Metaphilosophical Dualism

Ross Barham

University of Melbourne, rosscampbellbarham@yahoo.com.au
Metaphilosophical Dualism

Ross Barham

Published online: 11 July 2011
© Ross Barham 2011

Abstract

There exist two equally prominent, though seemingly divergent metaphilosophical viewpoints. One takes philosophy to be an essentially revolutionary process. The other sees philosophy as a constructive, collaborative enterprise that seeks increased rigor and consensus. Recent debate in the philosophy of language regarding the relationship of particular languages to the general capacity for language reveals an illuminating structural analogy with these divergent metaphilosophical trends. While neither debate is settled herein, regardless of their eventual determinations, it is concluded that there is little reason to suppose that philosophy will some day become a science, at least not in any metaphilosophically meaningful sense of the phrase.

0. Introduction

There exist two equally prominent, though seemingly divergent metaphilosophical viewpoints. The one sees philosophy as essentially a revolutionary process whereby novel perspectives are sought after and prized according to the extent that they either undermine the assumed universality of pre-existing schools of thought, or at least do not unquestioningly rely on them to get off the ground, so to speak. This mode of philosophy is made and advocated for in the metaphilosophical prescriptions of many of the West’s great philosophers. The other seemingly dichotomous viewpoint takes philosophy to be a constructive, collaborative enterprise that seeks increased rigor and consensus. This particular metaphilosophical characterization is made manifest in the workaday practices, pedagogies, and rhetorical modes common to Western academic philosophy.

The aim in the first third of this paper then, is both to establish that such apparently opposing metaphilosophical viewpoints do exist, and to thereby provide a rough
articulation of their supposed natures. Although it is not within the purview of this article to establish whether the one, the other, or both simultaneously are accurate, Richard Rorty’s own brand of metasemantical dualism shall be invoked as providing a working definition by which to undertake the meta-metaphilosophical analysis herein.

In the second third of the article, the goal is to rehearse a recent debate in the philosophy of language that shares a remarkable structural analogy to the metaphilosophical dualism outlined. The debate centers on the sense in which one must belong to a normatively grounded linguistic community in order for one to have any language whatsoever. Communitarians in the vein of Wittgenstein argue that bedrock propositions, such as ‘This is red’, are needed initially for the emergence of any full-blown language capable of making finer, objective distinctions, such as ‘I mistakenly thought that this was maroon’. Interpersonalists of a Davidsonian bent, on the other hand, maintain that ‘interpretation goes all the way down’, such that the notion of bedrock propositions is deeply misleading and cannot possibly serve the function hoped. The purpose in rehearsing this debate, however, is not to resolve it. Instead, the aim is to explore the parallels between the debate and outlined metasemantical dualism so as to further explicate the nature of the latter.

In light of the preceding undertaking, it shall be concluded in the third and final part, that regardless of how either debate may eventually come to be resolved, we have little reason to suppose that philosophy will become a science in any metasemantically meaningful sense of the phrase.

1. Meta-Metaphilosophy

The claim that philosophy harbors contrary tendencies is not without precedent (though technically it is not the claim that is being made herein). Friedrich Nietzsche, for instance, proclaims (1968, p. 509):

After having tried in vain for a long time to attach a definite concept to the word “philosopher” – for I found many contradictory characteristics – I recognized at last that there are two distinct kinds of philosopher:

1. those who want to ascertain a complex fact of evaluations (logical or moral);
2. those who are legislators of such evaluations.

In more recent times and with greater elucidation, Richard Rorty draws a similar distinction between what he called revolutionary and normal philosophy. Of revolutionary philosophers, they are said to create new vocabularies incommensurable with those of their institutionalized predecessors. In this category then, Rorty would
place the likes of all the great philosophers (e.g. Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Jeremy Bentham, etc.) insofar as they founded new schools of philosophy (i.e. Virtue Ethics, Kantianism, and Utilitarianism, respectively). Normal philosophy, on the other hand, is then to be understood as the workaday, institutionalized practice of professional philosophers, especially insofar as they subscribe to the schools made paradigmatic by their revolutionary counterparts. Undoubtedly the majority of normal philosophers will be unknown soldiers, as it were. Yet its poster-boys (and girls) would presumably include the likes of Peter Singer, Ernest Nagel, Philippa Foot, etc., in that each has made significant contributions to their respective schools of thought without thereby occasioning a Copernican shift.

