



## Philip Kitcher, *What's the Use of Philosophy?*

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Quassim Cassam<sup>1</sup>

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In this excellent book, one of the very best and most important philosophers of his generation holds up a mirror to professional Anglophone philosophy. The mirror has been designed to make vivid the latter's deformities, including "the misshapen features that amuse or annoy or appal scholars in other fields" (p. 106). Among these features is what William James saw as the tendency of too many philosophers to go on talking indefinitely about topics that have "not the slightest bearing on what matters to other people" (p. 109), including academics in other fields.

The content of many philosophical discussions is unfathomable to the uninitiated but many in the profession are staunchly unapologetic about their rarefied preoccupations. Timothy Williamson, Oxford's Wykeham Professor of Logic, frankly admits that "most philosophical questions lack direct applications" (2011: p. 537). In the same passage, he imagines a philosopher wanting to know whether people are events and asks: "What is wrong with simply wanting to know whether people are events?" (2011: p. 537).

Like his two great Pragmatist predecessors, James and John Dewey, Kitcher would respond to this question by asking another question: why do we need to know? How would it help us to know whether people are events? He suggests the same response to more familiar philosophical questions such as "What is knowledge?". The question is idle unless we can see how an answer might help people to make more accurate assessments of what they know and don't know. A failure to scrutinize the worth of one's questions is one of the six pathologies of contemporary Anglophone philosophy to which Kitcher devotes an entertaining chapter. Others include a fetish for complete clarity, for formalization, and

the "introduction of hypothetical cases so far removed from reality as to defy imaginative identification" (p. 81).<sup>1</sup>

Kitcher accepts that some philosophical projects that have no bearing on extra-philosophical questions can be justified and that "a world in which philosophy is reduced to the ventures that make immediate social impact would have lost something important" (p. 114). He is sensitive to the point that philosophers should be free to pursue their own interests because nobody can predict which intellectual pursuits will lead to future benefits. He is aware, also, that philosophy is not unique among academic disciplines in being at times (or frequently) incomprehensible to the uninitiated. He notes, however, that to concede these points is not to issue a blank check or make it unnecessary for philosophers to reflect on the character and value of their questions. Particle physicists and molecular biologists write in ways that outsiders cannot understand but at least they can outline "a sequence of steps that will lead from answers to the technical questions they pose to issues of far broader, and more readily comprehensible significance" (p. 5).

Despite his criticisms, Kitcher tells us that he comes to praise philosophy, not bury it (p. 113). He believes that philosophy has its uses, indeed important uses. The problem is not that there are no important questions that philosophy should be addressing but that "much of what is taken to lie at the center of the subject has no obvious bearing on any such question" (p. 23). Three uses of philosophy are to "help resolve the problems and debates of the age; to offer tools for various branches of inquiry; and to provide perspectives, synthetic responses to the chaos under people's hair" (pp. 147–148).

Most of the penultimate chapter is devoted to spelling out the idea that philosophy is a synthetic discipline that "reflects

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✉ Quassim Cassam  
q.cassam@warwick.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

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<sup>1</sup> The other two are "sprinkling fairy dust" (p. 87), that is, labelling key premises as "a priori" and underestimating the intricacies of other domains of inquiry.

on and responds to the current state of inquiry” (p. 13). The two great synthesizers were Aristotle and Kant. Both “systematized large and important parts of what was known when they wrote” (p. 127), though neither wrote about everything that mattered to their contemporaries. The complexity of the modern world means that the subject’s ambitions must be more modest. Philosophy today can realistically aim for *partial* syntheses that help to make sense of some *aspects* of the world in which we live. The best philosophy gathers a body of phenomena and invites us to “*try* thinking about them in this way” (p. 130). Doing so promises to bring order to “specific areas of subcranial chaos” (p. 133).

