

A Note on the Nature of Philosophy

by
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ABSTRACT: In this brief article I claim that philosophy consists in ways of seeing phenomena. I draw out three corollaries of this claim: philosophical positions have a certain degree of normative import; they have entailments, but, in most cases, no empirical consequences; though offering insight, they rarely achieve the status of truth or outright falsity (but they can encounter various forms of resistance, and also receive support). I claim that philosophy is not a science, neither an empirical one nor a logical one. I discuss the question of whether philosophy is always metaphorical and conclude that it needn't be. I end with a short point about philosophical progress.

KEYWORDS: philosophy, ways of seeing, science, conceptual metaphor

ABSTRACT: In questo breve articolo sostengo che la filosofia consiste in modi di vedere i fenomeni. Ne traggio tre corollari: le posizioni filosofiche hanno un certo grado di importanza normativa; esse hanno implicazioni, ma, nella maggior parte dei casi, non conseguenze empiriche; pur offrendo intuizioni, esse raramente raggiungono lo status di verità o di assoluta falsità (ma possono incontrare varie forme di resistenza, e anche ricevere sostegno). Sostengo che la filosofia non è una scienza, né empirica né logica. Discuto la questione se la filosofia sia sempre metaforica e concludo che non è necessario che lo sia. Concludo con una breve considerazione sul progresso filosofico.

KEYWORDS: filosofia, modo di vedere, scienza, metafora concettuale

Philosophy (when at its best, at least) consists in visions. This, and the corollaries of it, is what I aim to argue for in this brief article. Let me start off with some examples. I will pick a central claim by a key analytic philosopher, Quine, a central claim by a key continental philosopher, Hegel, and a central claim by a philosopher recognized by both traditions, namely Wittgenstein. Here they are (I am paraphrasing, of course):

Quine: *Our knowledge/science faces experience as an interconnected whole*¹;

Hegel: *History is the self-development of Spirit*²;

(early) Wittgenstein: *Linguistic description is picturing*³.

What these theses express, I claim, are certain *ways of seeing* of phenomena. Quine invites us to see knowledge as facing the “tribunal of experience” not sentence by sentence, but as a “corporate body”. Hegel invites us (or commands) to see history as the self-development of the cosmic subject, *Geist*. Finally, the early Wittgenstein invites us to see the use of language (which can only be description) as building for ourselves pictures of facts (*Bilder der Sachverhalte*)⁴.

It is important to recognize that these philosophers are not proposing empirical claims. It is not as if we could perform an empirical investigation and come up with the same claims they are making (or that we could test their claims by experiment). Rather they are imposing certain ways of seeing, or visions, on the respective phenomena. I propose to give the underlying form of their claims as “see A as B”, where “A” refers to the phenomenon at issue, and “B” introduces the guise under which it is to be seen. Irrespective of the surface form of these claims, which is indicative, it is crucial to recognize how different they semantically are from a scientific claim such as “water is H₂O”. This latter claim is an empirical discovery which tells us what water is, what it is made of. The philosophical claims, in contrast, present phenomena under certain guises, they prompt us to see them in a certain way, whereby no discovery is being made.

Is it possible for something other than philosophy to invite us to see things a certain way? Certainly – literature sometimes does this: it

¹ Cf. W. V. O. Quine, *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*, in Id., *From a Logical Point of View*, Harper & Row, New York 1961² [1951], pp. 20-46.

² This claim is made in several of Hegel’s works. For the interpretation of Hegel I am working with here, cf. C. Taylor, *Hegel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1975.

³ Cf. L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by C. K. Ogden, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1958 [1922].

⁴ In J. Žanić, *On the Nature of Philosophy*, «Metaphilosophy» 51 (2020), pp. 3-13, of which this article is a development and modification, I listed seven examples, only some of which I classed as instances of *seeing-as* (here: ways of seeing). Now I would be prepared to characterize all of them as ways of seeing.

often invites us to see the human life-world in a certain way (as tragic, comic, etc.). So I am offering a necessary condition on philosophy, not a sufficient one.

I propose that philosophical claims in general, as exemplified by the three claims above, have three key properties: they have a certain degree of normative import; they have entailments but, in most cases, no empirical consequences; though offering insight, they rarely achieve the status of truth or outright falsity (but they can encounter various forms of resistance, and also receive support). I will discuss them in turn.