For our present purposes, it will suffice to employ Rorty’s metaphilosophical dualism as providing working definitions for what we have called the constructive and revolutionary modes of philosophy. Although it would go far beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to endorse or refute either metaphilosophical dualism or its component parts, in the following two sections at least, the prevalence of each independent metaphilosophical viewpoint will be established in turn. The aim here is firstly, to offer some limited evidence that both metaphilosophical positions are common and widespread, and secondly, to further articulate what each standpoint amounts to, such that the success (or failing) of the analogical work in the second third of this paper will be made more determinate. The following two sections then, are meta-metaphilosophical in nature, and will outline in turn the characterizations of philosophy both as a revolutionary process and as a constructive enterprise.

1.1 Philosophy as a Revolutionary Process

If one looks to the canonical writings of philosophy, it is apparent that there is a common tendency to characterize philosophy as an essentially revolutionary process. It is the goal of this section to establish this as commonplace, and so we shall move rather quickly from one metaphilosophy to the next, relying on rather implicit and sweeping interpretations of the many quoted passages. Of course this is not ideal, but the slower, more careful treatment that each work undoubtedly deserves shall have to wait for another time.

It hardly needs mentioning that it was René Descartes – the commonly recognized father of modern philosophy – who most directly set the tenor for philosophy considered as a revolutionary process. Read by most every student of philosophy, his much-celebrated (and so, equally lamented) Meditations on First Philosophy famously opens (1996, p. 17):

1
Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all … that was stable and likely to last.

According to this conception of philosophy as a revolutionary process, the point is not simply to seek the ruin of collaborative, constructive enterprises for the sake of destruction. Rather, as the term revolution implies, the revolutionary philosopher seeks only to criticize and undermine pre-existing schools of thought for the sake of gaining new and better perspectives by which to comprehend the truth.

As was indicated earlier, Nietzsche’s own metaphilosophical vantage is admittedly dualistic. However, like Descartes, he endorses only the revolutionary strain, as can be better appreciated from the following elaboration on the earlier quoted aphorism (1968, §409, p. 220): ‘What dawns on philosophers last of all: they must no longer accept concepts as gifts, nor merely purify and polish them, but first make them, present them and make them convincing.’3 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari take Nietzsche’s metaphilosophy to its logical conclusion in suggesting that revolutionary philosophies are essentially incommensurable with other schools of thought. As they illustrate it (1994, p. 32): ‘The fact that Kant “criticizes” Descartes means only that he sets up a plane and constructs a problem that could not be occupied or completed by the Cartesian cogito … This is the creation of a new concept.’4 And of course, as with most aspects of Nietzsche’s work, seeds of inspiration can be readily found in the writings of his predecessor and early ‘teacher’, Arthur Schopenhauer. For instance, there is a clear parallel to be seen when Schopenhauer writes on genius (1948, p. 239):

We may … accurately define [genius] as the way of viewing things independent of the principle of sufficient reason, in opposition to the way of viewing them which proceeds in accordance with that principle, and which is the method of experience and of science. This last method of considering things may be compared to a line infinitely extended in a horizontal direction, and the former to a vertical line which cuts it at any point.

This passage and the simile it employs nicely illustrate the supposed distinction between the constructive and the revolutionary approaches to philosophy. On the constructive model, a philosopher’s work is to add to the edifice according to the rules and methods of their school of thinking. According to the revolutionary understanding, an edifice may at any point in its construction be radically re-imagined without recourse to the old, pre-established methods or assumptions.
Similarly, Nietzsche’s own successor, Martin Heidegger, also shared in commending something like the revolutionary approach. In writing about thinking (as opposed to, say, calculating), Heidegger offers the following metaphilosophical claim: ‘[Philosophers] are called thinkers precisely because thinking properly takes place in philosophy’ (1968, p. 5). He qualifies this by contrasting true philosophical thinking, which is original and free, from a ‘…preoccupation with [schools of] philosophy [which] more than anything else may give us the stubborn illusion that we are thinking…’ (ibid.). For Heidegger, true philosophical thought avoids the well-worn ruts that have in the scientific disciplines proven themselves so successful and so been much celebrated. He certainly does not dismiss the efficacy of these ready to hand approaches, but warns that, just as they may be instantiated in the unthinking circuitry boards of computers, it is essential to the continuation of our Being as distinct from unthinking machinery that we should keep alive true thinking that knows no predetermined path or destination (see Heidegger, 1977, esp. pp. 29–35). Again, a similar such metaphilosophy is expressed by Hans-Georg Gadamer, Heidegger’s own pupil, when he writes that true dialogue (of the variety extolled in the elenchus) is always open and undetermined (2004, p. 360):

As the art of asking questions, dialectic proves its value because only the person who knows how to ask questions is able to persist in his questioning, which involves being able to preserve his orientation towards openness. The art of questioning is the art of questioning even further – i.e. the art of thinking. It is called dialectic because it is the art of conducting a real dialogue.

