

# Philosophical Beauty

Robert Pasnau

## 1.

Here is a dilemma for the historian of philosophy: Either philosophy has progressed over the centuries or it has not. If it has not, then what good is philosophy? If it has, then what good is its history? Of course, there are many ways around, or through, this dilemma, but still it will serve as a useful starting point for considering the different sorts of reasons one might have for studying philosophy's history.

The highroad through the progress dilemma – the road more traveled – holds that philosophy progresses, but only fitfully, and that often the traces of true progress can be discerned only retrospectively, sometimes after a great many years have passed. The historian of philosophy then plays the role of a peasant following behind the harvester, gleaning from the field any stray truths that happen to have been missed by the onrushing course of philosophical inquiry.

I myself have sometimes thought of the history of philosophy in this sort of way – except that it has often seemed to me that the portion of truth left unreaped amounts to more than just a few scattered remnants – that row upon row of choice philosophy has been left unharvested, and that those of us who linger in the past have the luxury of wandering these verdant fields in unhurried peace, plucking from whatever tender stalk strikes our fancy.

I call this the highroad through the dilemma because it ennobles both philosophy and its history. Those who study philosophy, and those who study its past, can be viewed as fellow laborers, working together, albeit not quite side by side, toward a more complete understanding of reality. There must, I think, be some amount of truth to this picture, because the progress dilemma would be otherwise unanswerable. If philosophy did not make some measure of progress – uncover at least

the occasional truth – the discipline really would be intellectually indefensible, at least in its current form. And if historians of philosophy did not themselves contribute to this ongoing progress, at least in some humble way, then it really would be impossible to explain why the history of philosophy is an integral part of philosophy – how it contributes to the aims of a *philosophy* department to have historians on staff, and to teach the history of the subject in serious detail.

For we historians, however, this noble path presents a terrible hazard, because it requires making good on the claim that historical inquiry yields philosophical truth. No matter how many fat scholarly toms the historian may write, the noble path leads inexorably to the question that every philosophical historian must sooner or later confront, and that most of us dread:

*So, what can philosophers today learn from all of this?*

I say that most of us dread this question, but to be sure not all historians do. Some historians, indeed, are just waiting for the question to be asked, and have a great deal to say. Those who take the noble path will presumably say that these are the *good* historians. As for those who struggle with such questions, the most that can be said of them is that perhaps their work will be of some benefit to others who are better equipped to seek out the truth – by mapping out, as it were, the more fertile parts of the countryside.

The high and noble road therefore holds out the prospect of vindicating historical scholarship, but only on condition that the historian's gleanings are sufficiently valuable, where the measure of value is truth. If historians cannot satisfy this condition, it would follow that the history of philosophy does not deserve its present status in the profession. This is the terrible hazard that the noble path skirts. In effect, it confronts historians with a new dilemma: either produce philosophical results of the same kind that other philosophers produce, or give up the pretension that there is anything philosophically important about the history of our subject.

This new dilemma seems pretty well to capture how most philosophers think about the history of our subject: historical scholarship is worth doing, if it is, only because of what it contributes to the field's ongoing progress.<sup>1</sup> The historian will of course be confident of meeting the challenge – of discovering, if not truths, then at least conceptual resources that are useful to current research. Those who are skeptical about the worth of historical research will think in contrast that the challenge is rarely met, and that philosophers would be better off simply doing philosophy, rather than studying the history of how others have done it. I myself hold rather strong views in this area. I think not only that historical scholarship regularly contributes to the discovery of philosophical truth, but that the profession would be better off – would make more progress – if more philosophers spent more time studying the history of the subject, particularly in the early stages of their careers. There are, however, philosophers who hold strongly contrasting views – who think that progress in philosophy has been impeded by an excessive amount of attention to the history of the subject. This is a natural view to take if one thinks of philosophy as continuous with science and mathematics, since these fields of course pay little attention to the history of their subject. Even so, my impression is that most philosophers fall in between these two extremes, and find the current distribution of labor reasonably satisfactory. Hence departments generally sprinkle a few historical specialists amidst a larger number of scholars who just do philosophy.

