Book Review | The Death of Philosophy: Reference and Self-Reference in Contemporary Thought

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Philosophers are, by definition, lovers of wisdom. The average nonphilosopher (referred to as a “muggle” by some philosophers) can be pardoned for thinking that loving wisdom goes hand in hand with loving the truth. Alas...

The truth is that philosophy is a very strange discipline. It is not at all clear what philosophers are doing, nor is it clear what they think they’re doing. And asking them won’t help: Ask five philosophers what they are doing and you’ll get 10 different answers. One thing, however, that all philosophers agree to (so you know this can’t be right) is that they are doing something... something very important – even if it’s only killing philosophy, or pointing out that it has been dead for years and is starting to smell bad, or alerting everyone to the fact that philosophy is obsolete or passé. This latter phenomenon is one of the most peculiar things about philosophy. Alone among human intellectual endeavors (actually, alone among all things human), philosophy frequently declares itself dead, exhausted, bored, or dyspeptic and much in need of a long vacation. So, how can philosophers be doing something important, how can philosophy be important, if it is always on its way out the door?

Of course, not all philosophers think that philosophy is on its way out the door. Some philosophers deny that philosophy is a strange discipline, claiming that it is a discipline like any other, making good progress on its assigned problems. These philosophers are clearly not paying attention, to put it mildly. Other philosophers think that, yes, philosophy is a bit
strange, but it is clearly doing something positive and worth doing. There is, though, a significant contingent of philosophers across the spectrum, in the “analytic,” “continental,” and “post-modern” traditions, that claim that philosophy is either dead, dying, or morphing into a science in good standing, like, say, neuroscience. Professor Thomas-Fogiel has written a book about this group and their arguments, a book which discusses at some length philosophy’s penchant for suicide. She has an interesting insight about this phenomenon. She argues that all claims about the death of philosophy, despite their differences (which she discusses thoroughly), founder on one contradiction, made over and over again (I discuss some of the details below). She then provides a model of philosophical truth that takes avoiding this contradiction as basic, and concludes that philosophy is here to stay. Thomas-Fogiel’s book is one of those grand philosophy books, covering vast amounts of the discipline, corralling it all, and coming away with a single, clear, indeed, happy message.

Let’s have some names. Kant thought he was bringing philosophy, finally, to a glorious end. Nietzsche thought he was bringing it to an inglorious one. Wittgenstein thought he’d shown how philosophy is really just a confusion of language; then he denied this. Of course, we must include the entire rogues’ gallery of early twentieth century logical positivists who advocated the view that philosophy was meaningless since it wasn’t scientifically verifiable nor falsifiable: Hans Hahn, Moritz Schlick, Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap, etc., and, reluctantly, the early Wittgenstein, before he was replaced by a pod-person called the Later Wittgenstein (...Good times!). After logical positivism self-destructed (by self-referentially showing that it itself was meaningless – our first glimpse of Thomas-Fogiel’s main theme) – we had Quine (epistemology was to morph into the science and engineering of knowledge), Austin (philosophy into linguistics), Derrida (deconstruct the lot of it!), Richard Rorty (philosophy is to be replaced by ironically accepting that we just make stuff up), Stanley Cavell (literary psychology), both Churchlands (neuroscience), and Stephen Stich (cognitive and evolutionary psychology). That’s enough, but the list goes on. Thomas-Fogiel considers most of these and more.

Why do these philosophers think that their discipline is dead, dying, or obsolete? Everyone had his (they are all males – it’s not clear that that’s irrelevant) own specific reasons. For example, logical positivists, and later, Anglo-American philosophers, were enamored with science and its power to explain the universe and to explain away what it couldn’t explain. Thomas-Fogiel eschews the most obvious general explanation for philosophy’s penchant for suicide – philosophy makes no progress whatsoever – and analyzes the most prominent specific reasons. This is done in Part 1. There she discusses and analyzes the death of philosophy from many different points of view: (1) the end of “analytic philosophy,” (2) the growth of various sciences and branches of mathematics (biology, computer science, logic, physics, and psychology (cognitive and therapeutical)), (3) the emergence of linguistics and
language studies, (4) the role of literature, and (5) the turn to antispeculative “philosophy.” All this leads Thomas-Fogiel to conclude that philosophy spent a good deal of the previous century oscillating between skepticism and positivism (p. 96). She’s probably right about that (although, again, the most obvious single reason for the oscillation is not discussed).