For metaphilosophers such as these then, true philosophy is revolutionary for it aspires to the open freedom of originality engendered by what Nietzsche called legislation, Schopenhauer genius, Heidegger thinking, and Gadamer dialectic. What unites these four conceptions of revolutionary philosophy is that its practitioners are loath to rest contented merely puzzle-solving by filling in the blanks that have been circumscribed by some prevailing school of thought.

1.2 Philosophy as a Constructive Enterprise

While the explicit metaphilosophical claims of many of the great philosophers may espouse a revolutionary tendency, the contrary view is equally prevalent. But unlike the metaphilosophical mode canvassed in the previous section, we need not plumb the canonical writings in order to establish that philosophy is commonly taken to be a collaborative, constructive enterprise. It is plainly obvious in the practices, pedagogy and standard rhetorical mode of the discipline. Academic philosophy is geared around promoting ideals of developing sound and logical arguments, seeking clarity of ideas and expression, establishing cultural and contextual awareness, providing clear
referencing and citations, etc., etc. Professional philosophers are forever generating constructive criticism of the work of their peers in the hope of advancing debate and, with it, our collective understanding of the matters at hand. Indeed, that the work of a philosopher aspires to truth, accuracy, and with it, a convergence of consensus is inherent in the commonplace rhetorical mode employed by the discipline’s discourse. Unlike, say, literature, the very nature of philosophical writing is to present itself as speaking (to) the truth and so as inviting agreement.  

And yet, if there is a substantive difference between the constructive or revolutionary philosophical modes, then there must be more to constructive philosophy than just this, for surely philosophers’ efforts in aspiring to truth and so with it, general consensus, typically apply just as readily to philosophy as a revolutionary process. The relevant difference can, however, be teased out by considering a commonplace off-shoot of the constructivist view, which credits philosophy with having given rise to various other disciplines throughout its long history (see, for instance, Kuhn 1996, p. 92). On this approach, one might be tempted (though perhaps not well-advised) to joke with a computer programmer that were it not for Aristotle, they’d be out of a job. In this light, the relevant difference between constructive and revolutionary philosophy would then seem to be that constructive philosophy is defined specifically by its continuation and normalization of a particular school of thought, such that it may eventually attain to such a degree of rigor and general consensus that it becomes a field of inquiry in its own right.

It is curious that some regard this historical tendency of philosophy to engender independent and often highly productive disciplines as somehow a poor reflection on Philosophy herself (see, for instance, Picard 2007, p. 6). As I understand it, this censure must arise from either of two further metaphilosophical commitments: one that sees philosophy as having its own unique subject matter, and the other that doesn’t – rather only a methodology unique to the discipline. However, neither position coherently warrants the deprecation of philosophy. If one holds that philosophy has its own unique questions and areas of concern (see for instance, Berlin, 1999, p. 9), then the historical tendency of philosophy to give rise to disciplines in their own right should be viewed as a distinct kind of philosophical progress. This is because, according to such a perspective, one of the central roles of philosophy would be to sort the grain from the chaff, as it were, and so cast off all non-philosophical issues to their appropriate fields of inquiry. Philosophy having spawned independent disciplines would then be a sign of progress. As it stands, however, I do not believe that philosophers see themselves as involved in such an enterprise. When philosophers work to advance the arguments and methods for better understanding an issue, they do so, not in the hope that upon reaching a certain threshold of rigor and agreement they will finally be able to recognize that their efforts had only been incidentally philosophical insofar as by passing the threshold reveals that the problem was, for instance, scientific
after all and not philosophical. Philosophers strive for rigor and consensus because they want to better understand the matters that they are dealing with – ultimately it is beside the point whether the investigation is conducted in the faculty of Arts or of Science. So even if it turns out that philosophy inherently has its own unique questions and concerns, the fact it has given birth to other disciplines is no real failing of philosophy. And neither is it a straightforward indictment against philosophy proper that it has not made the same kind of progress as its various off-shoots, for who’s to say that its comparative sluggishness isn’t simply a result of the overly complicated and difficult subject matter distinctive to it. To think otherwise would be akin to naively comparing the ground covered by a long-distance runner with that of a mountaineer.

