Is Philosophy Stupid?

Richard Carrier, Ph.D.
www.richardcarrier.info/philosophy.html
"Philosophy is the field that hasn't progressed in 2000 years, whereas science has ... philosophical speculations about physics and the nature of science are not particularly useful, and have had little or no impact upon progress in [science]."

—Lawrence Krauss
"Most of us do not spend most of our time worrying about [the big] questions, but almost all of us worry about them some of the time. Traditionally these are questions for philosophy, but philosophy is dead. Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics. Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge."

—Stephen Hawking
"Except for a patina of twenty-first century modernity, in the form of logic and language, philosophy is exactly the same now as it ever was; it has made no progress whatsoever. We philosophers wrestle with the exact same problems the Pre-Socratics wrestled with...[so we must concede] philosophy’s inability to solve any philosophical problem, ever"

— Eric Dietrich
Is Philosophy Stupid?

- "Philosophy is useless"
- "... divorced from reality"
- "... too esoteric and obscure"
- "... just pointless nitpicking over trivial minutiae"
- "... gets nowhere, teaches and discovers nothing"
- "... just opinion masquerading as knowledge"
What Is Philosophy?

- Philosophy as practiced in the halls of academia
- ... vs. what philosophy was invented to be
- ... and what it should and could be
- ... and sometimes is.
What Is Philosophy?

* Philosophy as practiced in the halls of academia... vs. what philosophy was invented to be... and what it should and could be... and sometimes is.

Philo + Sophia = Love of Wisdom = Understanding Yourself and the World
"Philosophy is only concerned with the analysis of concepts, not with facts"

FALSE
Philosophy is...

- What exists and what doesn't.
- What its nature is or isn't.
- How much we can trust what we claim to know.
- How should we behave—and organize society.
- What we should infer from the facts of science to answer all of the above.
- How we should integrate those facts with others, e.g. from history, journalism, personal experience.
Philosophy is...

- "Who am I?"
- "What should I do with my life? How can I be happy?"
- "Do I have the right friends? Are these bad friends?"
- "Am I a bad person? Should I be living my life differently?"
- "What's worth making sacrifices for? How much sacrifice?"
- "Am I in love? What is love?"
- "Is there a god / afterlife / cosmic plan?"
The analysis of concepts is only a part of philosophy.

Philosophy is the quest for understanding, of yourself and the world.

It is what you use to construct and test your philosophy of life, your worldview.

And as such it very much concerns itself with questions of fact that science has not or cannot gain access to or conclusively resolve.
SO ARE YOU DOING IT WELL … OR POORLY?

SKILLFULLY … OR INCOMPETENTLY?

INFORMEDLY … OR IGNORANTLY?
"When I have the map, I will be free, and the world will be different, because I have understanding... of digital watches. And soon I shall have understanding of video cassette recorders and car telephones. And when I have understanding of them, I shall have understanding of computers. And when I have understanding of computers, I shall be the Supreme Being!"
"Philosophy is just *not oriented* to the outlook of someone who needs to *resolve* the issue, *implement* the corresponding solution, and then find out - possibly fatally - whether they got it right or wrong. Philosophy doesn't resolve things, it compiles positions and arguments. ... It would be one matter if I could just look up the standard answer and find that, lo and behold, it is correct. But philosophy, which hasn't come to conclusions and moved on from cognitive reductions that I regard as relatively simple, doesn't seem very likely to build complex correct structures of conclusions."

—Eliezer Yudkowsky
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- It fails to distinguish good from bad and settled from unsettled in the domain of results.
- And fails to synthesize well-tested results and centralize them for easy consultation.
PHILOSOPHY IN CRISIS
THE NEED FOR RECONSTRUCTION
ARISTOTLE

348 – 286 B.C.
The Six Parts of Philosophy

- Epistemology
- Physics
- Metaphysics
- Politics
- Ethics
- Aesthetics
The Six Parts of Philosophy

Epistemology

Politics

Physics

Ethics

Metaphysics

Aesthetics

Theory of Knowledge
The Six Parts of Philosophy

1. Epistemology
2. Politics
3. Ethics
4. Aesthetics
5. Metaphysics
6. Physics
The Six Parts of Philosophy

- Epistemology
- Physics
- Metaphysics
- Aesthetics
- Ethics
- Politics

"After Science"
The Six Parts of Philosophy

Epistemology

Politics

Physics

Ethics

Metaphysics

Aesthetics

Theory of Beauty
The Six Parts of Philosophy

Epistemology

Politics

Physics

Ethics

Metaphysics

Aesthetics

Moral Theory
SCIENCE IS JUST PHILOSOPHY WITH BETTER DATA

WHICH MEANS PHILOSOPHY IS JUST SCIENCE WITH LESS DATA
Ancient science had mathematical laws, precise observation, and controlled experiments.

The Scientific Revolution (17th Century) did not introduce any new methods for doing science.

Instead it recognized less reliable methods as less reliable (and attenuated belief to reliability).

It remained philosophy.
What we now call science was still called philosophy all the way up to the 20th century.

Natural philosophy, or physical or biological philosophy, or experimental philosophy, etc.

