

The Making of Professional Philosophy

A Thoughtful Profession is a fascinating and valuable book. The American Philosophical Association should be commended for having the good sense to commission a history of its origins, and James Campbell is to be thanked for having written an insightful history. In what does the value of the book consist?

First, over the years I have become increasingly convinced that to understand something one must have some sense of its history. This principle applies, I think, across the board, from social, political and economic phenomena to cultures, literatures and arts to the natural sciences, mathematics and logic. Even the latter, which we might think to be less temporal, have histories that inform their meaning and significance at any given point. The necessity of history, as we might call it, applies no less to scholarly disciplines and academic professions. One of the running themes that Campbell highlights in the years before and after the founding of the APA is the question of the nature of philosophy as a contemporary scholarly discipline. In that this topic is no less addressed today than a hundred years ago, the consideration of the history of the discussion helps us to frame the significance of the recent and current debate.

Second, this could have been a tedious book, that is if it were too institutionally focused. One could easily imagine a book that consisted largely of reprinted memos, letters, speeches and meeting agendas and programs. Campbell does describe many of the programs of the early meetings, but he does so in the context of the philosophical issues that were being debated. The focus of the book is not on the APA as an organization and the way it developed institutionally, but on the APA as the institutional expression of the nature of the discipline of philosophy in the US in the early 20th century, and the role the institution played in the pursuit of the philosophical issues that were then current. This choice of focus was a wise one on Campbell's part because it affords us a glimpse of, or rather a sustained look at, the scholarly nature of the discipline at the time. The implication is that the nature of the scholarly activity is related to the institutional forms in which it is carried out, in this case to the evolving nature of the university and to such academic organizations as the APA. The result is an examination of philosophy in America in the early years of the 20th century that is an intellectually rewarding read.

The third reason the book is valuable for contemporary philosophers in the United States, and perhaps for those abroad as well, has to do with a point that some may find disconcerting but which I find to be both interesting and encouraging. As I have mentioned, Campbell focuses on the

debates that were carried on around the formation of the APA that dealt with the question of the nature of the philosophical discipline itself. It seemed important for some American philosophers at the time to come to grips with the question of the purposes and methods of the discipline, if for no other reason than that they sought to describe the reasons philosophy merited a firm position in the university. Many were discomfited by the apparent fact that philosophy never seemed to make progress, that philosophers were dealing with many of the same general questions that had engaged thinkers for more than 2000 years. If philosophers could not agree on the questions to be asked, on research protocols, and on satisfactory answers when they appeared, how, they wondered, could the discipline command the respect afforded the sciences?

That this debate formed so much a part of the creation of the modern discipline of philosophy strikes me as rather comforting. For one thing, it indicates that the more recent debates, even battles, over the nature of philosophy and how it should be done, struggles that have been carried out in part within the APA, are not unique; they have a long tradition. One might take this as grounds for frustration in so far as it may appear that we have failed to resolve a critical problem. However, something else seems to me to be going on here, which is that self-reflection about the nature of the discipline is inherent in the discipline itself. It is an aspect of the philosophical enterprise that those of us who undertake philosophy continue to ask ourselves what we are doing, how we are to do it, and for what purposes it is to be done. This is not a failure of the discipline to be successful; rather it is an aspect, and a valuable aspect, of the nature of philosophical reflection.

The reasonableness of taking the situation this way is suggested by the fact that in this respect philosophy does not differ much from the other disciplines that constitute the modern university. Consider the questions that are occasionally asked by practitioners of other fields of inquiry: is *history* a science or a species of the humanities?; should *political science* be empirical or theoretical?; is *economics* in any reasonable sense a social science, given that economists disagree with one another so fundamentally?; is the study of *literature* a study of literary works or the study of theory?; does *sociology* have any proper subject matter?; what is the discipline of *communication* anyway?; are *ethnic studies* central or merely trendy?; is *physics* destroying itself by an excessive focus on string theory?, and so forth. Questions are also asked, with respect to all contemporary disciplines, about whether their practitioners should be disinterested inquirers or scholars with a serious interest in the application and social implications of our work? And we ask of the university itself whether the “ivory tower” is a defensible or detrimental metaphor? In short, the nature of all the disciplines that constitute the university, in fact the nature of the university itself, is under continual scrutiny. The discipline of philosophy is not exceptional in this respect.

Campbell makes clear in the book how much this sort of question bothered many of the founders of the APA, most clearly Arthur O. Lovejoy. But Lovejoy was mistaken, not just about whether philosophy should be a science, which is what he advocated, but about the assumption that philosophy needs to define itself more clearly and that its practitioners need to agree on a definition. It is not, I think, a failure of an academic discipline to entertain, even interminably, questions about its own nature and purposes. On the contrary, it is probably a strength in that it suggests the ongoing presence of new ideas, challenges, perspectives and possibilities. We should become nervous if such debates and disagreements were to cease. It may yet be the case that academic administrators and granting agencies and foundations need to be helped to understand this fact about scholarly inquiry and academic disciplines, but that simply means that our challenge is to help them understand it, not to try to redefine our activities according to a largely mythical conception of the progress of knowledge.

The fourth reason I have found the book so valuable is that it has helped me to understand that the manner in which philosophy is undertaken today, and the way in which the discipline organizes itself, are historical and geographical determinations. The current form in which professional philosophy is organized, with its roots in the early years of the APA, is the current way in which people in the United States with a philosophical bent can pursue their intellectual interests. With respect to geography, it would be interesting to have a similar careful study of how the profession of philosophy has developed in other places around the world. I suspect that there would be differences. Temporally, we can be certain that the current way in which philosophy is done and the discipline organized will change over time, either gradually or abruptly. But all the evidence suggests that however it changes, and whether or not philosophers ever agree on anything, people will continue to raise philosophical questions because that is just how we are. And if the APA were to disappear tomorrow, philosophers in the United States would, sooner rather than later, erect something in its place, for the simple reason that we want not just to do philosophy, but we also want to communicate with one another in some systematic way.

We are all very much in James Campbell's debt for demonstrating so clearly and carefully how and why that systematic communication came to be a century ago.

John Ryder

The State University of New York