The other alternative then, is that philosophy does not possess unique questions and concerns of its own, and instead has failed because it is unable to adequately respond by employing its own unique methodologies to so many of the questions over which it once held court – thus losing legitimate claim in investigating certain questions as other methods proved more successful (see, for instance, Armstrong, 1980, p. 3)\textsuperscript{10}. And yet, while it may well be humbling to realize that other methodologies are better suited to areas that once belonged within philosophy’s dominion, I think it is a mischaracterization to think that this in anyway detracts from the legitimacy or worth of current philosophical work or progress. Instead, I should like to recommend a decidedly Kuhnian approach in suggesting that the numerous individual schools of philosophy do indeed make progress comparable to that of the sciences (see Kuhn, 1996, esp. pp. 162–3)\textsuperscript{11}. It’s just that, because the very existence of each philosophical school thereby calls into doubt the foundations of the other, then, unlike the professional insularity of the various scientific areas of specialization (see Kuhn, 1996, p. 164), the voice of progress in any one school of philosophy is lost among the cacophonous choir that is philosophy as a whole. On this view, it is rather to the credit of philosophy that historically it has been nursemaid to so many of the various academic disciplines, for it indicates not only that philosophers have managed to make progress in the school-specific sense, but have done so to the extent that they’ve occasionally met the conditions sufficient for a transition to the scientific mode of progress. And nor should we feel bad that many of the remaining areas of inquiry that philosophy still concerns itself with have not yet brought to fruition their own individual disciplines, for constructive, collaborative progress is still being made, though just not (yet) of the same variety as scientific progress.

2. Philosophy and Language

As we have seen, the two metaphilosophical viewpoints – revolutionary and constructive – are at the same time equally prevalent and seemingly antithetical. Philosophy considered as a constructive, collaborative enterprise seeks increased rigor
and consensus, either so as to raise the level of inquiry to the point where it will become an independent school of thought of its own (scientific or otherwise), or alternatively to better understand the nature of a matter by means and methods uniquely philosophical. The metaphilosophical understanding of philosophy as a revolutionary process – so highly extolled in the annals of the discipline’s greats – counsels the contrary. According to this view, the true work of the philosopher is to think for herself, not merely problem-solving by filling in the blanks dictated by a pre-existing school of thought, but to radically re-envisage the conceptual landscape so as to create an original school in its own right. In the following sections, a recent debate in the philosophy of language shall be rehearsed (though not adjudicated), for, as we shall see, it shares a striking and remarkable parallel to the metaphilosophical dualism canvassed thus far.

2.1 Language and Languages

When we think about language, we typically think of particular languages, such as English, Japanese, or Gaelic. This tendency is liable to lead us to suppose that for language in general to be possible, one must be a speaker of some particular language. Despite this seemingly reasonable presumption, Donald Davidson claimed contrariwise that he knew of no argument that two speakers must share the same particular language in order for them to be able to communicate with one another (2001a, p. 14). Rather, Davidson reasoned that so long as interlocutors intentionally behave (e.g. speak) so as to be interpretable with respect to their individual perceptions and beliefs about a shared environment, then there is no need for recourse to any particular language in accounting for the possibility of language (ibid, pp. 114–17). Indeed, Davidson even goes so far as to argue that languages qua language do not strictly exist (2005, pp. 89–109) – meaning that, while individuals certainly approximate the normative conventions of a particular language, there is and can be no absolutely standard form of any given language, for it is impossible to conceive of an absolutely fixed convention marker (e.g. ‘By ‘x’, I mean, x’) that can resist being reinterpreted (for instance, by an actor calling out, ‘The theatre is on fire and this is not part of the play’, all as part of the play) (2001b, pp. 265–281).

Communitarians, on the other hand, wish to stress the need for shared and so, normatively governed bedrock propositions, such as are made by saying, for instance, ‘This color is called “red”’, when pointing at a patch of color that English speakers would typically refer to as ‘red’ (see Williams, 2000). They argue that without such primitively shared conventions that the initiate must take for granted, there can be no possibility of the further, more nuanced interpretations requisite for full-blown language. That is to say, the meaning of a word is given by the role that it plays in the language holistically; the communitarian emphasizes that one must first establish a shared framework of interrelated word meanings (e.g. ‘red’, ‘blue’, ‘yellow’), in order...
for more nuanced concepts to be possible (e.g. ‘purple’, ‘green’, ‘mauve’, ‘puce’, ‘aquamarine’, etc.).

To tease out exactly what is at stake here, let us dwell on the matter a moment longer by first considering Barry Stroud’s summary of the issue from a communitarian perspective (2003, p. 692)\textsuperscript{12}. Stroud asks:

> What determines what [an] expression means? It can be nothing other than the way the expression is actually used, or is to be used. In the most familiar ostensive learning situation, where the pupil is learning the language of her community, she will use the word correctly, and will have understood its meaning, only if she uses it as it is used in that community… That there is a certain social linguistic practice, and that a particular expression has a certain role or use in that practice, is therefore essential to that expression’s having any meaning at all.