As to the normativity of philosophy⁵, this was already hinted at in the general form of a philosophical statement, which I gave as “see A as B”. Philosophical claims prompt us to see phenomena a certain way, they *invite* us to see them (construe them) under a certain guise. This is in general a relatively weak form of normativity, since an ordinary descriptive claim (such as the scientific claim named above) can also be said to invite us to consider a certain content as true. However, I propose that the basic degree of normativity of philosophical claims is somewhat stronger than in the case of the descriptive claim, because philosophy in general doesn’t receive much empirical support for its views, so it has to base itself on prompts, on recommendations to see things a certain way. Additionally, philosophy can attain a stronger degree of normativity, as when it expresses a program (e.g., to take a different example from Quine, when he says that epistemology is «a chapter of psychology») or when, as in ethics or political philosophy, it actually prescribes what to do or what kind of political community to build. In a weaker or stronger form, therefore, philosophy seems to tell us how we *should* think or act.

Now for the second property of philosophical claims: they have entailments, but, in most cases, no empirical consequences. Take Hegel’s claim above – it can be said to have the following entailment: if history is the self-development of Spirit, then different epochs in history can be seen as different *stages* of this self-development. This

⁵ A reviewer asked whether philosophers have some special authority when it comes to telling us how to see the world. My reply is that the most charitable way we can read philosophical claims is as invitations to see phenomena a certain way (they are certainly not empirical claims). And there is no special authority, only the demand of a fellow rational agent to see things as s/he sees them, for which they try to make a convincing case.

is an entailment of his position (which he, of course, draws himself); but no *empirical* consequences follow from his claim, no way to test it. The same goes for Wittgenstein: an entailment of his view of languaging as picturing is e.g. that names in sentences correspond to elements in pictures; but no way to test his view empirically suggests itself. As for Quine, the entailments of his view of knowledge are well known: no part of the knowledge network is immune to revision, but we have a certain leeway as to which parts of the network to revise in the case of conflict with experience. This comes closest of the three examples to being a bona fide empirical consequence. However, I am not aware of any actual attempt to evaluate Quine's position on knowledge empirically. Sometimes, though, philosophical positions really venture into empirical territory, as is the case with Kant's views on space and time; then they are often refuted by science.

The third property of philosophical claims adduced above was that they rarely achieve the status of truth or outright falsity. Indeed, I don't think that either Quine's, or Hegel's, or Wittgenstein's claim above can be shown to be determinately true, *or* false. They are just more or less productive possibilities, ways of construing things. A definitely true way of seeing would come about when it is *the* way of seeing allowed by the phenomenon; a definitely false one when it is determinately excluded by the phenomenon. But this rarely happens.

Philosophical claims can, however, encounter various forms of resistance (and also receive support). Resistance can be internal, as when there is a contradiction in a philosophical position, or external. External resistance seems to occur when, so to speak, the phenomenon itself protests to being seen a certain way. For example, it could be claimed that the fact that language is linear, whereas pictures present their content simultaneously, belies Wittgenstein's view of languaging as picturing. Most philosophical positions are faced with more and more resistance as time goes by (as aspects of phenomena are pointed to that don't fit the bill), until they are finally relinquished; unless, of course, they are such powerful ways of construing a phenomenon that they have staying power despite the problems.

An essentialistically-minded philosopher might be irritated by my recourse to adverbs such as "rarely" or "often" in characterizing philosophy. However, I believe that philosophy is amenable to statistical characterization (although this characterization *is* a characterization of its nature).

The nature of philosophy is, therefore, that it proposes certain

ways of seeing phenomena. These ways of seeing are mostly not as simple as the condensed forms I gave as examples; they are normally embedded in elaborate theoretical frameworks. It follows from this characterization that argument is not crucial to philosophy. What is crucial is rhetoric: the “moves” one often hears spoken of in relation to philosophical texts (but not scientific ones) are rhetorical steps in the construction of a way of seeing. Analytic philosophy is better known for its arguments than continental philosophy; however, arguably, Quine or Wittgenstein don’t really argue, or argue well, for their claims (those listed above or others). And yet these belong to the most famous claims of analytic philosophy⁶.

It seems pressing now to give an account of the relation of philosophy to science. First off, let me briefly discuss the relation of philosophy to empirical science.

