IS PHILOSOPHY OBSOLETE?

PHILOSOPHY IN
Not dead, but treading water
CRISIS

Mario Bunge

There seems to be consensus that philosophy is currently at a low ebb. Some even claim that it is dead. This idea is not new: it was stated by Comte and repeated by Nietzsche, later on by Wittgenstein, and nowadays by Richard Rorty and others. Moreover, there is a whole Death of Philosophy industry. Ironically, some professors make a living from burying, exhuming, and reburying philosophy: their activity is more necrophilic than philosophical.

Philosophy is far from being dead but, in my opinion, it is stagnant. In fact, few if any radically new and correct philosophical ideas, let alone systems, are being proposed. Gone are the days of exciting new and grand philosophical ideas that spilled over into other disciplines or even the public—for better or for worse. Today most philosophers teach, analyze, comment on, or embellish other scholars’ ideas. Others play frivolous if ingenious academic games. Few philosophers think on a large scale: most are schoolmen without a school. However, if the philosophy looks barren, the genuine philosopher will attempt to cultivate it instead of just lamenting its decay.

SOME CAUSES OF THE CRISIS

I submit that current philosophy suffers from, among others, the following ailments.

• Excessive professionalization. In the old times philosophy was a calling: it only attracted amateurs enamored of general problems and bold if often vague or even wacky ideas. From Kant on, philosophy has become one more profession. (Science has suffered the same process since the end of World War II.) Technical competence, and the attendant caution, often replace passion. The profession has thus been filled with functionaries that are neither advancing philosophy nor transmitting an enthusiasm they lack, and without which no great enterprise can be undertaken.

• Mistaking obscurity for profundity. Deep thought is hard to understand, but it can be grasped with some effort. In philosophy, obscure writing is sometimes just a cloak to pass off platitude or nonsense for depth. This is how Heidegger won his reputation as a deep thinker: by writing such sentences as “Time is the ripening of temporality.” Had he not been a German professor and the star pupil of another professor famous for his hermetism—namely Husserl—Heidegger might have been taken for a madman or an impostor.

• Obsession with language. No doubt, philosophers must be careful with words. But they share this responsibility with all other intellectuals, whether they be journalists or mathematicians, lawyers or demographers. Only poets can afford to write about lucky winds or drunken ships. Besides, it is one thing to write correctly and another to turn language into the central theme of philosophy—without, however, paying any attention to the experts, namely linguists.

• Idealism. Although idealism is one of the dominant academic philosophies, it is just as exhausted as Marxism: it has produced no new ideas in recent times. Objective idealism, from Plato to Leibniz, and from Bolzano to Frege, is only viable in the philosophy of mathematics—and even so on condition that live mathematicians and active mathematical communities are overlooked. All the other disciplines, whether scientific or technological, are tacitly materialist since they deal with concrete objects. True, the hermeneutic thesis that social facts are “texts or like texts” has been well received in the shantytowns that surround the social sciences. But it is barren because it neither describes nor explains any social facts and, a fortiori, it cannot guide social policy making.

As for subjective idealism, from Berkeley to Kant, and from Mach to Goodman, in ignoring material things and processes, such as natural resources and work, it does not help to understand what happens around us. To understand or alter reality, whether natural, social, or mixed, we must start by assuming...

Mario Bunge is a professor in the Foundation and Philosophy of Science Unit at McGill University and a Laureate of the International Academy of Humanism.

“...There are roughly 9,000 philosophy Ph.D.'s in the country. More than 5,000 of them teach at four-year colleges, according to the American Philosophical Association, but few Americans would be able to recognize the name, much less the work, of a single one.”

among them would eventually discipline themselves. After all, treatment, or a similar one, it will die of hunger and boredom. Science, and technology; training in the detection and inactivation of problems whose solution would advance knowledge; intensive exercises in conceptual rigor resulting in the elimination of soft methods, in the manner of the linguistic (Wittgensteinian) philosophers, only elicits yawns. Insubstantial formalism and formless insubstantiality. William James famously classed philosophers into tough-minded and tender-minded. Regrettably, nowadays the tough-minded, if skillful in the handling of formal tools, seldom tackle bulky problems. They usually work under the delusion that logic suffices to reveal the secrets of the universe—something that actually only science can do. By contrast, some of the tender-minded brave tough problems but without making use of formal tools. The result of combining hard methods with bland problems is triviality. That of combining soft methods with tough problems is disappointment. And handling bland problems with soft methods, in the manner of the linguistic (Wittgensteinian) philosophers, only elicits yawns.

• Detachment from the intellectual engines of modern civilization. These engines are science, technology, and ideology. Detachment from them expedites wild and anachronistic speculation. Most contemporary philosophers have neither their feet on the ground nor their eyes fixed on the stars.

We ought to systematize ideas because stray ideas are unintelligible; because we need logical consistency; because deductive power is desirable; and because the world is not a pile of unrelated facts but a system of interrelated things and processes.

• Fragmentarism and aphorism. We have paid dearly for the failure of the “grand” philosophical systems, such as those of Aristotle, Aquinas, Leibniz, Wolff, Kant, Hegel, or Lotze. The price has been diffidence for any attempts to build philosophical systems, and the concomitant preference for the brief essay or even the aphorism. Nowadays the expression esprit de système is used in a pejorative sense. But this diffidence is as unreasonable as it would be to mistrust physics or engineering because sometimes they fail. What is wrong is not to systematize (organize) ideas, but to cling dogmatically to this or that product of such effort. It is wrong because all things and all ideas come in systems.