The emphasis at point here is as to whether the pupil uses a particular word in accordance with the norms of the linguistic community to which that word belongs. This communitarian point is further hammered home by Meredith Williams (2000, p. 20):

> Training is the medium in which … common behavior, that is, our differential responses to the aspects of the environment, is exploited in teaching judgments of sameness. Learning such responses is a matter of calibration. …Two kinds of natural reaction are involved: our innate perceptual sensitivities and behavioral reactions to certain stimuli; and our common reaction to training. Both are necessary conditions for becoming participants within language games.

The initiate’s natural tendency to imitate allows one to inculcate basic bedrock propositions in response to the most primitively shared experiences of the environment. Once the meaning of these bedrock propositions has been fixed by training, subtler distinctions can then be drawn and developed. That is to say, because ‘judgments of sameness must be rigid to serve [their] purpose in measuring understanding and enabling us to engage in more sophisticated [language] games where matters are far from obvious,’ (ibid) certain words and propositions (i.e. trained behavioral responses) must therefore be commonly shared and their meaning fixed. More straightforwardly: to have language generally, one must be a speaker of some particular language.

Interpersonalists do not deny that the communitarian’s account captures something important about the typical process by which one comes to be a language-user; after all, every known language-user seemingly has one or more particular languages. However, interpersonalists argue that strictly speaking, no particular language is in fact required,
and to think otherwise leads one to make statements and to draw conclusions that are misleading. As Davidson criticized Stroud’s communitarian bent (2003, p. 673):

When [Stroud] talks, for example, of ‘the role [an expression] plays in the language as a whole’, I am not sure whether he is just emphasizing the legitimate point that it is only in the context of a sentence that a word has meaning (as both Frege, and Wittgenstein after him, insisted), or whether he is also assuming that an expression has a role assigned to it by a linguistic society that in this respect just like a Platonic meaning is waiting there for the learner to grasp.

Clearly Davidson takes the latter assumption to be mistaken. The point Davidson wishes to make isn’t that the words taught by ostensive learning are utterly meaningless to the student. Rather, it’s that whatever meaning the teacher and the linguistic community at large may attach to that word (as part of the holistic network of their other beliefs) can in no way be directly transmitted to the student. As Davidson elaborates in an earlier paper (2001c, pp. 14–15, emphasis added): ‘The question what others besides the learner, even his teacher, mean by [a] sound is irrelevant … and we will misinterpret the learner if we assume that for him it has any meaning not connected with that process [of ostensive learning].’ This is a point that Claudine Verheggen also takes up and elaborates in response to Williams’ communitarianism. She writes of this central tenant of interpersonalism (2006, p. 214):

This is not to deny … it is likely that the child will end up meaning by her words what her teachers mean by them. Nor is it to deny that the first language learning process, in addition to the necessary sharing of beliefs, gives us all the more reason to think that people’s languages overlap a lot. But, again, there is no saying in advance which particular meanings will be shared because no particular ones must be… Ultimately, the important part of the learning process lies not in the particular ways in which the child draws the distinction between correct and incorrect applications of her words but in her acquiring the very idea of the distinction.

According to the interpersonalist, although we are typically correct in assuming that the process of ostensive learning will attach similar meanings to the introduced words and bedrock propositions for use in developing further, more sophisticated distinctions, they stress that it is not until the capacity for understanding that distinctions can be at all made that one can begin to investigate the extent to which the initial meaning that the student held via the process of ostension correlates either to that of the linguistic community generally or to any individual of that community in particular.
2.2 Drawing the Analogy

Here is not the place to weigh in on the debate of how we are to best understand and describe the relationship between language and languages. For our present purpose it will suffice to highlight the parallels shared with the two metaphilosophical perspectives outlined in the first third of this paper. To put it plainly: communitarianism shares similarities to philosophy considered as a constructive enterprise, as interpersonalism does to philosophy as a revolutionary process. Just as the communitarian stresses the need for normative rigidity in linguistic behavior so as to calibrate the meaning of certain bedrock propositions, the metaphilosophical characterization of philosophy as a constructive enterprise similarly stresses the importance of paradigmatic concepts, consensus, and the collaborative aggregation of effort in order for ‘progress’ to occur. Wittgenstein powerfully illustrated such a conception, not only of constructive philosophy, but also of normal science or any other constructive school of thought (2001, §6.341, pp. 81–2, emphasis added):

Let us imagine a white surface with irregular black spots on it. We then say that whatever kind of picture these make, I can always approximate as closely as I wish to the description of it by covering the surface with sufficiently fine square mesh, and then saying of every square whether it is black or white. In this way I shall have imposed a unified form on the description of the surface. … The different nets correspond to different systems for describing the world. Mechanics [for instance] determines one form of description of the world by saying that all propositions used in the description of the world must be obtained in a given way from a given set of propositions – the axioms of mechanics. It thus supplies bricks for building the edifice of science, and it says, ‘Any building that you want to erect, whatever it may be, must somehow be constructed with these bricks, and with these alone.’