Is philosophy an empirical science? I would say “no”. Whereas empirical science (at its best) breaks into phenomena, yielding discoveries, philosophy presents phenomena under certain guises, offers us ways to see them. And these are mostly not the same phenomena (although there is an overlap). Namely, some phenomena are such that *perhaps* there just is no breaking into them, but only seeing them under different lights – these are human phenomena: art, morality, meaning, knowledge, history (no laws of these phenomena have so far been discovered, despite great effort). And they are the main subject matter of philosophy (statistically speaking). Of course, sometimes a way of empirically breaking into a phenomenon, discovering its laws is discovered; in such a case, philosophy turns into science. The latest case of this is the birth of cognitive science – it offers *some* hope of really discovering facts (and laws) of human cognition, instead of just seeing them in different ways. But this is a relatively rare development when it comes to philosophy.

Philosophy is, therefore, not continuous with science, in the sense of sharing its goals and methods. It does, admittedly, share the most abstract goal of science: offering insight. However, it does this in a markedly different way than science. Science, as already intimated,

⁶ A reviewer objected to this characterization of the relation of argument to philosophy, so let me clarify. Most of philosophy does consist in arguments; however, when truly original philosophy, of a paradigm-changing sort, appears, it is often not accompanied by argument, or particularly good argument. The arguments come later.

gives us testable explanations as to what things are and how they function. Philosophy, on the other hand, gives us ways of seeing phenomena. But perhaps, as stated in the preceding paragraph, sometimes there is just nothing else to do in the way of offering insight but to prompt a way of seeing. This seems to be the case with human phenomena.

Science gives us discoveries, therefore, philosophy gives us perspectives, and thereby a sort of understanding. Some of the properties of understanding are the following⁷: it is holistic; it is seeing and creating connections in a large body of information; it is giving significance to individual truths in order to deepen what we already know; it can be non-factive, requiring deliberate distortion (as in idealization); it comes in degrees. Philosophy is also more personal than science: it expresses *attitudes*. Each way of seeing is a certain attitude towards a phenomenon, which we are invited to share.

But if it is not an empirical science, perhaps philosophy is a different kind of science? This seems to be what McGinn has in mind when he claims that philosophy consists of a set of *core problems*, of which it is a *logical science*, aiming at *clarification*⁸. I will dispute all three italicized points of McGinn.

First, as to the «core problems». McGinn says: «Philosophy consists of a fixed set of core problems that are invariant over time and social context»⁹. I don't believe this is true. In fact, you can have a philosophy of anything, as long as you present a rich and complex enough way of seeing it. Today there are such disciplines as the philosophy of sport, or motion pictures – certainly not among the time-honored set of McGinn's core problems, but philosophy none the less¹⁰.

As to the notion of a logical science, McGinn explains that «philosophy is concerned with *logical* questions – questions of definition, essence, entailment, and how things fit coherently together»¹¹. He

⁷ Cf. J. Mikkonen, *Philosophy, Literature and Understanding: On Reading and Cognition*, Bloomsbury, London 2021, pp. 51-52.

⁸ C. McGinn, *Philosophical Philosophy*, «Syzetesis» 8 (2021), pp. 89-98. A reviewer pointed out that this is also the view of Timothy Williamson.

⁹ C. McGinn, *art. cit.*, p. 90.

¹⁰ A reviewer asks why we should count philosophy of sport or of motion pictures as genuine philosophy. I am relying on a common practice of calling (and classifying) it as philosophy, and my unawareness of any challenges to this. The reviewer also asks whether these kinds of philosophy also perhaps deal with some core problems. Maybe, but these certainly don't seem to be "invariant over time and social context".

¹¹ C. McGinn, *art. cit.*, p. 92 (italics in the original).

also calls philosophy a «formal science» and an «ontical science»¹². I would counter that philosophy is an open set of ways of seeing, rather than any kind of science, even a logical one. Are the three examples we started with outcomes of a logical science, necessary in some way? In all likelihood not, and yet they are prime examples of philosophy. The point can be further appreciated if we reflect on the fact that the outcomes of philosophy are (almost) never necessary, even if they seem such to the authors. We could still claim today that knowledge faces experience sentence by sentence. We could claim that history is the self-destruction of Humankind. We could claim that the meaning of sentences is given in terms of use-conditions. An opposing point of view always seems possible, and if it is developed well enough, it becomes a serious contender.

It follows from this that philosophy is much less constrained than McGinn thinks. It has to be “logical” i.e. consistent, of course, but otherwise it’s a creative enterprise of coming up with ingenious ways of seeing, rather than a rigid discipline of working out entailments and discovering essences.

