ON BEING OF SOME USE

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ABSTRACT

By reflecting on philosophy's reputation for uselessness I am led to an analysis of the success conditions for pragmatic arguments of the sort proponents of conceptual engineering offer in favour of their analyses.

Keywords Social epistemology · Explication · Ameliorative Analysis · Conceptual Engineering

1 Introduction

To prove that philosophy could be practically useful Thales embarked on an olive press venture, yet despite his impressive fourth-quarterly sales many remain unconvinced of our utility. In the face of this disdain a defiant intellectual (e.g. Hitz, 2020) may take consolation in Euclid's flippant response to a student who asked how he would benefit from pure mathematics. "Give this man a halfpenny", the geometer retorted, "since he must make a gain out of what he learns". Let us explore the space between sarcasm and monopoly profits.

We can examine one strategy for showing philosophy's worth that reflects the recent growth of conceptual engineering (Cappelen, 2018), or explications and ameliorative analyses (Dutilh Novaes, 2020). Philosophers are professionally engaged in producing theories, refining concepts, and defending propositions. We think and act guided by thoughts and desires which are framed by such things. Could not the philosopher exploit this fact to ply their trade in a way that tends to the public good? Such a philosopher could defend their claims not only on the grounds that they are true or well justified, but also by showing that it would be useful to adopt or come to believe their claims.

The basic idea is intuitive enough. The claims we make may predictably affect interlocutors' cognition and behaviour. If I credibly inform you that the beer is in the fridge then I can foresee where you will search for beer when you are next in need. Similarly, if I teach you how to do long division then I may predict you will more reliably solve problems which require long division. I may thus tell you where the beer is or teach you a particular method of doing long division in order to assist you in tasks which I should like you to successfully carry out.

Of course there are more subtle cases of similar phenomena. One example is self-actualising beliefs. Suppose whether or not you believe you can jump the ravine determines whether or not you in fact can do so. Here I may wish to persuade someone that they can make the jump not because it is true and would be useful for them to know, but because I wish to make it true so they make the jump. Or we may take as an example claims given an emotivist analysis, where the goal is not to induce an interlocutor to believe something true but to induce some other state of sentiment, that itself may have predictable behavioural consequences. Another example still would be cases where I persuade you of one method over another in light of some explicitly pragmatic rationale – I persuade you of this way of doing long division rather than that because the former allows for faster work even if it somewhat less reliable.

Presumably philosophical claims may have similar effects – and where such advantages exist, proponents of a view may advertise as much and seek to use these features of their claims to persuade interlocutors. Indeed, people engaged in conceptual engineering, explication, or ameliorative analysis explicitly appeal to such pragmatic considerations in

favour of their preferred analyses. If there are any good arguments of this form a case for philosophy's pragmatic utility has been made.

If a pragmatic argument in favour of a view is to be credited we must ensure some conditions are met. The philosophical view in question must, if adopted, have predictable behavioural effects that themselves predictably generate good consequences, that these behavioural effects and felicitous consequences may be effected must be known to the proponent of the view, and the view must be communicated to some people in a position to enact the relevant behaviours and bring about their good results.

Without predictable behavioural effects none of this could get off the ground. If these effects were unknown by proponents then they would lack grounds upon which to actually recommend their view. And if the views with these features were not communicated to others, or only communicated to people not in a position to enact the behaviour in order to bring about its predictable results, then its utility would be itself merely theoretical, and the whole exercise would have a faint air of self-parody.

It is instructive to consider cases where the conditions are not met. Dotson and Sertler (2021) have an extended case study of philosophers' failed attempts to ameliorate concepts surrounding discourse on incarceration. For our part we shall examine the recent arguments of Srinivasan (2020) and Pettigrew (2021). They both attempt "arguments from the practical, moral, and political uses to which we wish to put the concept" (Pettigrew, 2021, 1). Srinivasan defends epistemic externalism over internalism, while Pettigrew defends pluralism. They both argue that their preferred view would generate politically desirable consequences in the population by changing how people conceive of certain fraught situations. And in both cases the authors say that the fact that their preferred views would generate desirable results constitutes a practical reason to prefer them. Srinivasan is quite explicit that for externalism to have the practical benefits she claims on its behalf would require collective consciousness raising (20), not performable by any individual acting alone (37). And Pettigrew claims on behalf of internalism that were enough members of the population sufficiently educated in internalist approved modes of epistemic analysis it would reduce the influence of pernicious ideology or propaganda (17).

Alas, both authors implicitly rely on a far too logically tidy psychological theory of their audience. They assure us changes in attitude or behaviour would come about in line with the logical consequences of their view. In a world in which utilitarians dine out we cannot safely presume such practical inferences will be drawn. Further, both authors rely on mass adoption of their view to reap the large scale cultural benefits they claim. But they communicate in paywalled journals of academic philosophy, making use of the technical language of our discipline. Neither accompany this work by concerted popularisation or dissemination. The typical reader of these journals hence faces a coordination problem. They cannot unilaterally induce social change, and without broad social change the claimed desirable effects will not come about. Our conditions for a successful pragmatic argument have not been met.

But these problems with Srinivasan and Pettigrew's arguments point towards the social epistemological context required for our conditions to be met. If the sort of people who read paywalled journals of technical philosophy were in a position to effect pertinent changes Pettigrew and Srinivasan would have been in better standing. Likewise, if unilateral action by the reader were sufficient to bring the result about this would have rescued their case. And even if mass action was required, if it was plausible that their work could affect or be incorporated into some mass movement this would have helped.