I will not here belabor, or even defend, my own more radical pro-history view. Of more interest to me here is my counterpart on the other radical extreme, who thinks that historical research stands in the way of philosophical progress. This sort of skepticism deserves serious attention. For it certainly is possible that our discipline's respect for the history of its subject

---

<sup>1</sup> For a recent defense of historical work along these lines, see Ryan Nichols, "Why is the History of Philosophy Worth Our Study?" *Metaphilosophy* 37 (2006) 34-52. Nicholas usefully summarizes a range of other views on the topic.

amounts to nothing more than a bad case of idol worship – that we are wasting our time propping up these edifices from the past when we should just let them quietly crumble to dust on their library shelves. The noble path through the progress dilemma demands that we take this possibility seriously, because it pins the worth of historical scholarship to the contingent question of whether such research in fact yields philosophical insights. If we had some accurate way of assessing this question, and if it turned out that in fact historical research is not productive in that way, then the noble path would push us toward reforming the philosophical curriculum along the lines of mathematics or physics. Now I think, as I have indicated, that this is a challenge the historian can meet, but even so there seems something deeply worrisome about the noble path. For it strikes me as just absurd to treat the value of philosophy's history as contingent on whether such study contributes to progress in philosophy today. As confident as I am that such contributions regularly occur, I do not think philosophical historians need to justify their studies in this way. The noble path misses something important about the value of the history of philosophy, and about the value of philosophy in general. What it misses, I now want to argue, is that philosophy possesses a kind of beauty that makes its study intrinsically valuable quite apart from whatever claims to truth it might possess.

## 2.

Philosophical theories are valuable when they are true, and still more valuable when they are known to be true. But philosophical theories can also be valuable when known to be false, provided they are beautiful. The beauty of a philosophical theory gives it independent value and thereby makes it a worthy object of study, even if the theory is no longer a contender for the truth.

What do I mean by a beautiful philosophical theory? I do not mean writing that is

aesthetically beautiful in the usual literary sense. The often-cited beauty of Plato’s dialogues has no bearing on their philosophical beauty, as I am using the phrase. Davidson, Quine, and Frankfurt are masterful prose stylists, but this is not what makes their philosophy beautiful. Conversely, neither Rawls’s stiff cadences nor Fodor’s almost unbearable jokiness mars the philosophical beauty of their ideas. Philosophical beauty rests in the power of one’s arguments, the originality of one’s ideas, the depth of one’s reasoning, the clarity of one’s prose. I might go on, but there is really no need, because all I am describing here are the features that make for good philosophy. Good philosophy, I am suggesting, is beautiful.

It is unclear to me how to think about the relationship between philosophical beauty and beauty in its more familiar forms. It might be said that the beauty of philosophy is not strictly aesthetic at all, insofar as it has no particular relationship to sensation, but then again it is not clear that the beauty of literature has any closer relation to the senses. Good philosophy fascinates and delights us in a way that is at least analogous to how we respond to fine art and literature. In speaking of philosophy of beautiful, however, I do not mean to assimilate it to art, but rather to invoke the broader conception of beauty articulated by R. G. Collingwood: “The word ‘beauty’, wherever and however it is used, connotes that in things by virtue of which we love them, admire them, or desire them.”<sup>2</sup> To praise philosophy for its beauty is not to praise it for the pleasure it brings us; on the contrary, it brings us pleasure because it is beautiful. Nor is the beauty of philosophy a function of its capacity to uncover the truth – what we might call its *scientific mission*. Good philosophy certainly is well suited to that scientific mission, and that mission of course has tremendous value. But good philosophy also has a further kind of intrinsic value, a goodness, even in cases where the truth lies many miles away.

---

<sup>2</sup> *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1938) p. 40.

