Mark Addis* and Kenneth R. Westphal*

Introduction

https://doi.org/10.1515/sats-2020-2005

Philosophy and its Plight

Philosophy, as a form of inquiry and an academic discipline, is under unprecedented pressures in various ways that combine to amplify their overall effects. In an increasingly technological and globalised world, demands on resources, instability, and conflicts are rising with ever more urgent needs to find interdisciplinary solutions to complex problems. Unsurprisingly, many outside the broad philosophical community regard pursuing philosophy for its own sake as an expensive luxury that can be spared; such claims increasingly find their way into the mainstream media. This context results in growing intellectual and institutional demands upon philosophy to justify its relevance and contribution to contemporary issues, whether economic, sociopolitical or scientific.

The impacts of globalisation, the managerial revolution (Pritchard 2015; Donskis et al. 2019) and the rise of right-wing anti-intellectual populist politics upon the academy generally have been well documented within academia; their effects upon the humanities, including philosophy, has being particularly marked. The current widespread institutional problems for the humanities have long history dating back to the mid-nineteenth century. They were first diagnosed and criticised by Mill in his 1867 Rectorial Address to the University of St. Andrews; they accord with Weber's characterisation of bureaucratic rationalisation, whereby procedures and protocols are set by administrative decision-making, typically without effective oversight or redress by those subject to such management (Atalay 2007; Clegg 2007; Krasmann 2007). A steady stream of such analyses has gradually become a torrent of informed and detailed analyses (for a chronological bibliography, see Westphal 2018), and although this work is within the academic province of sociology, philosophers ignore it at their own peril. Yet there is little a typical university philosopher can do directly to address the consequences of globalisation, managerialism in the academy and the growth of right-wing populist politics.

***Corresponding authors: Mark Addis,** Centre for Philosophy of Natural and Social Science, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom,
E-mail: m.addis@lse.ac.uk
Kenneth R. Westphal, Philosophy, Boğaziçi Üniversitesi, Istanbul, Turkiye,
E-mail: westphal.k.r@gmail.com

From within the discipline, philosophy is also under challenge by increased questioning from philosophers about a perceived lack of progress and whether some well-established methods of philosophical inquiry are actively contributing to this. In still sharper criticism, some philosophers have clearly articulated the idea that there is something very wrong with our discipline's configuration and practices. This trend reflects a growing sense of unease amongst philosophers about the direction philosophy has been taking recently and continues to take. These concerns are located within and reinforced by the broader problem of lack of fundamental agreement about what would constitute progress of a desirable kind and which general approaches would facilitate it. This stems at least in part from the fact that searching critical assessment is central to philosophy, and yet trying to characterise what this might entail generates controversies about its proper scope and nature. Some key questions amongst the many which might be posed include those about the terms and range of relevant search and scrutiny, what forms of criticism are germane, feasible, informative or cogent, what can count as assessment in contrast (say) to mere disagreement, and what is deemed as innovation or advance in contrast to mere novelty or change of topic. Most professional philosophers are educators, but few are philosophers of education. However, there are important questions about what the educational aims of philosophy are and what they ought to be, how well these align with each other and with actual educational outcomes and what would be the distinguishing features of cogent answers. Difficulties about and negative perceptions of disciplinary direction and progress are not merely of intellectual relevance but are of direct practical importance, as they increase the difficulty of defending the institutional position of philosophy. Evidence of this can be found globally, with recent examples of cuts or attempted cuts in Brazil, Hungary and the United States, amongst other places.

Although philosophers sceptical of the view that anything is wrong with how the discipline is currently configured and operates might wish to dismiss these concerns as another instance of the cyclical fashions in philosophy, maintaining the plausibility of such scepticism is not simple. Of course, the history of philosophy contains examples of overt or implicit scepticism about the value of the activity, with Hume and Wittgenstein often featuring in discussions of this, but such scepticism is relatively rare and heavily concentrated on particular individuals and groups. There was a relatively recent crisis of philosophical self-confidence in the 1980s, but its scope was heavily constrained to discussion about the philosophical agendas Rorty and MacIntyre appeared to promote (Smith 1988). In their respective ways, they appeared to urge that the methods and resources of philosophy cannot address genuine philosophical issues, especially not those live in the broader culture. What is different about the current crisis in philosophy is

the amount and diffusion of literature about this both within philosophy and also the broader context of academic humanities (see, for example, Cellucci 2018). This kind of proliferation strongly suggests that there are substantive concerns.

The crisis within philosophy

Although a typical university philosopher can do little to directly influence these developments solo, philosophers can and should address problems about the configuration of and practices within the discipline. As might well be expected, developments outside philosophy putting it under pressure tend to be more obvious to philosophers than what we ourselves do either deliberately or unwittingly to the nature, content and concerns of philosophical activities. For example, although professional philosophers recognise the importance of public education, a common reason given for not engaging in it is that university reward systems give insufficient weight to and support for this kind of public activity. There should be greater self-critical discussion amongst philosophers about how current internal disciplinary practices have damaged and are damaging the discipline; this should serve to motivate examining our own philosophical and pedagogical practices.

