

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

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Dear Nicholas Maxwell,

I read your piece as an argument that the academic discipline philosophy is overly focussed on knowledge and does not concern itself enough with questions about the proper course of action for issues of societal relevance. I am very sympathetic to this claim. Your argument, however, suffers from severe weaknesses, principally your excessive use of emotional language and your homogenisation of a heterogenous discipline. This makes your piece sound grouchy in a way that is likely to be harmful to your cause.

You write that you “utterly disagree”, that philosophy has “degenerated” into an “esoteric triviality”, that it is responsible for “the worst ills”, you write about “trivial intellectual pursuits” and of “supreme urgency”. And all this just in the first five sentences of the second section; the paper continues in a similar fashion. This emotional language is reminiscent of contemporary FOX news reporting, Donald Trump speeches, or overly zealous activist writing. It aims to manipulate the reader into following your line of reasoning, rather than letting the arguments speak for themselves. It sounds grouchy in a way that undermines (my) trust in what you have to say. This harms your cause.

You write as if philosophy were a homogenous whole. It is not. There are various strands of philosophy, and some are more like the philosophy you criticise than others. By downplaying (if not ignoring) your allies in the discipline, you alienate potentially interested readers. Much feminist philosophy, for example, has concrete recommendations for courses of action to societally relevant issues of today – from women’s rights to unjust exclusions of marginalised groups to matters of climate change and beyond. Education theorists have long since challenged educational practices at all levels of learning. The practice turn in the philosophy of science has (also) brought about engagement with human action in science. Discussions about the ethics of various scientific and mathematical disciplines is flourishing and has led to concrete policies. You mention none of this, and hence fail to acknowledge the complexities of the issue at hand.

I am also put off by the never-acknowledged ambiguity in your piece between philosophy as an academic discipline and philosophy as a sort of general attitude or value system that informs contemporary academic practices. Are you criticising the discipline, or are you criticising the aims of academic activity? The quotes you give in the first section suggest the former, but your writing often (but not always) seems to target the latter. Some care with this would significantly increase the value of your piece.

Your trust in reason and rationality strikes me as naïve. The literature on motivated reasoning (see Neil Levy’s book “Bad

Beliefs” for references) or the (more recent) work of Catarina Dutilh Novaes is insightful here.

And then there is the issue already pointed out by your reviewer Joseph Pitt: your article has too much of an “I am angry because I have been saying stuff for 50 years but nobody is listening”-flavour. I suggest to find others who say something similar to what you want to say, treat them as allies, praise them for what you like about them and criticise what you dislike. This will help your reader to get a more refined feel for what you are after.

Kind regards,

Colin Rittberg