Part 1 covers a lot of ground and provides a new take on quite a bit of the recent history of philosophy. It is also in Part 1 that the main theme of contradiction is introduced and discussed. About it, Thomas-Fogiel says, “The ‘end of philosophy’ engenders a paradoxical discursive attitude because it consists in affirming a matter while simultaneously denying it” (p. 11). Her argument against claims about philosophy’s demise is to the effect that all such claims amount to someone saying, “I’m not speaking,” or writing, “I’m not writing” (pp. 10ff.) She calls such contradictions pragmatic contradictions or performative contradictions.

Early in Part 1, Thomas-Fogiel makes an example of Rorty, illustrating her main thesis. She points out that Rorty “never ceases to argue” (p. 10), but then he turns right around and claims that truth is conventional and evaluation is fad-prone or viewpoint dependent. So, no argument is better than another. Why then does he argue? Contradiction. As one more example, consider the “morphed into/morphing into science” claim. If someone claims that philosophy is a science, he or she is not doing science, but rather philosophy, so it hasn’t morphed and the person’s claim is false: the utterance of it contradicts its content. If someone claims that philosophy will one day in the future become a science, then that person is now doing philosophy, and in the future, when pointing out that the transition “has occurred,” the person doing the pointing will still be doing philosophy. Thomas-Fogiel argues that ultimately, no matter what particular form one’s dismissal of philosophy comes in, one is saddled with contradiction.

In Part 2, Thomas-Fogiel provides a remedy of sorts. Pages 136-139 are the key. Keen to avoid all contradiction (which, as she points out, shows up often, even when philosophers aren’t trying to kill philosophy), Thomas-Fogiel offers a necessary condition for philosophical truth: “agreement between a statement’s contents and the status of its utterance” (p. 137). By “a statement’s contents,” she means ‘a statement’s meaning’ and by “the status of its utterance” she means making the utterance – doing things with the words one utters. So, with a look of abject malevolence on one’s face, one cannot shriek at another “I love you” and express love (not conventionally, anyway). Nor can one unambiguously mean “I hate you” by such bodily and linguistic behavior. Thomas-Fogiel claims that all philosophy statements (and perhaps all statements) have this aspect of self-reference embedded in them (at least implicitly): the meaning of the statement and what the speaker does in uttering the statement either align or they don’t. If these two don’t align, then we have a performative contradiction. And that’s bad.
What Thomas-Fogiel is getting at here is that every statement uttered by any philosopher doing philosophy must, as a necessary condition of its truth, align its meaning to its delivery. She calls such happy alignment the *law of self-referentiality* (ch. 5, esp., 136ff.). If what the speaker utters *doesn’t* align with the form of its being uttered, the statement violates this law. So, for Thomas-Fogiel the only kind of self-reference that is relevant here is the happy kind where the meaning of a statement and its form in being uttered align. Therefore, we can put her proposal this way: Every statement uttered by any philosopher doing philosophy must, as a necessary condition of its truth, satisfy the law of self-referentiality (p. 137).

So, pretty obviously, speaking ironically is right out. So much for Rorty. And so much for every philosopher who runs afoul of contradicting what they say by the very act saying of it (e.g., Frege, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and many others).

