

BOOK REVIEW

A Review of Overgaard, Søren, Paul Gilbert, and Stephen Burwood. 2013. *An Introduction to Metaphilosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Friends and family have haunted philosophers for years with the seemingly simple question: what is philosophy? Nonetheless, there is rarely have an adequate answer. Worse still, we rarely discuss the topic in a thorough and purposeful manner. This book is an attempt to do such task.

The book begins with a typical introduction. It argues that metaphilosophy – the study of philosophy's nature – is not only interesting but also important since we must have an adequate idea of philosophy's nature before we can even evaluate its competency and usefulness. For instance, you cannot evaluate Plato's *Republic* if you do not know whether practicality is an important criterion for political philosophy. This argument is sound.

The second chapter: "What is philosophy?" is, however, more questionable. As a matter of fact, I believe that this is its weakest chapter. The book argues that some definition is inadequate since its scope is too large for some great philosophers.

It is only to be expected that an individual's interests are narrower than the entire field. Take a biologist who is an expert on penguin. We would not think that "the study of animals" has a scope too large for biology since this expert studies penguin. On the contrary, we would say that biology involves the studies more than animals despite the fact that most expert study only a certain animal.

This chapter has other suspicious reasoning. It argues that philosophers tend to confuse prescriptive accounts with descriptive ones. To clarify, the authors use a metaphor from football. It may be more interesting if there were no goalkeeper, the book argues, it would no longer be football.

Obviously, a social entity can change with time. I see no reason that the rules of football as well as the practice of philosophy will be exceptions. In fact, both have changed to some degree overtime. Philosophers, however, tend to see Athena in philosophy. We tend to believe that philosophy has sprung from our heads fully grown with weapons and armour. Furthermore, the book's reasoning implies that our current practice should monopolize its future. This is possible, but we should demand justification.

The book moves onto the next chapter by debating whether philosophy is more on the spectrum of science or humanities. It argues controversially that philosophy progresses since we do not only collectively refute most schools but also share a paradigm. It argues that most of our conflicts are over details. Our research,

although not conclusive, provides a clearer understanding and helps us use our conceptual tools better. Our disunity, according to this book, is exaggerated. I concur with this analysis, but I suspect that most philosophers will strongly disagree with its further argument. It cites Weber and MacIntyre who posit that philosophy has the potential to progress but philosophers, out of habit, impede this progress by exaggerating the small details.

The fourth chapter is more technical than the rest of the book. "The data of philosophical arguments" is worth reading though. Its discussion on intuition is arguably the most cogent in the book. It argues that since philosophy relies on intuition and research intuition, how can we justify neglecting quantitative research? We simply assume that our intuition is representative, but without solid facts, we can neither check nor calibrate our intuition.

"Analytic and continental philosophy" is a banal account of the divide. Unless one is unfamiliar with the subject, I would recommend skipping this chapter. It is an adequate introduction though.

The sixth chapter: "Philosophy and the pursuit of truth," though, is a highly recommended introduction to philosophy. It contextualises philosophy and makes it relevant to our problem. It argues that philosophy does not deal with big question but rather context sensitive questions. For instance, logical atomism is not a school that tries to deal with language *per se*, but with the scepticism of the early twentieth century.

Clearly, some philosophers will argue that this position is untenable for two reasons. Firstly, there is in some sense a competition between great philosophers of different eras. Eclecticism is plausible but it still means that philosophers themselves believe in this competition. The book raises this issue but cannot provide any answer. Secondly, if philosophical truth is plural rather than singular, then how should we live? The book cites Rorty's answers which is to appeal to solidarity of our current best answer. This suggestion is highly questionable but highly still interesting. Philosophy is infamous for its disunity. "Philosophers cannot agree on anything," is a cliché for a reason. The book should try to defend its suggestion more rigorously.

This brings us to the next chapter: "What is good philosophy?" The book justifies its value almost entirely upon this question. It argues that we cannot know whether we do proper philosophy until we know what it is. Understandably, it does not deliver as much as we may hope. It cannot suggest, let alone establish, criteria for good philosophy.

The last chapter: "What good is philosophy?" is clever wordplay with arguably underwhelming content. The book delivers a weak argument that cannot convince anyone who is already convinced that philosophy is useless. Nevertheless, it should be able to convince neutral bystanders.

This book is, in the end, of some value. It is, after all, an introduction. One should

not expect an introductory book to offer a deep and convincing argument. One should expect it to offer some light which makes the issue easier to see. In this way, the book is illuminating.

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