

Review of: "Does Philosophy Matter? The Urgent Need for a Philosophical Revolution"

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At this point, there are over two dozen reviews of Dr. Maxwell's paper, and there is little that is new to say about it. We will mainly agree with those of his critics who note the strongly personal and negative tone, the excessive repetition, the absence of argument or evidence, and the presence of many sweeping generalizations. The author ensured that this piece would not be taken seriously by his claims that the author can save all of academia if only academics would listen to him and follow his guidance. This is an almost perfect self-caricature of an academic. It drips with irony for anyone who has spent any time in universities. Unfortunately, if we leave it here, we would be guilty of just the kinds of expression that we criticize Dr. Maxwell for (except that we have not claimed to have the profound and sweeping answers he has claimed). So, in what follows, we provide some evidences of why we evaluate Dr. Maxwell's paper as negatively as we do.

Dr. Maxwell ends the first paragraph of his article with the sentence: "Academic philosophy today is a hollow, sterile discipline, devoid of all intellectual and human significance." We cannot afford to neglect the sweeping denunciation of an entire discipline comprised of thousands of practitioners. Read literally, the statement becomes almost impossible to defend, because academic philosophy surely possesses some intellectual merit. Although we are not philosophers, we find many philosophers well worth reading because they illuminate important points, reveal hidden discrepancies, and make valuable distinctions. We agree that there are many boring and highly jargonistic philosophers who do not repay the time and attention their work requests, but how can he make such sweeping generalizations when there are such obvious differences among philosophers?

Dr. Maxwell's straw person is defended through provocative attributions. He cites an unfavorable quote toward the Philosophy of Science by John Ziman, even though the latter, later in his career, became an active and passionate philosopher of science. After Dr. Maxwell lists a handful of quotes expressing pessimism toward philosophy's usefulness, he concludes "Even philosophers themselves hold that philosophy is devoid of any value or significance!" Again, the overgeneralizations here are essential, and they invalidate his claim. The few quotes he provides cannot support a thesis that is so expansive as to be almost impossible to defend.

Dr. Maxwell confuses repetition for persuasion and ire for correctness. His openly self-serving fury undermines his argument inasmuch as it seems to prevent him from providing any argument at all. Instead, he tells us to read his books and articles to find the argument he neglects to provide. It stuns us that he thinks that this set of complaints would incline us to read more of his work! If anything, it convinces us that his work will not repay the time it takes to read it. In this paper, he asserts, asserts, and asserts again, moving into such sweeping claims as (and this is only mildly paraphrased)

'If my work had been more appreciated, millions of lives would have been saved.' Or, as he puts it: "The body of work I have alluded to, [Dr. Maxwell's own]... might have been noticed...[and] catastrophic loss of wildlife might have been stopped...Brexit might not have been voted for. And Donald Trump might not have become President." It seems advisable to try to find out why his work has been less appreciated than he thinks it should be.

Dr. Maxwell has gripped a kernel of truth, that academic philosophy can at times turn toward the esoteric and the removed, but he has whipped it into a crisis of eschatological proportions. Despite his furor, Dr. Maxwell does not provide any sort of penetrating social analysis in his article, nor does he address the complexity of the transitions he proposes. When reading the article, one has the impression of an individual banging on a drum, an effect emphasized by the frequent repetition of words, phrases, and sentences as well as the occasional use of all-caps.

Dr. Maxwell seems to believe that academic philosophers exert an incredible amount of influence on the University, as an institution, and on other knowledge practices, as evidenced by his conviction that increased philosophical appreciation of his work would lead to dramatic global change. Unfortunately, Dr. Maxwell will continue to be disappointed, for multiple reasons. Firstly, he over-estimates the influence of academic philosophy on society in general. Secondly, he under-estimates the difficulties inherent in producing lasting social change. Thirdly, the social challenges he identifies are sufficiently complex and over-determined as to haunt him regardless of the extent to which his work is appreciated in the academy. We are sorry, but we cannot say anything to support his self-perceived importance, but that is an extremely tall order!

Dr. Maxwell might want to read the voluminous literatures on ecological science, social influence, ecological psychology, science communication, and many other subdisciplines that are focused on just the sort of practical solutions he pines for. This is the problem with sweeping generalizations, they are seldom accurate in such a complex world.