Perhaps this will strike some as an appalling conception of philosophy – as perhaps even a betrayal of the very spirit of the discipline. It is the only way I can find, however, to make sense of how I sometimes find myself engaging with the field. As an example, I think back on a recent week I spent teaching Aquinas’s theory of charity. Charity, for Aquinas, is a virtue infused by God into our souls, permitting us to care more deeply and steadfastly for God and God’s creatures. For me, and I think for many of my students, this was fascinating material with which we were profoundly engaged. Yet this is, on its face, puzzling, because there is almost nothing about Aquinas’s theory of charity that strikes me as at all likely to be true. I am not much attracted to ethical virtue theories; I am not at all tempted to suppose we have immaterial souls; I do not even believe in God. What value, then, could any of this have? How could I regard it as anything other than a waste of time to teach this material to my students, when there are so many other true things I might be teaching them? The noble response to such questions would be to insist that there are truths here, even in the midst of so many false assumptions, and that the business of the historian of philosophy is to glean these truths from those dusty pages. I do not scorn this project; I agree that this is part of what the historian of philosophy may try to do, and it is something I myself have tried to do on many an occasion. But it seriously misunderstands the project of historical inquiry to suppose that this is the only thing historians do, or ought to do, when they engage with philosophical texts. The history of philosophy can and regularly does contribute to the scientific mission of philosophy, sometimes by pointing toward the truth, sometimes by offering a repertoire of useful conceptual resources, and sometimes simply by giving fledgling philosophers material on which to sharpen their beaks. But these sorts of instrumental purposes do not exhaust the value of historical research, nor are they essential to it. Part of the value of engaging with topics like Aquinas on charity is simply that they are philosophically beautiful, whether or not such theories are in any respect true.

This is not, to be sure, the highroad through the progress dilemma. It is a road less traveled; indeed, philosophers have paid astonishingly little attention to the question of whether philosophy might have some value apart from its scientific mission. Once we embrace this idea, however, we can understand why the progress dilemma should have little grip on the historian of philosophy. Let philosophy progress as much as you like; let the ideas of Aristotle, Aquinas, and Locke be as superannuated and superseded as you please. Still, they are beautiful, and worthy of study for that reason alone.

I am not suggesting that such beauty is sufficient, all by itself, to justify our discipline as a whole. When philosophers advance theories they surely take themselves to be making claims about what is true. I myself take to be true everything I am saying here today, and if I did not strongly believe in its truth I would not say it. To value philosophy solely for its beauty would make the discipline as it stands quite unintelligible. Wholesale reconceptualization would be called for, perhaps along the lines of Nietzsche or Rorty.<sup>3</sup> Those projects are of no interest to me here. But it is obvious, all the same, that much of philosophy consists not in offering up truths of our own, but in studying the professed truths of others. My question, cast most generally, concerns why we should do that. Why should we pay attention to what other people think, particularly when they have lived so long ago, without the benefit of many modern discoveries? The familiar and noble answer to such questions holds that there are still truths to be gleaned from that material, that the benefits of modernity are perhaps overrated, and that in any case there are compensating benefits to be had from diverse perspectives. I wish well those who want to take that highroad, lending their shoulders to the engines of philosophical progress. But I offer the historian another kind of answer to the

---

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* §5: “only as an aesthetic phenomenon are existence and the world eternally justified” tr. W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966).

daunting question of how that old material can still be relevant today. To such questions it is entirely proper for us to respond, with whatever degree of politeness the situation demands, that we don't give a shit about relevance. The great philosophy of old is beautiful, and that is enough.

### 3.

This side-road appeal to beauty, as a path through the progress dilemma, will of course appeal to the lover of beauty over truth, but it scarcely ennoble historical scholarship as a species of philosophy. Indeed, historical skeptics are likely to embrace my account of the situation, as confirming their worst suspicions. Perhaps, the historical skeptic will say, this line of thought shows why historical research has some kind of humanistic value, of a piece with the history of art and literature, but by the same token it also shows quite vividly why the history of philosophy should not be an integral part of philosophy, and perhaps should not even be housed in the same department. The highroad, then, may have had its terrible hazard, but here lies an equally terrible danger along our scenic side path.