The word "scientist" didn't exist until the 1830s (and wasn't popular until the 1890s).

Galileo, Newton, Lavoisier, even Maxwell and Darwin, were all known as natural philosophers, never or rarely as scientists.
SCIENCE HAS ALWAYS BEEN PHILOSOPHY

- They all published many of their scientific findings in philosophy journals.
- The first science journal, published by the Royal Society of Britain, retains the same title it has always held since the age of Newton: *Philosophical Transactions*.
- Even now scientists get doctorates in "philosophy" (Ph.D.).
SCHOOL COMPENDIUM
OF
NATURAL AND EXPERIMENTAL PHILOSOPHY,
EMBRACING THE ELEMENTARY PRINCIPLES OF
MECHANICS, HYDRAULICS, HYDROSTATICS, PNEUMATICS, ACOUSTICS, PYROMETRY,
optics, electricity, galvanism, magnetism, electro-magnetism,
magnetoelectricity, and astronomy.
CONTAINING ALSO A DESCRIPTION OF THE
STEAM AND LOCOMOTIVE ENGINES,
AND OF THE
ELECTRO-MAGNETIC TELEGRAPH.

BY
RICHARD GREEN PARKER, A. M.,
LATE PRINCIPAL OF THE JOHNSON GRAMMAR SCHOOL, BOSTON; AUTHOR OF "AIDS TO
ENGLISH COMPOSITION," A SERIES OF "SCHOOL READERS,"
GEOGRAPHICAL QUESTIONS," ETC., ETC.

CORRECTED, ENLARGED AND IMPROVED.

NEW YORK:
COLLINS & BROTHER, PUBLISHERS,
82 WARREN STREET.
1860.
Darwin's theory of evolution was commonly referred to as a discovery in **physical philosophy** or **philosophy of biology**, and as the **philosophy of evolution**.

So even in Darwin's day the demarcation was **not** between science and philosophy, but between **two kinds of philosophy**.

In fact it was a **spectrum of reliability**, based on certainty of results, which in turn was based on access to data.
THE SHIFT IN THE 20TH CENTURY WAS NEVER JUSTIFIED
Science today is just the best philosophy we have, not because it's free of error or fraud, but because it works on questions we have the best data to answer.

But that does not leave the rest of philosophy with no data—just data insufficient to meet scientific standards of certainty.

But there are many degrees of certainty below the scientific (e.g. historical, journalistic, personal, and philosophical).

Hence atheism is a highly certain factual conclusion, but not a scientific conclusion (there is no scientific paper proving it).
Scientific hypothesis formation is philosophy (metaphysics)

Example: Superstring Theory
BUNGE'S TEN CRITICISMS

1. Tenure-Chasing Supplants Substantive Contributions
2. Confusion between Philosophizing & Chronicling
3. Insular Obscurity / Inaccessibility
4. Obsession with Language vs. Solving Real-World Problems
5. Idealism vs. Realism and Reductionism
6. Too Many Miniproblems & Fashionable Academic Games
7. Poor Enforcement of Validity / Methodology
8. Unsystematic (vs. System Building & Worldview Coherent)
9. Detachment from Intellectual Engines of Modern Civilization
10. Ivory Tower Syndrome
How do you find the philosophy that avoids all ten of Bunge's defects?

Philosophy as an academic field simply isn't making any effort to.

Philosophy needs to be rigorously demarcated from pseudo-philosophy.

Just as science is from pseudo-science.

Not all philosophy is pseudo-philosophy, but there is no easy way to tell (published in the same journals and academic presses, presented at the same conferences, gain the same professorships)
PSEUDO-PHILOSOPHY IS...

- Philosophy that relies on fallacious arguments to a conclusion.
- And/or relies on factually false or undemonstrated premises.
- And isn't corrected when noted.
ALL SUPERNATURALIST RELIGION IS PSEUDO-PHILOSOPHY
Religious philosophy is to philosophy what "creation science" is to science

ALL SUPERNATURALIST RELIGION IS PSEUDO-PHILOSOPHY
"I found the [philosophical] arguments [in aid of religion] so execrably awful and pointless that they bored and disgusted me ... I now regard “the case for theism” as a fraud and I can no longer take it seriously enough to present it to a class as a respectable philosophical position—no more than I could present intelligent design as a legitimate biological theory. ... I do not mean to charge that the people making that case are frauds who aim to fool us with claims they know to be empty. No, theistic philosophers and apologists are almost painfully earnest and honest. ... I just cannot take their arguments seriously any more, and if you cannot take something seriously, you should not try to devote serious academic attention to it. I’ve turned the philosophy of religion courses over to a colleague."

—Keith Parsons

"Goodbye to All That"

Secular Outpost
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Secular Outpost
ONCE YOU DEMARCATE PHILOSOPHY FROM PSEUDO-PHILOSOPHY

PROGRESS IN PHILOSOPHY BECOMES APPARENT
Like science, vast majority of “progress” in philosophy = tiny incremental advances that look small or pointless, but together amount to a significant body of knowledge. (Just skim through science journals.)