Thus it is claimed that the rigidity and conventionality of theoretical frameworks provide scope for interpreting the world in different ways. The choice of framework is more arbitrary than one might commonly suppose, and although they may contradict one another to various degrees, each nonetheless brings something worthwhile to the table.13 Analogously then, the communitarian’s bedrock propositions can be seen to form a function similar to the axiomatic ‘bricks’ Wittgenstein describes. If a student is taught English, Japanese or Gaelic, they shall be introduced to different words and grammars (replete with their own unique ‘worlds’14). Yet common to any particular language is the emergence of meaning, communication, and so language generally. Communitarians and the metaphilosophical prescription to constructive philosophy share an emphasis both on common, bedrock concepts, and the subsequent, collaborative development of relatively rigid frameworks.
Ironically it is Wittgenstein – the paradigmatic communitarian – who also gives voice to the parallel shared between the interpersonalistic philosophy of language and philosophy regarded as a revolutionary process (1999, p. 214): ‘You have a new conception and interpret it as seeing a new object. …What you have primarily discovered is a new way of looking at things. As if you had invented a new way of painting; or, again, a new metre, or a new kind of song.’ Such a metaphilosophical characterization seems to accord well with the potential freedom that the interpersonalist stresses is borne by each and every word, concept and proposition. As Jacques Derrida puts it (elsewhere tying it not only to the illusory a-historicism of philosophy, but to all experience whatsoever) (1988, p. 12): ‘Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written … in a small or large unit, can be cited, put in between quotation marks; in doing so it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable.’ In this light, just as the interpersonalist denies that the meaning of any particular word, sign, or concept can be either absolutely fixed or directly communicated, it can be said that philosophy considered as a revolutionary process similarly sees any pre-existing school of thought and their lynchpin concepts as ever prone to radical reconception. Indeed, Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes in such a vein about the phenomenology of the innately revolutionary hermeneutics of philosophical study (1966, pp. 178): ‘People can speak to us only in a language which we already understand, each word of a difficult [philosophical] text awakens in us thoughts which were ours beforehand, but these meanings sometimes combine to form new thoughts which recast them all, and we are transported to the heart of the matter, we find the source.’ Philosophy as a revolutionary process is thus seen to share a curious parallel with the interpersonalist’s insistence that, despite the typically successful inculcation of certain communally shared words, phrases and propositions via the process of ostensive learning, there will always remain space open for a difference in and so, a radical reconceptualization of meaning and understanding.

3. Conclusion: Scientific Philosophy?

The aim thus far has been neither to endorse nor refute either or both metaphilosophical viewpoints. Rather, it was to establish that they do indeed exist; that despite being seemingly antithetical to one another, they are equally prevalent metaphilosophies; to give some limited expression to what each position entails; and to point out the apparent similarities that the two share with positions held within the philosophy of language. Of this lattermost undertaking, it is hoped that some further light will have been shed on the supposed natures of their respective metaphilosophical counterparts. It would certainly go too far to suggest that the parallels themselves are sufficient to demonstrate that the cause of the metaphilosophical divergence has its roots in the primitive nature of language. For one thing, the once all-encompassing influence of the
linguistic turn has begun to fall out of favor in recent years, such that it is no longer widely held that the key to philosophy lies in better understanding language (though equally, no one doubts that such understanding will nonetheless be of benefit) (see for instance, Williamson, 2008). In this light, one might perhaps suspect that the dual metaphilosophies investigated herein might therefore need to be reevaluated for the seemingly inherent linguistic predilections. Perhaps – but again, here is not the place to attempt such determinations. Rather, in this third and final section the aim is solely to consider in light of what has gone before, whether it is likely that philosophy will one day become a science. To do so, we will consider, without condoning or refuting either metaphilosophical viewpoint, the likelihood of philosophy becoming a science were either or both true and accurate accounts of the discipline’s nature.