It is not only historians, however, who should recognize the role of philosophical beauty. For if we consider the practice of philosophers in general, there are reasons to suspect that we all tacitly acknowledge that philosophical theories can have value independently of their truth. Here, in brief, are three such reasons.

*First*, many contemporary philosophers give substantial sympathetic attention to theories that they do not find even slightly credible. Many atheists, for instance, have lavished attention – both in their teaching and in their research – on various problems in philosophical theology. And although almost no epistemologists are skeptics, they treat the topic exhaustively. Philosophers of science go on at great length about various competing interpretations of quantum mechanics, even



though quantum mechanics is known to be false. Many metaphysicians have engaged deeply with Lewis's modal realism, without for a moment taking it seriously as true. Again, there is the familiar noble explanation of such behavior: that there is much to be learned even from false theories. No doubt this is often so, just as it is so in historical cases. But it seems unlikely to explain fully the extent of our willingness to invest time in theories that we do not for a moment believe. Part of the story, in cases like this, is that such topics ensnare us with their philosophical beauty.

*Second*, there is something puzzling about our entrenched professional disagreements. I believe, for instance, that libertarianism is an incoherent conception of free will. But I know that this is a highly contentious matter, and that very smart people have thought otherwise. The majority of philosophers perhaps agrees with me, but the numbers are not so striking as to engender any real confidence that I am right. Still, I persist in my conviction about the incoherence of libertarianism. Is this not irrational? Is it not just as likely, or nearly so, that the other side is right? And what about those cases where I hold a minority view in some domain? Would I not be well advised – if all I cared about was getting at the truth – to abandon my view? Still I persist, believing the things that I believe even while well aware that others who are just as smart and well-informed see the matter differently. And even while I adhere to my own position, I admire others who do the same, even if they reach contrary conclusions. I would indeed think less of them if they did not have their own independently developed views.

This is a perfectly familiar phenomenon in philosophy and other domains, and has received extensive attention in recent years.<sup>4</sup> The special weight we give to our own views, even in the face of disagreement from others, calls into question the extent to which we are really doing our best to arrive at true beliefs and avoid false ones. Al-Ghazālī describes in his *Kitāb al-'ilm* (*Book of Knowledge*)

---

<sup>4</sup> For a representative sample of papers in this area, see Feldman and Warfield, *Disagreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

how one ought to go about searching after the truth: “We should search for the truth in the way we look for something that is lost – without distinguishing between whether the thing is found by our own hand or by the hand of someone who helps us look.”<sup>5</sup> It is fairly obvious that this is not the way we go about things in philosophy. We give special weight to our own views even when there is no good objective reason to think they are more likely to be right. In this way, the search for the philosophical truth is not like searching for one’s lost car keys. Where one’s keys are concerned, all one wants is that they get found, no matter by whom. Why is philosophy different? The difference seems to lie, at least in part, in our not being solely concerned with the truth. Of course we would *like* to learn the truth, even if it turns out other than what we thought. But we also value the process of arriving at our own conclusions through well-reasoned argumentation. We regard people who do this well as good philosophers. We want our students to do this, and we want to surround ourselves with colleagues who are exemplary at it. We want this, in part, because the process itself is of intrinsic value. It is part of what makes philosophy beautiful. We might abandon such methods, and instead follow the majority opinion of the experts. Or we might adopt an across-the-board agnosticism about all philosophical questions. Either of these strategies would be more likely to serve the end of maximizing our ratio of true to false beliefs. But our better purchase on the truth would come at the cost of philosophical beauty – a price we are unwilling to pay.