An important instance of the impact of the growth of bureaucratic rationalisation upon professional philosophy is simplistic reliance upon double- or triple-blind procedures for journal refereeing. These require any prospective referees for the journal to recuse themselves if they surmise the authorship of an article they are invited to review. It is worth reflecting on what such requirement for ignorance of authorship presupposes, namely, that only such ignorance can ensure unbiased assessment and either expertise is not a desideratum for professional refereeing or professional contributions to the field are expected to be so bland and generic that their authorship cannot be discerned. What should give pause for thought here is that experts are supposed to know what research is conducted within their fields and who is conducting it and be able to assess research solely on its merits, independently of personal preferences; these capacities count as criteria for legitimate ascription of expertise. The bland unidentifiable academic style required by the anonymity of the refereeing process inevitably results in the extreme fragmentation of topics so that philosophers are too narrowly trained and focussed to ascertain whether their latest invention may have any significance beyond its specialist niche or whether indeed that niche has any further significance, philosophical or otherwise. Such extreme fragmentation of topics is also notably driven by the demand to

be ever more productive, where one way to satisfy this is to identify a particular niche which can be populated. Contemporary academic philosophy is thus characterised by increased specialisation and small technical and scholarly debates. Another manifestation of the productivity drive is the chronic over-commitment experienced by so many professional philosophers (Haack 2019).

Due to increasing individual specialisation, departmental members of hiring committees are either unable or unwilling to assess the merits of research or research records of those who apply. Instead, only indirect indicators are used, such as the writers of the reference letters and the presses and journals publishing their research. However, these indicators can be unreliable, as they are evidence by proxy and cannot substitute for critical assessment by experts in the field. This is compounded by the fact that appointments by committees (even those comprising the whole philosophy department as members) often encounter the problem that the best candidates are some in regard or another the most controversial, with the result that a lesser comprise candidate is recruited instead. The importance accorded to philosophical stars, whether individual or departmental, can help to reinforce existing disciplinary norms. These trends have resulted in many departments that were more or less pluralist in their philosophical approaches and methods have over the past 20 years or so becoming exclusively orientated towards analytical philosophy. Recruitment and promotions are determined by perceived merit but there is a failure to recognise that only philosophers engaging in the same kind of analytical philosophy favoured by the appointing committee can be regarded as meritorious. One consequence of this is that philosophy has become increasingly distant from much of the other work going on in the humanities and other disciplines.

Turning to practices within philosophical inquiry itself, the methodological stance taken towards new genres and methods is important. When new genres or methods are developed within the humanities, the first generation is usually the most original and incisive because they know what they are turning away from and what they seek to gain with their new approach and methods. The second generation still learns something of the alternative genres and methods but passes little of this on to the third generation. Then (borrowing an analogue of Kuhn's idea of normal science), the new genres and methods settle into a normal discipline or normal technique. In philosophy, a common (though not a necessary) consequence of this is methodological constriction and superficiality linked to a limited understanding of the alternatives. It can be a definite philosophical achievement to demonstrate that what people (including philosophers) regarded as a serious philosophical problem is not one or is only a pseudo-problem. However, showing this is very different from drawing enough distinctions or reconfiguring the form of the inquiry to ensure that the putative

philosophical problem ceases to be part of that inquiry or even visible. Methodological issues remain insufficiently examined; instances of this may be found in many parts of philosophy. For example, traditional philosophy of science has been grounded on and is still dominated by a single model discipline with theoretically orientated physics being the paradigmatic case. However, current scientific practice is increasingly interdisciplinary, engineering orientated and computationally and big data driven. Given this divergence between philosophical thinking about science and the practices of science itself, key questions include those about what general methodological, epistemological and ontological principles and concerns philosophy of science should have. Another instance is that the philosophy of public health is hardly addressed outside specialist philosophy of medicine journals despite its wider methodological ramifications for issues about rights and distributive justice.