As for clarification as the aim of philosophy, this is also doubtful. How much has been achieved in this respect? Has Hegel in any way clarified history? And Wittgenstein language? Or have they made them more obscure? Certainly, as pointed out, philosophy aims at insight, but the guise it presents the phenomenon under can be really complex and hard to understand.

Looming in our discussion, especially in the light of Lakoff and Johnson¹³, is the following question: is philosophy crucially metaphorical? Lakoff and Johnson claim that all abstract concepts, and therefore all philosophy, is built on metaphor¹⁴. They see the process as proceeding in this way: a certain set of concepts, that originally belong to some sensori-motor domain, are transferred to an abstract domain to build an abstract concept. Philosophical positions are built the same way. In all cases, there is a source domain and a target domain, and the point of conceptual metaphor, as they call it, is to

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ G. Lakoff-M. Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, Basic Books, New York 1999.

¹⁴ Of course, this was earlier claimed by J. Derrida, *White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy*, in Id., *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by A. Bass, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1982 [1971], pp. 207-271, but in a much less clear fashion.

structure the target domain in terms of the source domain, which is always sensori-motoric, and therefore easier to understand (because closer to basic experience). When I speak of “ways of seeing” or “insight”, I am deploying a conceptual metaphor in Lakoff and Johnson’s sense.

Is, then, philosophy always metaphorical? I would say that philosophy *can* be metaphorical, but needn’t be. Wittgenstein’s claim given above, to the effect that linguistic description is picturing, seems indeed to be an instance of conceptual metaphor, as Lakoff & Johnson understand it. The domain of picturing is sensori-motor, and so closer to our basic experience than linguistic meaning. It is therefore used by Wittgenstein to understand a more abstract domain, namely language. But Quine’s and Hegel’s claims given above don’t seem to rest on conceptual metaphors. The difference seems to be this: metaphoricity happens when the guise is concrete, but has to be interpreted abstractly (it has to be bleached). This is the case with Wittgenstein’s claim: one needs to abstract from certain aspects of picturing (such as what sort of projection is employed, or how color is handled) in order to apply the notion to linguistic meaning. There is no such bleaching in the case of Hegel or Quine¹⁵.

What of my own metaphors in this article? I would say they are dispensable. “Ways of seeing” could be rendered literally as “ways of conceptualizing”; I use the seeing metaphor for its greater poignancy (which is not to say it is only an ornament).

The final issue to be dealt with in this paper is the recently hotly debated problem of philosophical progress¹⁶. On behalf of the No-Progress view, it is claimed that there is no progress in philosophy. I basically agree in the sense that there is no growing body of factual knowledge that philosophy offers. Can we write a textbook beginning with “Today in philosophy we know...”? It seems not, whereas in science this can always be done (although the contents of the virtual book would change over time). Philosophy does move forward in a sense, it changes and develops, but this doesn’t seem to be movement towards a goal, which would constitute progress. The underlying reason seems to be that ways of seeing that can be imposed on a

¹⁵ A reviewer is correct to point out that some of Quine’s language, such as “web of belief”, carries some metaphoricity. This does not endanger the claim defended above.

¹⁶ For a book-length treatment see D. Stoljar, *Philosophical Progress: In Defence of a Reasonable Optimism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.

phenomenon are basically limitless. There doesn't seem to be an end in sight for philosophy – only ever new ways of seeing phenomena, which suit, more or less (constituting better or worse philosophy), the times they were made for. It could be asked¹⁷ whether understanding, mentioned earlier, could not be a goal towards which philosophy moves, and whether some way of seeing might provide more understanding than another, thereby constituting progress? My reply would be that we do not have a criterion by which to decide whether one piece of philosophy provides more understanding than another. All we have are invitations to understand this way or that, and countless more to come. The best we can expect is that a certain way of understanding suits (in some way, which I cannot hope here to make clearer) the times it was made for.

What's the use of philosophy? Well, it is a common situation in philosophy that around each problem a set of positions forms, none of which can get the upper hand. The downside of this is that there almost never is a final resolution. The upside, on the other hand, is that each person interested in the issue can choose for him or herself the position, which philosophy has antecedently articulated, that best suits his/her needs or mentality. That is partly why I said above that philosophy is more personal than science.

Without philosophy we wouldn't know how to think about phenomena. Some of these ways of thinking (seeing) eventually turn into sciences, and that's when real knowledge comes into the picture. But without philosophy as an initial guide, we wouldn't know where to start.

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¹⁷ A reviewer raises this issue.