*Third*, there is something puzzling about the way we make hiring decisions in philosophy. Among the various criteria we employ – intelligence, productivity, departmental fit – we do not consider whether a candidate’s views are *true*. On the contrary, it is almost universally regarded as deplorable to make hiring decisions on the basis of whether a candidate’s beliefs agree with one’s own beliefs about the truth. But why should this be? After all, do we not really believe that our own

---

<sup>5</sup> al-Ghazālī. *The Book of Knowledge, Being a Translation with Notes of the Kitāb al-‘Ilm of al-Ghazālī’s Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, tr. N.A. Faris, rev. ed. (Lahore: Shaykh Muhammad Ashraf, 1966) sec. 4, p. 114 (translation revised).

views are true? And do we not wish to promote philosophical progress, and want our own department to be at the forefront of such progress? And do we not think that philosophical progress lies in arriving at the truth? Is it not then much better to hire a candidate who believes what is true, rather than hire someone who is more accomplished but on the wrong track?

David Lewis has considered this phenomenon in some detail.<sup>6</sup> The best explanation he could find is that we are afraid of our opponents in the profession – afraid that they will try to hire on the basis of their own false philosophical views, and thus do as much harm as we could do good. In response to that standoff, Lewis suggests that we have entered into a tacit contract with our opponents, agreeing not to let our own views influence our decisions just so long as our opponents set aside their views. Optimistic that the truth – our views – will win out in the long run, we all agree to hire the smartest philosophers we can find, regardless of whether they agree with us.

This seems implausible. Our aversion to hiring on the basis of our own views goes beyond mere prudential calculation. We genuinely think that colleagues who hire in that way – even when they are our allies – are doing something that is bad *philosophically*. We can imagine ourselves in a situation where we have complete control over a hiring decision, and where the grounds for the decision can be kept completely secret. (Such things do sometimes happen, at least when it comes to short-term positions.) Even in such a case, most of us would regard it as quite wrong to make such a decision based on whether we regard the candidate's views as true. It is not that we would be threatening a tacit agreement, but that we would be employing the wrong criteria for selecting the best candidate.

One might take this phenomenon as evidence that we do not really believe the various philosophical theories we profess. We assert them, yes, verbally and in print, but our true credence

---

<sup>6</sup> “Academic Appointments: Why Ignore the Advantage of Being Right?” *Papers in Ethics and Social Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 187-200.

in them is much less than such assertions imply. Hence what we truly believe is that all the disputed questions in philosophy are fairly wide open, with the various options all still very much in play. This would certainly explain the phenomenon, but it strikes me as quite wrong about the degree to which philosophers are convinced of their views. When I commit myself in print to something, I do so because I am seriously persuaded of it. Even in many areas where I have no particular expertise, I hold quite firm views. I really believe, for instance, that libertarian free will is incoherent. At the same time, I would not penalize a job candidate for thinking otherwise. I am sure that in this regard I am no more dogmatic than others.

A better explanation for our hiring practices is that we happily hire candidates whom we disagree with so long as we admire the philosophical merit of their work, true or false. It is not that we do not care about the truth. We think that all philosophers should see things the way we do, and we devoutly wish for such an outcome. But experience has taught us that this is not to be, at least in the short term, and so we settle for a different kind of value, the value that comes from doing philosophy beautifully. Indeed, we do more than simply settle for this. If given the choice between a mediocre colleague who holds our same views – who believes the truth – and a brilliant colleague who disagrees with us about almost everything, we choose beauty over truth.

In practice, few of us have much control over who our colleagues are. But we do, in another sense, have almost complete control over which philosophers we spend our time with, inasmuch as we decide whom to read, think, and write about. In choosing to spend much of my professional career studying the history of philosophy, rather than the latest state-of-the-art developments, I have perhaps missed out on some amount of philosophical progress. But what I may have lost in truth, I feel I have more than made up for in beauty.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Thanks for their suggestions to John Helsel, Bradley Monton, Ashley Taylor, and the 2011 PhilProgress symposium at Harvard.

add somewhere as a note:

There is a deeper question of what gives beautiful things their value, which Susan Wolf (2011) has subtly explored. She treats art and philosophy as analogous cases, though she does not consider just how close the analogy may be.