Thomas-Fogiel goes on in Part 2 to argue that meeting her law of self-referentiality will crucially help make philosophy into a robust discipline that can hold its head up even when hobnobbing with the sciences. She gets this conclusion by arguing in chapter 7 that her law of self-referentiality, “congruence between a statement and its utterance” (p. 160), is fecund: it “permit[s] the construction of a ‘logic’ or a method of argumentation that is... likely to unfurl a network of interdependent truths...” (p. 161). Nothing formal is on offer, but that’s okay. She presents many examples of her method at work from artificial intelligence to Fichte.

Finally, in Part 3, Thomas-Fogiel, shows how her model of philosophical truth provides us with an understanding of philosophy without having to also speak of its demise. She puts this point nicely in the conclusion: “I... wanted to show how it is possible to understand philosophy without the end of its history and its history without the end of philosophy” (p. 250). Her final diagnosis is that philosophy, of whatever type or brand, has focused too much on reference, and not enough on self-reference. Her whole project is to elevate self-reference to the status she thinks it deserves, in a philosophy worthy of the name.

*The Death of Philosophy* is a big book. It is a bold, robust, and detailed attempt to explain and use one of the most interesting aspects of human thought and language: our ability to create self-reference.

A couple of observations are now in order:

(1) Thomas-Fogiel assumes without argument that all contradictions are false and only false. That is, she assumes that all contradictions are bad. This is a very common belief. That she
cites Aristotle on this matter (p. 136) is evidence that she is not entirely comfortable with this belief (why cite anyone if the belief is both well-known and true?). She is right not to be comfortable with this belief. Not all contradictions are false and only false. Some of them are false and true at the same time. Such contradictions are called *dialetheia*. Put strongly, the proper logic for the study of philosophical matters, including philosophy itself, is a *paraconsistent logic* – a logic that allows some contradictions to be true as well as false. (There is a large literature on the topic of paraconsistent logic and its role in philosophy. I refer the reader to two of Graham Priest’s works, 2003 and 2006, and my own paper, 2008. For an excellent introduction to paraconsistent logic, see Zach Weber’s entry on the topic (in the references).) Given dialetheia, the following reply to Thomas-Fogiel is available.

Philosophy works at the *limits of thought*. That is, philosophy works always at the limit of what we can conceive, find intelligible, and speak about (this is one explanation of why it doesn’t make any progress, see the second observation, below). Priest has shown (2003) that such limits of thought are the locus of true contradictions, of dialetheia. Specifically, when working at such limits, one is often required to go beyond the limit. And when one does that, one conceives, finds intelligible, says something that is also inconceivable, unintelligible, and unsayable. The fact is that when philosophy declares itself exhausted, spent, dead, it has transcended the limit that defines it ... and so contradicts itself. These are the very contradictions Thomas-Fogiel finds and objects to. But far from causing the problems she thinks they do, they instead point to philosophy’s most profound property: it works at the limit of thought.

(2) Philosophy can’t die. It is immortal. Why? Because it makes no progress. All it does is to, fractal-like, unpack and redescribed in more and more intricate and sophisticated language the very problems it started with (usually the new language is supplied by mathematics and the always advancing sciences, but sometimes the new language is invented by the philosopher him- or herself). These problems – is there free-will?, how is the conscious mind connected to the body?, what is reality?, etc. – were compelling and extremely important all those millennia ago, and, since we’ve made no progress, they are still compelling and extremely important.

In my 2011 paper, “There is no progress in philosophy,” I argue for this titular conclusion. Suppose I *proved* this conclusion. That is, suppose I established this conclusion beyond doubt. Would I then be trapped in one of Thomas-Fogiel’s performative contradictions? Yes. In proving that philosophy makes no progress, I would have added to philosophy’s store of truths (bringing the total to two). This is progress, by definition. So, the content of my words and my performance in uttering and proving them don’t align. So, I’m trapped in a Thomas-Fogielian contradiction. But “trapped” is the wrong word. We dialetheists are
seldom trapped. We move willy-nilly both within and without all boundaries of thought. In proving that philosophy makes no progress, I’ve both made real progress and made no progress whatsoever. Welcome to philosophy.

References