None of the fathers of philosophy held a philosophy chair, or even a doctorate in philosophy.

FROM NEURON TO MIND

Until the mid-twentieth century there was little communication between neuroscientists and psychologists. Typically, the former were interested only in the various subsystems of the nervous system, whereas most psychologists studied only overt behavior, or learning, or conscious processes. Hardly anyone was interested in the mechanisms whereby neural systems control behavior, much less in the nonmotor and nonsensory activities of the central nervous system of the higher vertebrates (mammals and birds). Consequently, behavior appeared largely mysterious, and mind nonexistent or at least beyond the reach of the scientific method. In particular, no self-respecting scientist tackled the problem of the nature of self-consciousness, let alone its location in the brain.

The gap is now slowly closing. Neuroscientists are becoming increasingly interested in behavior, memory, perception, ideation, consciousness, and emotion, while some psychologists and ethologists are happily ignoring the paralyzing injunction “Do not neurologize!” Better yet, they are starting to guess on that which controls behavior and does the mentation, while biological psychiatrists are treating mental disorders with increasing success.

A consequence of the success of the brain-centered approach to the study of mind and behavior is that the old theological and idealist view that detaches mind from matter is in decline. It survives only in functionalist (nombiological) cognitive psychology, in the philosophy of mind attached to it, and in such verbal vestiges as “X is the neural correlate (or basis, or substrate) of mental function Y,” and “X is the neural system that mediates (or subserves) mental function Y.” What is really meant by these subterfuges is simply “Neural system X performs mental function Y.”

The fusion of neuroscience with psychology is thus finally taking place: Cognitive neuroscience, as psychobiology is now often called, is a going concern.

Neuroscientists know that the nervous system is only one of the subsystems of the whole animal—albeit the most complex and interesting of all; and psychologists are realizing that real animals are not black boxes. The great wall between body and mind is being bored from within (subjective experience) and from without (the brain). The same wall is also being scaled on both sides: from perception to concept formation, and from single neuron to whole brain. As the drilling and the scaling proceed, it is being realized that the wall is not in nature, but in theology and the idealistic philosophy that continued the theological tradition. They invented the myths of the immaterial, immortal, and inscrutable soul, and of the radical discontinuity between man and the other primates.

Yet, the fusion or merger strategy has so far been sketched only in vague terms. Moreover, there is some confusion as to the credentials required to be regarded as a card-carrying cognitive neuroscientist. For example, scientists who investigate the visual system, or the effects of stress on self-perception and behavior, do not usually regard themselves as cognitive neuroscientists. Such imprecision and confusion originates not only in historical accident and turf division, but also...
in philosophical sloppiness. Witnesses of the second factor are the expressions “mind/brain” (why not “walk/legs”?): “the brain causes the mind” (do the lungs cause respiration?); “intentionality” instead of “reference”; and “computation,” when all that is meant is signal propagation (e.g., along an axon) and transduction (e.g., across a synapse).

Some conceptual precision should be introduced if we want to find out how best to integrate the various approaches, methods, and findings of the many sciences, from biophysics to sociology, concerned with the problem of accounting for behavior and mentation.

**CONCLUSION**

Evidently, whoever wants to make original contributions to knowledge must specialize. But specialization need not, may not, exclude the elaboration or use of a comprehensive (philosophical) scheme of things allowing one to locate one’s problems, choose the right approach to tackle them, and make use of any relevant scraps of knowledge found in adjoining fields, to the point of integrating erstwhile disparate research fields.

Such integration of formerly disjoint research fields, particularly neurobiology and psychology, has shown its worth in bridging the gap between neuron and mind, as well as in treating some serious mental disorders.

The integration of the various sciences of mind and behavior is being effected despite the resistance put up by the old theological and idealist dogma of psychoneural dualism, as well as by radical reductionism. And the synthesis in question is witness to the intellectual vigor, fertility, and practical usefulness of both materialism and systemism, as well as to the truth of the thesis that science and philosophy overlap partially rather than being disjoint.

Finally, the same synthesis of psychology and neuroscience falsifies the claim that, since science does not know about souls, which are the concern of religion, there is no basic conflict between the two “non-overlapping magisteria.” Indeed, science does know something about the soul, namely, that it does not exist any more than the phlogiston, the aether, life force, penis envy, collective memory, or the manifest destiny of a certain nation. It also knows that the soul is an invention that began as a naïve explanation of certain daily life events—such as dreams and unexplained phenomena—and ended up by becoming the nucleus of a whole family of ideologies used for social control.

Moreover, it is easy to see that science and religion are mutually exclusive rather than compatible. Indeed, science takes it for granted that the world is material and lawful rather than spiritual and miraculous. This assumption underlies the very endeavor to explore and control the world, at least in part, with the help of mundane technological procedures rather than through religious practices. By the same token, every success of the scientific and technological endeavors weakens the hold of religion and its secular arm, namely philosophical idealism.

Adapted with permission from Philosophy in Crisis: The Need for Reconstruction by Mario Bunge (Prometheus Books, 2001).

**Note**