Why does order matter? The value of trying to bring order to the chaos under our hair is that it helps us to make sense of the phenomena that are the focus of synthetic philosophy. The latter is an exercise in sensemaking that “changes the way people think, the way they see the world, by accomplishing a change of perspective” (p. 149). This also helps with one of the other three uses of philosophy: helping to resolve the problems and debates of the age. This appealing view of the uses of philosophy is underpinned by the recognition that “philosophical problems emerge from the situations in which people – many people, not just an elite class – find themselves” (p. 5). Philosophy should be a source of *guidance*. We should think of it as “guiding human practices through its achievements in introducing concepts, proposing lines of reasoning, suggesting standards and rules, posing questions, offering striking comparisons, opening up possibilities, and so on” (p. 150).

How good has philosophy been at helping us to resolve the problems and debates of the age? The most pressing problems of our age are social, political, economic, and environmental. One problem is increasing inequality. As a recent book on John Rawls’s theory of justice points out, “most of us – and by ‘us’ I mean citizens of the world’s richest democracies – would agree that the societies in which we live are far from fair” (Chandler 2023: p. 1). Philosophers like Rawls have helped us to *understand* this problem by explaining the sense in which our societies are unfair. They have a vision of what a fair or just society would look like, but they offer little practical guidance about how to bring about such a society. They do not have a theory of political change, and this limits their ability to guide human practices or to offer practical solutions.

One can imagine some philosophers protesting that, contrary to what Marx claimed, the job of philosophy is only to interpret the world, not to change it or give practical advice on how to change it. The guidance that philosophy offers is not of this type. Perhaps, in that case, one should look to philosophy for other types of guidance, such as *moral* guidance. Consider this analogy: “Other areas of human inquiry have a problem. They send for the philosopher, in much the same way that homeowners send for a plumber, to fix things (or, quite often, the philosophical plumber turns up, uninvited)” (p. 116). This was Kitcher’s view in earlier work, but he now

concedes that the analogy conceives of philosophical guidance too narrowly and that the help that philosophy offers is often much less direct. That may be so but let us stick with the more direct conception of guidance suggested by the plumber analogy. When other areas of human inquiry have a problem and seek guidance from philosophers what is the quality of the guidance they receive today, and what does the answer to this question reveal about the uses of philosophy?

Competent plumbers generally—though of course not always—solve problems and they do so without the help of those who require their services. A plumber who is asked to fix a leaking tap is expected to have the necessary expertise to do so without the help of the homeowner. According to this expert model of plumbing, solutions to plumbing problems are not *co-created*, that is, the result of the service provider (the plumber) and the service recipient (the homeowner) working together. The plumber only requires the help of the homeowner to understand the problem, not to solve it.

When it comes to philosophy, the expert model is more problematic and a co-creative approach more appropriate. Imagine an Israeli military commander who is faced with the task of framing an appropriate military response to the mass slaughter of Israeli civilians by Hamas terrorists on 7 October 2023. The moral issues are extremely complex, and one can imagine a thoughtful commander looking to philosophers for practical moral guidance. How, they might ask, should Israeli military tactics take account of the widespread use of civilians as human shields by Hamas? Should the fact the Hamas uses hospitals and schools as military bases make these targets immune to attack even if those responsible for atrocities are known to be present at these locations? How should the many civilian hostages who were kidnapped by Hamas figure in Israel’s military calculations? And so on.

The unrealistic hypothetical cases that moral philosophers rely on in their discussions will be of little use because they fail to replicate the complexity, messiness, and urgency of the commander’s situation. To offer useful advice, we must be able, as Kitcher puts it, to “think ourselves into the situation envisaged” (p. 71). This requires empathy but even empathy is not enough. The commander is subject to constraints about which the philosopher who wants to offer moral guidance needs to learn. This requires humility as well as a willingness to engage with the lived complexity of the commander’s situation.<sup>2</sup> Minimizing civilian casualties is a moral obligation, but commanders also need to minimize the risks faced by their own soldiers. The balancing of these obligations is a delicate task, and the last thing anyone needs is arrogant philosophers blundering in with impractical solutions to half understood problems.