If philosophy is indeed a constructive and collaborative enterprise that seeks increased rigor and consensus then it seems hopeful that it may one day become a science. Some of the work in considering this hypothetical has already been undertaken at the close of §1.2, but it will serve us well to here reconsider the matter more directly. That is to say, if philosophy has its own unique questions and areas of concern, then it would seem that the discipline of philosophy is to be defined by those set of issues. Further, if philosophy is only a constructive enterprise and its alleged revolutionary tendencies are either something of an aberration or a mischaracterization, then alone by what has been explored herein, there would seem to be no obvious obstacle preventing the possibility of philosophy one day coming to investigate its definitive questions in a manner that should be regarded as scientific. It would, however, appear redundant and so unlikely that the moniker ‘philosophy’ would subsequently be retained if this shift were to take place. This of course, isn’t to claim that such an issue-centric definition of constructive philosophy is unlikely to achieve scientific status, but it does appear to undercut the metaphilosophical force of what it means for philosophy as a discipline ever being a science. If, on the other hand, philosophy has no unique questions and areas of specialization, but is rather defined by being a particular approach and methodology, then clearly philosophy could not become scientific without radically altering those methodologies that presently define it. As to whether such a radical alteration might nonetheless see the emergence of a new, sufficiently scientific, yet distinctly philosophical methodology, nothing considered so far provides any real ground on which to speculate. It is therefore left as an open question.

On the other side of the metaphilosophical divide, if it is the case that philosophy is essentially a revolutionary process, then it seems highly unlikely that it should ever be regarded as a science. Such a conclusion, of course, assumes something like a Kuhnian characterization of science defined as maintaining a certain degree of rigor and consensus. If we take such a characterization to be accurate of the essential distinction between the sciences and the non-sciences, then the comparatively idiosyncratic and
diffuse nature of revolutionary philosophies certainly precludes them from initially being regarded as sciences.

The only remaining option to consider is that, despite the apparent antithetical nature of each respective metaphilosophical perspective, both in fact are accurate characterizations of the discipline of philosophy. If this is the case (as I personally suspect that it is), then it is again highly unlikely that philosophy will ever become a science. On this dualistic view, philosophy occupies an indeterminate position between aspiring towards consensus and rigor, and retaining the free, creative originality of the revolutionary process. In this light, philosophers are to be characterized by their tendency to seek out issues and schools of thought that are either in their fledgling stages of understanding, or in crisis and in need of substantial reconceptualization. Neither of these states, however, is commensurate with being labeled scientific. Of course, it may be pointed out (as it was earlier) that philosophers take themselves to be concerned not so much with the stamp of their discipline, but rather with the issues themselves. While this is certainly true, it would mean that if, for instance, Ethics were to one day become a scientific study, then although those gripped by ethical concerns would surely follow suit, they would simply be regarded as scientists and no longer as philosophers. Thus, regardless of how the metaphilosophical dualism canvassed herein is to be resolved, we have little to suppose that philosophy will become a science, at least not in any metaphilosophically meaningful sense of the phrase.

References


In order to avoid confusion, it is perhaps important to note one further aspect of Rorty’s own particular brand of metaphilosophy. That is, Rorty suggests a further distinction that he considers to be of greater significance than his original categorization. The division is between *systematic* and *edifying* philosophy. According to Rorty, systematic philosophies may be found within either the normal or revolutionary modes of philosophy, for systematic-revolutionary philosophers seek “the institutionalization of their own vocabulary” (p. 369), such that the ...
practice of systematic-normal philosophy can continue anew. Kant would be the exemplar here. Edifying philosophy alternatively commends itself only to the revolutionary mode. Indeed, it is of the very essence of edifying philosophy that it resist normalization. Rather than the development of arguments and analyses so typically definitive of philosophy, Rorty claims “great edifying philosophers are reactive and offer satires, parodies, aphorisms” (p. 369). Here he signals the later work of both Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger. This further division is, however, not included in the meta-metaphilosophical investigation herein. Firstly and definitively, Rorty’s categorization is not commonplace. Secondly and rather speculatively, it is believed the so-called edifying element in philosophy can be accounted for by the original division of constructive/revolutionary philosophies. Edifying philosophy that serves an exclusively polemic function can be said to adopt only the destructive element of revolutionary philosophy. Whereas edifying philosophies that actively resist all systemization, even of their own approach (e.g. ‘The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao’ [Lao-Tzu, 2006]), can be straightforwardly characterized as revolutionary philosophy turned upon itself, without need for any further categorization.

For any who feel that the various philosophies I cite would not be commensurable if taken in their entirety, notwithstanding the apology I have already made, let me invoke the wisdom of Nietzsche in my defense (1996, p. 261): ‘The Error of Philosophers. The philosopher believes that the value of his philosophy lies in the whole, in the building: posterity discovers it in the bricks with which he built and which are then often used again for better building: in the fact, that is to say that the building can be destroyed and nonetheless possess value as material.’

Further, related discussion takes place in Philosophy and Truth. Ed. Daniel Breazeale (Amherst; Prometheus Books, 1999) esp. pp. 50, 834

There is a remarkable excerpt from a conversation between Wittgenstein and Turing, where the two talk past one another in each of their own well-honed idioms (see Hodges, 2000, pp. 512–3). For further discussion of such phenomena, see Jeffrey Goodman, A Critical Discussion of Talking Past One Another (Philosophy and Rhetoric - Volume 40, Number 3, 2007, pp. 311–25).