There are several ways in which methodological issues within philosophy might be more critically examined. One would be to try to move towards a conception of philosophy as a discipline characterised by what ought to count as a philosophical inquiry by examining what is done and how it is done rather than by the topics analysed and the resources used in this analysis. Taking this conception of philosophy seriously would have the consequence that the presumption that the method of philosophy is conceptual analysis (see e.g. Spohn 2018) requires critical scrutiny. For example, the attempt to parcel philosophical issues into individual problems to be solved, resolved or dissolved piecemeal requires semantic atomism of a kind that Carnap repudiated when he (1950b) adopted a moderately holistic semantics (Wick 1951) and the method of explication in *The Logical Foundations of Probability* (1950a, 1–18). This critical scrutiny relates to a limited strand in the analytic philosophy literature questioning what value conceptual analysis has (see e.g. Unger 2014). Another consequence would be that the history of philosophy should be taken properly as philosophy rather than relegated to the broad disciplinary category of the history of ideas. However, such an approach runs counter to the current prevalent trend within analytical philosophy to regard the history of philosophy as irrelevant to the resolution of philosophical problems. It would also alter the aims of graduate study in philosophy, much of which has the implicit aim of constricting the terms of philosophical inquiry so as to better to understand and assess any specific issues, examinations or results of that inquiry, thereby promoting conformity to established disciplinary norms. Instead, graduate study must be open about the scope, capacities and limits of various philosophical methodologies as well as the problems to be addressed and their proper formulations.

Professional philosophers are members of institutions who interact widely, directly and indirectly, and are responsible for the consequences of their actions, whether intended or otherwise. The indirect consequences of individual professional activities can be occluded by a narrow focus upon a personal niche, regardless of its nature. These problems are compounded by the sociological law of unintended consequences through which a group of interacting people behaving in the same or similar ways can over time effect results quite different from any sought by the individual agents in that group (Boudon 1982; Flap 2015; Mica 2015). Professionalising philosophical training to narrowly focus upon chosen specialisations multiplies possible forms of negligence whilst stunting capacities to identify and rectify untoward consequences of our actions and institutional behaviours (Beck 1997; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Flap 2015). It follows from this that however training in philosophical skills is conceived and practised, this training in itself is insufficient to nurture the professional ethos required to perform our duties, whether departmental, in the wider profession or the academy generally. Such a failing of what may be seen as a production line approach to graduate study is one source of the current philosophical crisis.

Contributions

As part of its mission to promote philosophical dialogue across disciplinary boundaries within philosophy and with neighbouring fields, and to contextualise philosophy, in December 2018, *SATS* issued specific invitations and an open call for papers for a special issue on the current crisis in philosophy. The scope of the call was the status and nature of philosophy, its importance and progress, and what might be done to restore its intellectual centrality. The four geographically diverse contributions nicely complement each other and together detail a broad range of the current difficulties and current prospects for going forward in philosophy. Haack (Miami) poses 'The Real Question: Can *Philosophy* be Saved?' Her piece first appeared in *Free Inquiry* but deserves publication here because it concisely characterises so many of the plights of professional philosophy within our current cultural landscapes and challenges us to respond vigorously with more than doctrinaire apologetics. This requires and is certainly facilitated by some measure of multi-disciplinarity.

In 'Philosophy Today: Cries of Alarm and Prospects of Progress' Paolo Parrini (Florence) examines in detail the relations between developments internal and external to philosophy. His examination bears both upon the ever increasing

'professionalisation' within philosophy, which often takes the form of routinisation and increased narrowing of specialisations by philosophers ill-trained to consider the broader context and trends which constrain their work, and whether or how these contexts and trends may work against philosophical understanding and insight. Parrini details these themes by examining some recent episodes in history and philosophy of science whose analysis also illustrates and illuminates other issues and subfields as well. The prospects for progress he identifies involve pursuing philosophical inquiry and analysis with a view to relevant philosophical history and to the multidisciplinary context and character of philosophy.

Whether antecedent preferences are given priority over evidence and analysis, and how they are properly assessed, is a crucial current issue in philosophy and more broadly in the humanities and social sciences, as various forms of what is termed political correctness can stall critical inquiry and discussion by insisting upon a particular kind of orthodoxy. One study of such trends by McIntyre, *Respecting Truth* (2015), contends that this tendency is pronounced in many areas, one of which concerns race and racism. Here Phila Mfundo Msimang (Stellenbosch), in 'Medicine, Anti-realism and Ideology: Variation in Medical Genetics Does Not Show that Race is Biologically Real', counters one of McIntyre cases. Msimang examines the scientific evidence about medically significant genetic variations often regarded as racial markers to argue that although these genetic variations are real and racism is real, these medically significant genetic variations do not map onto nor do they provide scientifically credible evidence for purported racial difference amongst human subpopulations. His examination exhibits the kind of constructive integration of actual scientific data and analysis with the philosophical reinterpretation and use advocated by both Haack and Parrini. In doing so, Msimang indicates one possible route for philosophical progress.