1 — Progress as Destruction

- Eliminates options from logical space (demonstrating incoherence internally or with well-established evidence)
- Options in philosophy are enormously more constrained now than they were a hundred or even fifty years ago.
- No philosophy of magic, numerology, mysticism, astral planes, angels, demons, gods, souls, miracles (all except as counterfactual thought experiments), Platonism, Idealism, etc.
1 — Progress as Destruction

Remember what Dietrich said about the Pre-Socratics...?

No philosophy of magic, numerology, mysticism, astral planes, angels, demons, gods, souls, miracles (all except as counterfactual thought experiments), Platonism, Idealism, etc.
2 — Progress as Clarification

- Distinctions / Possibilities / Meaning & Implications
- Exposing Assumptions
- Real-world impact, e.g. legal decisions, like *Roe v. Wade* and *Kitzmiller v. Dover*.

Less obvious:

- **Scientific speculation and theorizing** (Quantum Theory, Cosmological Theory [*e.g. Ekpyriotic Big Bang Theory*], Superstring Theory, Quantum Loop Gravity Theory)

- **Mathematical theorems & discoveries** (discoveries in concept-space)
2 — Progress as Clarification

- Distinctions / Possibilities / Meaning & Implications

- ...and "Facts Most Probable" (remember atheism?)

- **Scientific speculation and theorizing** (Quantum Theory, Cosmological Theory [e.g. Ekpyriotic Big Bang Theory], Superstring Theory, Quantum Loop Gravity Theory)

- **Mathematical theorems & discoveries** (discoveries in concept-space)
... NOT ALL THAT DIFFERENT FROM SCIENCE

- Most scientific progress consists of destruction: eliminating or narrowing hypotheses.
- Much of it consists of clarifying the available options given the known facts.
- The rest consists of building an edifice of highly certain conclusions to use in understanding and improving the world.
MAJOR GENERAL ADVANCES MADE BY MODERN PHILOSOPHY

1. Naturalism (metaphysics)
   • vs. Supernaturalism

2. Evidentialism (epistemology)
   • vs. mysticism, authoritarianism, dogmatism, a priori facts, faith

3. Consequentialism (ethics)
   • vs. authoritarianism / absolutism

4. Democracy / Human Rights (politics)
   • vs. fascism, aristocracy, autocracy, Athenian democracy

5. Aesthetic Relativism (aesthetics)
   • vs. cosmic aesthetics / aesthetics as morality
MAJOR SPECIFIC ADVANCES MADE BY MODERN PHILOSOPHY

1. Late 19th Century...
   1. Set Theory
   2. Symbolic Logic
   3. Reduction of Mathematics to Axioms & Logic (Russell)
   4. Transfinite Mathematics (Cantor)

2. 20th Century...
   1. Game Theory
   2. Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorems / Dan Willard
   3. Modal Logic
   4. Bayesian Epistemology
SMALL BUT IMPORTANT DISCOVERIES MADE BY MODERN PHILOSOPHY INCLUDE...

Connecting meaning of a statement with its truth conditions (and corresponding advances in defining "truth")

Distinction between sentences and propositions (and its significance for cognitive science and AI research)

Demarcation of *qualia* as fundamental attribute of consciousness

Compatibilism (*proving that desirable versions of responsibility, self-determination and personal freedom are compatible with total causal determinism*)

More rigorous defenses of atheism

"... a comprehensive exposition of modern analysis of causation. It shows how causality has grown from a nebulous concept into a mathematical theory with significant applications in the fields of statistics, artificial intelligence, philosophy, cognitive science, and the health and social sciences [including business, epidemiology ... and economics]. Pearl presents a unified account of the probabilistic, manipulative, counterfactual and structural approaches to causation, and devises simple mathematical tools for analyzing the relationships between causal connections, statistical associations, actions and observations. ... This book will be of interest to professionals and students in a wide variety of fields. Anyone who wishes to elucidate meaningful relationships from data, predict effects of actions and policies, assess explanations of reported events, or form theories of causal understanding and causal speech will find this book stimulating and invaluable."

Remember Krauss saying philosophy of science contributed nothing to science?

Remember Hawking saying philosophy is dead and makes no progress?
MUCH LESS PROGRESS...

1. Vastly fewer personnel.
2. Vastly fewer resources.
3. Lack of focus (Bunge criteria).
WHAT SKILLS ARE PARTICULAR TO PHILOSOPHY?

1. **Logics** *(building accurate logical models & fallacy-detection)*

2. **Conceptology** *(the study of ideas and the meaning and implications of words and concepts)*

3. **Conciliation** *(completing inferences from the results of science & other fields, determining the most probable)*

4. **Axiology** *(completing inferences from moral, aesthetic, and political values).*
WHAT ABOUT PHILOSOPHY FOR THE COMMON MAN AND WOMAN?

1. We don't need to be scientists or do science to broadly understand the results of science and apply it in our daily lives and personal philosophy.

2. In exactly the same way, we don't need to be philosophers or do philosophy at an expert or professional level to broadly understand the results of philosophy and apply it in our daily lives and personal philosophy.

3. We just have to figure out how to tell good philosophy from bad. The academy should be helping everyone do that.