Co-creation is problem solving by diverse stakeholders with different perspectives, assumptions, interests, skills, and

<sup>2</sup> I owe the expression “lived complexity” to Richard English.

thinking styles.<sup>3</sup> It is a mode of working together that is very different from the expert model. It is not a matter of one person *revealing* solutions to others but of two or more people working together to solve problems. It requires openness to diverse perspectives and interests, a willingness to listen, and to see things from other points of view. On this account, Kitcher's talk of philosophy *helping* to resolve the problems of our age is entirely appropriate since philosophy cannot, on its own, solve these problems. The virtues philosophers need to cultivate if they are to be sources of guidance are the virtues of co-creation: empathy, humility, open-mindedness, and an instinct for lived complexity, among others.

For an example of philosophers manifestly failing to offer the type of philosophical guidance that is so desperately needed, a recent Open Letter on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza is a useful case study.<sup>4</sup> The letter is signed by a group of senior Oxford academics, including the White's Professor of Moral Philosophy and the Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory. The latter is Amia Srinivasan who, coincidentally, is extravagantly praised by Kitcher for other reasons. There are many grounds on which exception might be taken to the Open Letter but the relevant one for present purposes is its failure to offer any useful moral guidance to those such, as the hypothetical military commander, who are faced with having to make agonizing choices on an hourly basis.<sup>5</sup> Instead, the letter offers moral condemnation, delivered in sanctimonious tones from the comfort of All Souls and the other Oxford colleges in which the signatories are ensconced.

These criticisms of the Open Letter have been well made by one Israeli critic, and they raise a more general question about the contribution of academics today to resolving the problems and debates of our age. The critic writes that “among the many causes of frustration with recent reactions by moral philosophers and other experts to the war in Gaza there is this: they consist basically in condemnations (short introductory condemnations of Hamas, more textually extensive condemnations of Israel). These texts do not aim to provide us, Israelis, with advice or guidance as to what would be the best thing for us to do” (Schwartz 2023).<sup>6</sup> The plea for moral guidance is understandable, and the failure of leading moral and political philosophers to offer any is both shocking and disappointing.

This sorry tale shows that philosophy has important uses, including giving moral guidance, but that too many members of the profession today prefer virtue-signalling—or what passes for virtue-signalling in the current political climate—to an empirically informed and empathetic engagement with morally and politically complex situations. It is notable that

this criticism of some twenty-first century philosophers would not apply to their twentieth century predecessors. Nobody could reasonably accuse Elizabeth Anscombe, Anthony Appiah, Thomas Nagel, or Bernard Williams of a lack of seriousness or a failure to engage constructively with the messiness and complexity of moral reality.

If there is one criticism of Kitcher's otherwise brilliant book, it is that it says too little about political realities and their relevance for his conception of philosophy. As a notable philosopher of science, Kitcher has useful things to say how philosophy and science can work together. However, his list of the uses of philosophy does not include the idea that it can be politically emancipatory. For philosophers living in unequal societies ruled by military dictatorships, a useful philosophy would be a liberatory philosophy. “Liberation philosophy”, as it has been labelled, is the philosophical analogue of liberation theology.<sup>7</sup> Kitcher's already rich discussion would be further enriched by a greater engagement with the political. However, this should not detract from the book's many merits. His statement that philosophical problems emerge from the complex and often pressing situations in which people—many people, not just an elite class—find themselves should be pinned to the entrance of every philosophy department.

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**Reviewer:** Quassim Cassam, FBA, is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warwick, UK, and a member of Society's editorial board. His most recent book is *Extremism: A Philosophical Analysis* (2021).

<sup>7</sup> See Nuccetelli 2020, chapter 9, for an overview of Latin American liberation philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> This account of co-creation is developed in Cassam 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Home | Gazaopenletter (academicsongaza.wixsite.com)

<sup>5</sup> See Hacker 2023 for a highly critical response to the Open Letter by another Oxford academic.

<sup>6</sup> See, also, Enoch 2023.