And these observations are buttressed by positive exemplars. Much of the most successful pragmatic arguments in philosophy have been produced by philosophers interacting with mathematics or the sciences (Leitgeb, 2013). Philosophers have, for instance, developed key concepts in decision theory (Ramsey, 2016), or generated and axiomatised methods of causal reasoning (Malinsky and Danks, 2018). There are plenty of non-mathematical interventions of this sort (Laplane et al., 2019), and recent sociological work tells us of a robust community of philosophers regularly contributing insights or analyses that help scientists do their job better (Pradeu et al., nd). We should see what is going well in these cases.

We can look at a concrete example to make the matter more clear. Okasha (2006) proposed a framework for reasoning about different levels of selection in evolutionary theory. This work has been widely cited and influential in not just philosophy but biological science itself. The matter is somewhat akin to the example we looked at earlier with teaching someone a new method of long division. Okasha persuaded biologists to adopt this, at least in part, by persuading them it would make them more reliable reasoners when they encountered difficulties they hoped to overcome. Now, Okasha has sometimes published in biological journals (e.g. Birch and Okasha, 2015) and works in an area where biologists and philosophers regularly collaborate (Pigliucci, 2009). Okasha was thus in a position to communicate his ideas directly to the relevant community, and through familiarity with their mores and ability to influence their behaviour was in a position to confidently predict the effect of their uptake. Okasha, thus, was in a good position to defend his philosophical position as likely to be useful.

Ideal opportunities for useful philosophy arise when the relevant behaviours philosophers hope to change are highly conscious and explicitly theorised activities. Examples include drawing inference, programming computers, producing models, or designing experiments. And in ideal cases the people carrying out those activities read the technical journals in which philosophers present their ideas, and where they are persuaded they are consciously trying to adapt their behaviour to the sort recommended by the philosopher. Philosophers themselves are in regular contact with the pertinent community and may observe and course correct as their ideas get uptake, or adapt them to suit new needs or in light of new discoveries as they arise.

Ideally then if a philosopher wishes to persuade us to adopt their idea, their ameliorated analysis, their theatrical framework – etc – they must meet our conditions on a pragmatic argument in something approximating an ideal social condition. They must know the behavioural consequences and effects of those behaviours, which will be easiest in cases wherein the behaviour is of a simple and well theorised sort and carried out by people who are consciously and skillfully trying to conform their behaviour to the logic of the philosopher's argument. And they must be communicating with an audience who can effect the changes that will bring about the desirable consequences, which will be easiest when there is a small community that regularly shares information, which the philosopher can themselves participate in, and which is open to further communication or guidance on how the ameliorated concept (etc) is to be deployed.

It is no wonder that scientific philosophy has been the most fruitful soil for pragmatically useful philosophy, and likewise why it proves so difficult in socio-political cases. But that is not at all to say the latter is impossible. After all, what is actual is possible, and there have been such classic and momentous cases as Marx or Locke. Judith Butler also furnishes a recent example. This informal survey is striking for the fact that these three did not defend their claims on explicitly pragmatic grounds of the sort we described here. Butler purports to tell us something about gender performance, Marx about the value form, Locke about Native Americans – and it is because they would have us believe their claims backed by evidence or argumentation that they would have us affirm with them.

In any case, contemporary scholars interested in pragmatic arguments whose benefits are supposed to accrue at the social level have adopted the strategy of first developing technical analyses – (e.g. Stanley, 2015; Manne, 2016). These are then followed by sustained media appearances and well advertised popular presentations of the core elements of their view – (e.g. Manne, 2017; Stanley, 2018). Here we have an attempt to communicate directly and at scale with the audience whose behaviour are pertinent, and to do so regularly and in public forums and modes that allow the philosopher to gently guide their audience to the consequences they think pertinent. What is more, the very act of spreading their claims on high profile media venues does something to solve the collective action problem Pettigrew and Srinivasan faced, as it may become common knowledge that cultural or conceptual change is possible. Time will tell whether this strategy is viable.

A special case of such ideal conditions occurs in the work of behavioural self-transformation typical of ancient ethics. Here the required audience is just the reader, which may even be the philosopher themselves in cases of philosophical diaries – see, e.g., Aurelius' Meditations or Wu Yubi's journal (Yubi and Kelleher, 2013). The benefit claimed is directly personal and to be attained by actions the individual can take, even if (as in Stoicism or Confucianism) the belief is that an ethically transformed reader will be of indirect benefit to their broader community. And the behavioural results of the philosophical idea are predictable because they are under the direct control of the person applying them. Personal self-transformation can be the most difficult task of all, but there is a sense in which philosophy directed at such embodies most perfectly the ideal context and conditions for pragmatic arguments to be successful.

The problem for philosophers' public image is that the contexts which are most friendly to their social, as opposed to personal, utility are highly likely to be esoteric. Being of great use to technical specialists will do nothing to alleviate the contempt that Thales laboured under. And while philosophically mediated personal transformation is a real possibility, in order to be willing to try it one must already be open to the possibility that philosophy could be useful in guiding one's life. It thus preaches to the converted. Whereas, paradoxically, it is often when we speak about things of broadest social relevance – that which might seem intuitively to be of applied interest or social utility – that it will be hardest for us to plausibly claim that our work will be useful to the reader. Only under the right social conditions, and with the right effort, may our work be of any use.

All this is no cause for philosophers to despair. Crude ambitions of changing others and our own behaviour along anticipated lines will only rarely be satisfied. We should never forget, however, that philosophy can also be of a more sublime use. Through philosophy we can totally transform our lifeworld, render the phenomenology of our own existence entirely anew. This is not useful in any way that would please the scoffing cynic of the worldly city. But to those who have experienced it whatever allowed them to achieve as much is the most prized thing they could possess. And though we cannot induce transcendence by pragmatic arguments it can be attained none the less. Even if success is difficult and rare, nothing could ever be totally useless that gives us the possibility of blessedness.

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