JUSTIFYING A LARGE PART OF PHILOSOPHY

Bryan Frances

I explain why research in non-applied, non-interdisciplinary, non-historical philosophy is worthwhile. The key move in the explanation is the realization that many philosophical problems can be put in the form of a set of highly plausible yet apparently jointly inconsistent claims regarding a fundamental notion.

On occasion, someone will ask you why you're a philosopher and not a scientist or some other, more obviously respectable, intellectual. Or a high and mighty philosopher will dismiss all of philosophy with the exception of the history of philosophy. Others will restrict philosophy's importance to applied philosophy or philosophy with obvious interdisciplinary features. Or someone from a different discipline might be respectful of the philosophical profession but in need of an explanation of why research in philosophy that is not applied, is not interdisciplinary, and does not fall under the heading of the history of philosophy is thought to be important. A university dean or other university official or professor might have just that question. A family relative might like to know the answer too.

I suspect that there is a way to justify the modest claim that much of the research done in non-applied, non-interdisciplinary, non-historical philosophy is worthwhile as a community endeavour because it consists of work on real and worthwhile problems. (By 'non-historical' all I mean is that it isn't history of philosophy; so 'non-historical philosophy' includes philosophy explicitly informed by the history of philosophy.) Oddly enough, we need not delve far into the problems or any other philosophy in order to offer the justification.

The key step is to point out that there are certain *genuine* puzzles regarding *fundamentally important* notions that only

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philosophers work on and which scientists don't seem able to solve or often disposed to even address. The reason these puzzles are fundamentally important lies in their subject matter (e.g. truth, justice, consciousness, knowledge); the reason they are genuine is that they can be put in the form of a small number of individually highly plausible yet apparently jointly inconsistent claims. Since they seem jointly inconsistent, I want to say that they can't all be true; since each is highly plausible, I want to say that each is true; but of course I can't say both things once I see the incompatibility between them. Any minimally adequate response to the puzzle must do either of two things:

- Identify the claims in the puzzle that aren't true, explain why they aren't true, articulate the truths we have been confusing them with (if there are any), and explain how it is that we made the mistake of thinking they are true.
- Explain how contrary to what anyone thought, the claims are all true and do not conflict with one another. In this case the solution must greatly clarify the claims so we can see that they don't really conflict.

For instance, the gist of the problem posed by philosophical scepticism can be captured in this way.

1. If there are conflicting and competing hypotheses P and Q, then in order to know that P is correct, one has to have some evidence, of some or other kind, that rules out Q.
2. The brain-in-a-vat hypothesis ('For many years I have been nothing but a handless brain in a vat being fed electrical signals so as to produce the illusion of living a normal life') and the hands hypothesis ('I have hands') conflict and compete.
3. We don't have any evidence of any kind that rules out the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis.

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(It apparently follows from (1)–(3) that we don't know that we have hands.)

4. We know that we have hands.

It certainly appears as though (1)–(4) are jointly inconsistent. And after some reflection (in a philosophy class, say), one will see that each claim is pretty plausible. Of course, the sceptical problem could be put in this plausible-but-inconsistent form with a slightly different set of claims, but it's the form that we're interested in here. If one thinks that the natures of knowledge and evidence are important topics, as one should if one is intellectually alive, then one will see the value in the philosophical investigation of the problem of scepticism, as it can be presented as a set of apparently conflicting yet highly reasonable claims about knowledge and evidence.

Here is another example, from metaphysics. Suppose 'human trunk' meant the torso and the head. Suppose further that we lived in a community in which 'trunk' had a useful role in linguistic behaviour. So 'trunk' in this society is like 'arm' in our society. (Perhaps in this society people lose their arms and legs unfortunately often, so 'trunk' is really useful and used frequently.) At 1 p.m. you have an entirely intact and normal body; at 2 p.m. your arms and legs are removed in an accident but you are kept alive and fully conscious (with plenty of morphine). Once your arms and legs are removed they are annihilated in a nuclear explosion. Call your 1 p.m. trunk 'Trunk'; call your 1 p.m. body 'Body'; call your right foot 'Foot'. Here is a set of apparently jointly inconsistent yet individually highly plausible claims.

5. At 1 p.m. Body exists and has Foot as a part.
6. At 1 p.m. Trunk exists but does not have Foot as a part.
7. If (5) & (6) are true, then at 1 p.m. Body $\neq$ Trunk (they can't be the same thing, since at 1 p.m. one has a part the other lacks).

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8. If Body ≠ Trunk at 1 p.m., then Body ≠ Trunk at 2 p.m. (compare: the fact that Twain = Clemens at one time guarantees that Twain = Clemens at any earlier time).
9. At 2 p.m. Body = Trunk (as they are perfectly materially coincident at that time: made of the exact same stuff in the exact same place at the exact same time).

It may be a bit harder to digest this series of claims, but eventually one can see why each is plausible. If one thinks that it's worthwhile to understand the notion of a physical object and the logical notion of parthood – even if one fails to find either *personally* interesting – then one should see the value in puzzling over (5)–(9).