Susan Wolf, “Good-for-Nothings,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 85 (2011) 47-64.

From Kris McDaniel:

1) It seemed to me that your hypothesis about beauty as one of the 'values of philosophy' is strengthened by considering ugliness as well. Consider certain 'postmodern' ways of doing philosophy -- their products sometimes evoke in analytic philosophers a kind of disgust that is partially 'moral' disgust or something in the neighborhood, but I think there is also a kind of aesthetic reaction occurring. There are ugly instances of philosophy.

2) In addition to truth and beauty, there are other obvious 'values of philosophy': justified belief and knowledge are obvious possibilities. When one engages in a kind of scientific activity, one cares more about getting the truth: one wants evidence, and better, knowledge, and even better, systematic bodies of knowledge. This latter fact provides an alternative explanation for the data of valuing one's own views because they are one's own views. I'm not sure how beauty as a value explains this; and I'm not sure the data has been characterized correctly either... Anyways, here's a rough thought. If I believe that P simply because I trust David Lewis, I have some evidence for P -- testimonial evidence -- but testimonial evidence for philosophical views isn't great evidence. So if I want better evidence, I'd better examine the arguments for P (and not-P) thoroughly, and draw my own conclusions. If all I cared about was truth though, the question about evidence would be beside the point, and I might as well take truths wherever they can be found.

3) On pages 4-5, you switch from talking about the beauty of a theory to the beauty of a bit of philosophy, the latter of which is a function of power of argument, clarity of prose, originality, etc. I worry that this slide is really a conflation: a theory is an abstract object, capable of being expressed clearly or unclearly, in a context in which it is original and in a context in which it is derivative, and so forth. I agree that even abstract objects like theories can be beautiful, such as theorems in mathematics or equations in physics. Whereas a bit of philosophy is what? Perhaps a collection of remarks, written or spoken, imbued with meaning, having a date and a location and appearing in a particular social context, and hence capable of having the kinds of aesthetic properties that any such collections can have. Are theories and bits of philosophy beautiful in the same ways? (Seems unlikely.) Which kinds of beauty are relevant to your paper? Probably both -- but it might still be

good to distinguish them? Yes, he's noticing what I remarked on in discussion, and which I have a comment on above as well – that I need to distinguish between the beauty of a theory, and the beauty of a whole paper, or philosopher, or train of ideas, etc.

4) I find the stuff about where historians should be housed a little baffling in general. I'm inclined to think that for any x worthy of study, the history of the study of x is also worthy of study, for its own intrinsic interest. But (i) (for most of those xs), you'll need training in x to study history of x, and (ii) practitioners of the history of x can sometimes shed light on x itself. For xs in which (i) and (ii) are true, what better department to house a historian of x than in with the rest of the xs? How could anyone deny either (i) or (ii) of philosophy? Hence my bafflement. I think I can let this pass.

5) Near the end, about truth of the views of candidates when considering whether to hire them. I think that the standards for counting as believing something in philosophy, even firmly believing, are pretty low. I don't try to publish things that I don't believe are true, but when I say I believe P what I say is usually consistent with my confidence in P being .60. That's a little low for me to want to make decisions about people's livelihoods. But if I were to interview a candidate who offered philosophical arguments for, e.g., the intrinsic evil of homosexuals or the earth's being 6000 years old, I'd take considerations of truth into account. Maybe their arguments would also be ugly, since they'd be not very powerful, even if original and presented clearly. But this makes me think that beauty and truth are not independent values either. Yes, I agree: there are limits to how much we'll ignore what we believe true.

And for what it is worth, there are many people in our profession who, if given the opportunity, would never hire metaphysicians, since they view the metaphysical enterprise as bankrupt, or ethicists, or whatnot. Considerations of what is true by their lights are playing a big role.

Anyways, interesting stuff. I hope these comments are not too off.

take care,

Kris