Einstein (2000, 314) observed that everything must be made as simple as possible but no simpler. It is a constant philosophical temptation to prioritise simplicity over adequacy. Such a temptation predominates as specialisms become ever more narrowly defined, thus losing sufficiently broad perspective to link an individual piece of philosophy to other philosophical concerns. This narrowing of philosophical perspectives promotes the likelihood of neglect and ignorance. However, philosophy is supposed to be the quintessentially reflexive form of inquiry through which we can discover our own faulty presuppositions including ignorance. This raises the question, what is required for any thinking being to be aware of its own ignorance? Although philosophy is said to have originated in wonder and the revelation of ignorance, the professionalisation of philosophy has resulted in diverting attention from what is required to be aware of one's own ignorance and away from the identification and examination of various forms of ignorance. This strangely neglected topic is investigated in the

final contribution to this issue by İlhan İnan (İstanbul), 'Awareness of Ignorance'. İnan develops both neo-Russelian and neo-Fregean accounts of awareness of one's own ignorance and shows how these accounts can be usefully combined as they identify distinct forms of ignorance as well as demonstrating there is also a third form. These forms of ignorance are not mutually reducible, and each has its own curious role to play in understanding and accounting for the very possibility of awareness of one's own ignorance.

İnan's paper demonstrates prospects for philosophical progress latent in the unexplored resources available even in very well-known mainstream technical philosophy of language. His distinguished paper is a very fitting way to launch the kinds of self-reflection upon our own philosophical and professional activities that are central to this special issue. This self-reflection might be put in a question to and for everyone in philosophy, namely: what have *you* been doing as a philosopher and as a professional which has unwittingly contributed to the current crises in our discipline? Only if questions such as this are addressed searchingly and cogently can philosophers take responsibility for their field, profession and their own philosophical activities. If philosophers do not take responsibility for the health and effective functioning of philosophy, the profession and institutions of higher education, no one else will because no one else can.

As this issue goes to press we are deeply grieved by the news that Paolo Parrini has passed away just as he had been elected to membership in the Academia Europaea in recognition of his scholarly accomplishments. We extend our deepest condolences to his family.

References

Atalay, Zeynep. 2007. Rationalization. In G. Ritzer (ed.), *The blackwell encyclopedia of sociology*, vol. 11. 3816–3818. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Beck, Ulrich. 1997. *The reinvention of politics: Rethinking modernity in the global social order*, M. Ritter, tr. Cambridge: Polity.

Beck, Ulrich & Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. 2002. *Individualization: Institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*. London: Sage.

Boudon, Raymond. 1982. *The unintended consequences of social action*. New York, St: Martin's Press.

Carnap, Rudolf. 1950a. *Logical foundations of probability*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Carnap, Rudolf. 1950b. Empiricism, semantics and ontology. *Revue International De Philosophie* 4. 20–40.

Cellucci, Carlo. 2018. Philosophy at a crossroads: Escaping from irrelevance. *Syzetesis* 1. 13–53.
Clegg, Stewart. 2007. Bureaucracy and public sector governmentality. In G. Ritzer (ed.), *The blackwell encyclopedia of sociology*, vol. 11. 376–378. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
Donskis, Leonidas, Ida Sabelis, Frans Kamsteeg & Harry Wels (eds). 2019. *Academia in crisis: The rise and risk of neoliberal education in Europe*. Leiden: Brill.
Einstein, Albert. 2000. A. Calaprice (ed.), *The expanded quotable einstein*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Flap, Henk. 2015. Organizations: Unintended consequences. In J. E. Wright (ed.) -in-chief, *International encyclopaedia of the social & behavioural sciences*, 2nd edn. vol. 17, 420–422. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
Haack, Susan. 2019. The academic-publication racket: Whatever happened to authors' rights? *Borderless Philosophy* 2. 1–21.
Krasmann, Susanne. 2007. Governmentality and control. In G. Ritzer (ed.), *The blackwell encyclopedia of sociology*, vol. 11. 2008–2011. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
McIntyre, Lee. 2015. *Respecting truth: Willful ignorance in the internet age*. Abingdon: Routledge.
Mica, Adriana. 2015. Unintended consequences: History of the concept. In J. E. Wright (ed.) -in-chief, *International encyclopaedia of the social & behavioural sciences*, 2nd edn. vol. 24, 744–749. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
Pritchard, Adam J. 2015. Beck, Ulrich (1944–2015). In J. E. Wright (ed.) -in-chief, *International encyclopaedia of the social & behavioural sciences*, 2nd edn. vol. 2, 396–400. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
Smith, Huston. 1988. The crisis in philosophy. *Behaviourism* 16(1). 51–56.
Spohn, W. 2018. How the modalities come into the world. *Erkenntnis* 83. 89–112.
Unger, Peter. 2014. *Empty ideas: A critique of analytic philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Westphal, Kenneth R. 2018. Higher education & academic administration: Current crises long since foretold. *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective (SERRC)* 7(1). 41–47. https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-3Tb.
Wick, Warner. 1951. The 'Political Philosophy' of logical empiricism. *Philosophical Studies* 2(4). 49–57.