By putting philosophical problems in this 'highly plausible but apparently jointly inconsistent' form there is little room for dismissive responses towards either the problems themselves or the goal of the research effort devoted to solving them. For instance, one cannot complain of our 'not having earned the right to speak in that way' or being saddled with either 'incoherent statements' or 'inadequate concepts'. The challenge is always this: which of the several claims isn't true (and now *please* explain why it seems true but is really false or neither true nor false), and alternatively, if they're all true, then how on earth do you explain away their apparent joint inconsistency? There is no way to proceed except by getting philosophically dirty by delving into the details (alternatively: the only way to proceed is to partially *clean* one's philosophical mind by delving into the details!). The recalcitrant philosopher, scientist, or other intellectual who desires to stand above the fray can always claim that the individual claims aren't all plausible, but then she still has to offer an explanation why they aren't true and yet so many intelligent philosophers – some of whom are or were geniuses – take them to be obviously true. Frankly, to say they aren't intuitively true is to make an obviously false sociological claim!

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When I say that scientists don't seem to be able to solve the problems of philosophy, I don't mean that they don't have anything useful to contribute. For instance, the theory of relativity seems to be a good and highly relevant contribution to the investigation of certain philosophical problems regarding time. But scientific training often fails to give one the tools one needs to do productive work on philosophical problems. In fact, it sometimes creates an attitude that simply refuses to see philosophical problems – on occasion, even when they are put in the form just described.

There are many philosophical problems that can be put in this 'highly plausible but apparently jointly inconsistent' form. This isn't to say that they are actually put into this form in the typical research article (or even introductory book) that addresses the problem. And it's often difficult to put them in this form. Finally, I'd be surprised if this way of formulating philosophical problems could be applied to all philosophical problems, even the most famous ones. So be it.

Someone could challenge my thesis 'Any philosophical problem regarding some notion like knowledge or goodness that can be put in this form is worthwhile'. He or she might think that an apparently contradictory set of highly intuitive claims about the notion of truth, or justice, or time, or thought, or existence, or beauty, isn't very important. She might do this because she doesn't care about inconsistency; alternatively, she might not care about the philosophical notions in question. The first defect can often be repaired with some instruction in logic; the second might be harder to correct. But if one has any serious kind of intellectual life then one won't challenge the premise. I'm addressing only people who appreciate intellectual matters.

By my lights, philosophy is mostly (but not entirely!) *PAINTS*: problems, arguments, ideas, notions, theories, and solutions. I choose a fundamentally important *notion* (e.g. truth, time, matter, thought, consciousness); I want a *theory* of (or explanatorily illuminating 'story' about) that notion; to that end I gather some *ideas* or claims regarding that notion; I often then see that the ideas generate a *problem*, often in

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the form of a collection of 'highly plausible but apparently jointly inconsistent' claims; I then try to find a *solution* to that problem, a proposal for solving it, thinking that the proposal will help me come up with the desired theory of or story about the philosophical notion in question.

We philosophers would do ourselves a favour if we worked hard to put our favourite philosophical issues into the 'highly plausible but apparently jointly inconsistent' form using nothing but simple, non-technical prose. This can't always be done, but it can be done often enough that we should be able to write 1,000-word essays with titles like 'Why Philosophical Research into Vagueness [or Scepticism or Content or Freewill or Moral Facts or Modality or Material Composition or Induction or Confirmation or Reference or Causation or Colour or Belief or Evidence or 'The'] is Important'.

Let me be clear on what I'm doing. I'm not saying that philosophy (today or overall) is *just* PAINTS; I'm not even saying that *almost all* philosophy is PAINTS (although I do believe that). I'm not saying that the importance of philosophy lies in PAINTS alone. I'm not saying that the most important part of philosophy is PAINTS. I have said nothing about the teaching of philosophy (although I hope that the reader can guess part of what I'd say on that topic). I am saying this: PAINTS is a significant part of philosophy and it shows that research in *non-applied, non-interdisciplinary, non-historical* philosophy is well worth doing as the activity of a community of intellectuals. As long as one thinks that the topics mentioned are important, and one appreciates the logical point about the apparent inconsistency of highly reasonable claims, one should come to see why the philosophical research in question is worthwhile.

A critic of mine might agree that the subject matter and goals of non-applied, non-interdisciplinary, non-historical philosophy are worthwhile but go on to object that since philosophers make no progress in meeting their goals, my justification for a group of scholars working in non-applied, non-interdisciplinary, non-historical philosophy falls away.

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It isn't hard to show that the remark goes too far: philosophers are the ones who call our attention to and rigorously formulate these problems. The fact that there is progress in this kind of philosophizing is harder to show, although it's perfectly obvious to anyone who actually studies philosophy for an extended period of time; I won't attempt it here although I have a work in progress defending this claim about progress (a little joke there).

This 'highly plausible but apparently jointly inconsistent' justification of the enterprise of research in philosophy is *modest*. All I've shown is that much of the research in philosophy revolves around *genuine and fundamental problems*. But when we put our philosophical problems in the form described above, we have something close to a *proof* of the worth of those problems; we also have the start of a justification of the philosophical community's research into those problems. This amounts to at least a partial defence of the enterprise of non-applied, non-interdisciplinary, non-historical philosophy, one appropriate for discussion with sceptics and curious bystanders.

Bryan Frances is Research Professor of Theoretical Philosophy in the Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics at the University of Tartu, Estonia. bryan.frances@yahoo.com

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