

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

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I think the significant point the article makes is that the thesis it mentions (without substantiating it here) has been consistently overlooked despite having been validated by a host of our disciplinary measures for such validation. As it happens, I myself believe that the thesis itself about what philosophy should be doing could not be more wrong. But, clearly, this is not why it has been overlooked. Again, the worth of this thesis has been validated by a host of exactly the institutional measures to which we look for such validation. Consequently, it is enormously revealing that it has been overlooked as it has.

I think if the paper were to explore what this neglect reveals, this might make it not only publishable but very important to publish. I think, too, that what this neglect of the thesis reveals is one of the things which is crucially missed by the thesis itself. There is (at least) a second thing I believe the thesis crucially misses, which I will come to. (I will take it up only briefly, as this thesis is not where I see the value of the paper to lie.)

The first thing I believe this neglect reveals is that institutional/professional philosophy is not, in fact, concerned even with inquiry into mere knowledge, as the neglected thesis claims it is. It is instead concerned with carrying out a set of industries of discussion among like-minded peers, industries which can create the illusion for the scholars involved that they know what they're talking about: that they have an expertise. This illusion, it seems to me, shields them from the existential uncertainties which belong to genuine deep thought and, on the positive side, gratifies a lot of basic human needs for them: security, belonging, status. Consequently, it really doesn't matter what Dr. Maxwell says that challenges the status quo. It will be overlooked because the point of the status quo is to have that particular status quo, and that is what will be defended. In this context, any attempt to get a hearing that involves a challenge to the status quo misses the point of what motivates the challenge's audience, what its commitments are.

That professional philosophy is a set of industries of this kind is, I think, enormously significant. It means that, philosophically speaking, professional philosophy has nothing to do with philosophy -- even with what it itself purports to mean by the word, since the point is to maintain the illusion that it is not just an industry, but a genuine form of inquiry resulting in a genuine expertise. This means, in turn, that we need to turn elsewhere to find responses to appeals to philosophy, and in fact to find the practice of philosophy.

With respect to Dr. Maxwell's overlooked thesis itself, the second thing I believe it crucially misses is that philosophy and the kind of wisdom it seeks are the very opposite of what is directly useful or practical. I would say philosophical thought

and interaction consist most fundamentally in an active exercise of our being. (I know: "what could this mean?" Nonetheless, this is my view; and I think it means well enough as meanings go: as well, for example, as "doing the right thing," "being careful," or even "specifying exactly.") For a practice of exercising our being, unanimity of answers is not only unnecessary but is incoherent as a relevant conception; and being directly useful for any particular purpose is equally so. When we find theses that we can directly put to use, rather than insights which are the fertile soil from which unanticipated uses may emerge, we are no longer doing philosophy, but carrying out irresponsibly unreflective ideology. This, I believe, would be a "fundamentalism," to use Dr. Maxwell's term, of the ordinary kind.

To be clear, I am not saying that the kind of wisdom pursuit Dr. Maxwell's thesis advocates is any less important than he says it is. What I am describing as philosophy may pale into insignificance against it, and perhaps should be abandoned in favour of it. I'm just saying that what he's describing isn't philosophy. On the other hand, I'm also saying that what he criticizes as bad philosophy isn't philosophy either, and for reasons that probably make it much worse than his characterisation of it.

His current article offers a good argument for the bad character of institutional philosophy and, deliberately, not an argument for the thesis he mentions. I am proposing that the argument he does make makes the article valuable, and that accordingly this argument should be completed by developing some of its implications.