought to be in favour of one side *vis-à-vis* some normative reasons in favour

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of the other, but rather the weighing of some normative reasons in favour of granting socio-historical facts greater weights *vis-à-vis* other normative reasons in favour of granting them less weights. In other words, characterizing metaphysics (or, *mutatis mutandis*, philosophy in general) is as much a normative task all the way down as it is a (meta)philosophical task all the way down: precisely what the normative account of philosophy suggests. Meanwhile, note that the normative account of philosophy is only 'mildly' revisionist, so to speak; that is, while holding that many metaphysicians misunderstand *why* their works count as philosophy, it does not deny that those metaphysical works *do* count as philosophy. As a result, it does not 'risk changing the *subject*' of the discipline at all, and therefore does not tip the normative balance towards conserving the dominant 'professional view' on the nature of philosophy.

That being said, the normative account does have significant practical implications in relation to how the discipline of philosophy *perceives* itself. For example, think about the culture of intradisciplinary hierarchy prevalent in many corners of contemporary academic philosophy, where those working in so-called 'hard' philosophy (such as metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language and philosophy of mind) often look down upon 'soft' philosophy (exemplified by 'value theory'). While there might be a variety of factors contributing to this culture, the perception that 'hard' philosophy does not involve normative (or evaluative) dimensions, and can therefore be more rigorous and more objective *vis-à-vis* 'soft' philosophy, arguably plays an important role in this regard. If so, the realization that philosophicality and normativity are two sides of the same coin would be crucial to dismantling this hierarchical culture within contemporary academic philosophy and transforming the discipline into a radically egalitarian intellectual enterprise.

3.2 The Boundary Policing Objection

But even if the normative account of philosophy acknowledges the philosophicality of, say, metaphysical works because of their embedded normativity, some might protest, aren't there still lots of other decidedly *empirical* researches done by philosophers? For example, recent works in 'experimental philosophy' aim to ascertain our philosophical intuitions empirically by means of various social scientific methods, such as surveys and controlled experiments. Does the normative account of philosophy deny that those emerging works in experimental philosophy count as philosophy? Underlying

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this line of questioning is the second objection to the normative account, the Boundary Policing Objection, which holds that the normative account unjustifiably polices the boundary of philosophical inquiry, dictating what kind of work should be accepted as philosophy and what kind of work should not. In contrast to the Professional View Objection, which worries that the normative account is too *radical*, denying the philosophicality of those works that are widely regarded as central to the philosophical enterprise, the Boundary Policing Objection worries that the normative account is too *conservative*, denying the philosophicality of those works that are novel and peripheral *vis-à-vis* the established practice of the discipline.

This objection rests on a misunderstanding of the normative account of philosophy, however, and consequently conflates the *distinction* between normative and non-normative inquiries, on the one hand, with their *insulation*, on the other hand. Rather than insulating the normative discipline of philosophy from all the scientific and humanistic disciplines of descriptive inquiry, the normative account of philosophy *encourages interdisciplinarity*, especially considering that normative and non-normative dimensions of inquiry are all too often intricately entangled with each other in any of those disciplines. Just as questions in philosophy of science inevitably arise throughout the process of scientific inquiry, and are rightfully taken up not only by professional philosophers but also by scientists whose knowledge, training and familiarity with their respective scientific disciplines are crucial to reflecting on those philosophical questions, the familiarity of professional philosophers with various philosophical concepts, arguments and theories is crucial to designing and conducting adequate empirical researches on how those concepts, arguments and theories are valorised in real life. In the meantime, the 'fruitfulness' of a normative concept in solving practical problems is arguably an important consideration in our appraisal of that normative concept (Lindauer 2020), and adequately designed empirical researches can help us assess the fruitfulness of various normative concepts. In other words, even though much of experimental philosophy is empirical in nature, philosophers are more than justified to partake in it, both because the participation of philosophers is needed for the healthy development of experimental philosophy, and because the empirical program of experimental philosophy is needed for the reflective progress of philosophy as a normative discipline.

As a side note, it is important to distinguish the Boundary Policing Objection to the normative account of philosophy, on the one hand,

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from criticisms of the actual practice of boundary policing in contemporary academic philosophy, on the other hand. For example, Kristie Dotson (2012) has famously called to attention the fact that the philosophical credential of black feminist theories is too often explicitly or implicitly questioned within the discipline, placing onerous burdens on black feminist philosophers to justify the philosophical relevance of their works and approaches. By contrast, precisely because racism and sexism are quintessential normative issues to grapple with, the normative account of philosophy sees black feminist theories as quintessentially philosophical, and demands the cultural transformation of the philosophical discipline from a 'white man's game' to an intellectual enterprise embracing diverse people with radically different lived experiences and theoretical perspectives.[10]

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[10] Core ideas of this article were presented at the New York Chinese Culture Salon (May 3, 2015), at the Center for East Asian and Comparative Philosophy, City University of Hong Kong (December 5, 2016), at the Colloquium on Contemporary Issues in Western Philosophy, Renmin University Department of Philosophy (June 23, 2018), and at the Humanities and Social Sciences Colloquium, New York University Shanghai (September 13, 2024); laid out in a number of public philosophy essays written in Chinese; and tried in countless conversations with fellow philosophers. I am deeply grateful to all my audiences, readers, and interlocutors for their engagement and feedback – and in particular to Yuan Yuan for her unwavering support – throughout the years.

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