Subsequently, while books such as Kahlil Gibran’s, The Prophet, and Robert M. Persig’s, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, are often taken to be of a philosophical nature, they are not regarded as philosophy proper.

i.e.: ‘Those unwilling or unable to accommodate their work [to a new paradigm of Science] must proceed in isolation or attach themselves to some other group. Historically, they have often simply stayed in the departments of philosophy from which so many of the special sciences have been spawned.’

i.e.: ‘Philosophy, of old the Queen of the Sciences, has come down a notch since her glory days. The rise of modern scientific methods, rather like a Cesarean section, has forced the birth of her independent children, the sciences, and one after another they have dropped from her generous womb: first physics, with it physiology, then chemistry, followed later by the social
and human sciences, psychology, economics, sociology, etc. Each in turn abandoned her as they attained to the peerage of departmental status within the academies.’

8 Strong philosophical quietism is not given any credence here, for to make the philosophical claim that philosophy has no legitimacy except to do away with itself it is taken to be self-defeating.

9 i.e.: “What is an okapai?” is answered easily enough by an act of empirical observation. Similarly “What is the cube root of 729?” is settled by a piece of calculation in accordance with accepted rules. But if I ask “What is time?”, “What is a number?”, “What is the purpose of human life on earth?”, “How can I know past facts that are no longer there – no longer where?”, “Are all men truly brothers?”, how do I set about looking for the answer? ... The only common characteristic which all these questions appear to have is that they cannot be answered either by observation or calculation, either by inductive methods or deductive ... Such questions tend to be called philosophical.’

10 i.e.: ‘...in philosophy ... in moral questions in so far as they are thought to be matters of truth and falsity, there has been notable failure to achieve an intellectual consensus about disputed question among the learned. Must we not then attach a peculiar authority to the discipline that can achieve a consensus [i.e. science]?’

11 i.e.: ‘Other creative fields display progress of the same sort [as science]. The theologian who articulates dogma or the philosopher who refutes the Kantian imperatives contributes to progress, if only to that of the group that shares his premises. No creative school recognizes a category of work that is, on the one hand, a creative success, but is not, on the other, an addition to the collective achievement of the group. If we doubt, as many do, that non-scientific fields make progress, that cannot be because individual schools make none. Rather, it must be because there are always competing schools, each of which constantly questions the very foundations of the others. The man who argues that philosophy, for example, has made no progress emphasizes that there are still Aristotelians, not that Aristotelianism has failed to progress.’

12 It should perhaps be noted that it is unclear whether Stroud counts himself as a communitarian in the sense outlined herein, or if the emphasis placed in this passage is somewhat misleading as to Stroud’s allegiances. Either way, the quotation clearly illustrates the general communitarian attitude, regardless.

13 A similar sentiment I suspect was expressed by Aristotle when he writes of the various conceptions of happiness that preceded his own (1998, pp. 15–6): ‘For some identify happiness with virtue, some with practical wisdom, others with a kind of philosophic wisdom, others with these, or one of these, accompanied by pleasure or not without pleasure; while others include also external prosperity. Now some of these views have been held by many men and men of old, others by a few eminent persons; and it is not probable that either of these should be entirely mistaken, but rather that they should be right in at least some one respect or even in most respects.’
14 For a Hermeneutical account of how each particular language opens a unique world to its speakers, see Gadamer (2004), esp. pp. 436–52.

15 Derrida continues: ‘This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchoring [ancrage]. This citiationality, this duplication or duplicity, this iterability of the mark is neither an accident nor an anomaly, it is that (normal/abnormal) without which a mark could not even have a function called “normal”.’

16 Merleau-Ponty continues: ‘Here there is nothing comparable to the solution of a problem, where we discover an unknown quantity through its relationship with known ones. For the problem can be solved only if it is determinate, that is, if the cross-checking of the data provides the unknown quantity with one or more definite values. In understanding others [philosophically], the problem is always indeterminate because only the solution will bring the data retrospectively to light as convergent, only the central theme of a philosophy, once understood, endows the philosopher’s writings with value of adequate signs. There is, then, a taking up of others’ thought through speech, a reflection in others, an ability to think according to others which enriches our own thoughts.’

17 Of course, there may be other reasons why the questions unique to philosophy cannot ever be treated scientifically. For an argument as to why philosophy of mind and language must fundamentally remain non-scientific, for instance, see Davidson 2001d, pp. 229–44.