

## What's to be done?

John Perry

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**Abstract** All of culture, philosophy included, is a huge trick on nature, and nature will eventually catch on and reassert itself. But for right now, if one lives in a free society, it's a wonderful time to be a philosopher: so much to read, so much to think and write about.

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*Topoi* provides an excellent expression of a view of philosophy that I share:

*Topoi's* main assumption is that philosophy is a lively, provocative, delightful activity, which constantly challenges our received views, relentlessly questions our inherited habits, painstakingly elaborates on how things could be different, in other stories, in counterfactual situations, in alternative possible worlds. Whatever its ideology, whether with the intent of uncovering a truer structure of reality or of soothing our anxiety, of exposing myths or of following them through, the outcome of philosophical activity is always the destabilizing, unsettling generation of doubts, of objections, of criticisms.

As one who has taught philosophy in American universities for 40 years, there are a couple of things I would add. First, philosophy taught at the undergraduate level is often that which puts students in a frame of mind to be adventurous about their college education, by encouraging them to ask questions they have not been encouraged to ask before, by showing that

such questions can be approached seriously, and by introducing them to a class of people relatively invisible outside of the university, “professional” philosophers—faculty and graduate students—who often are among the most weird and interesting and even inspiring whom they have encountered.

Second, a thought about this wonderful and interesting group of people, my philosophical colleagues. I have a very distinct memory of arriving at the Eastern Meetings of the American Philosophical Association some years back, when they were held at a hotel in Baltimore. The meetings began just after a National Football League playoff game had been played in that city, and the previous occupants of the hotel seemed to be mainly people connected with this game. Since I was flying from the west coast, and had to attend some meeting or other in the early afternoon of the first day, I arrived the night before most of the other participants. So I was able to watch the amazing transformation that took place as the football crowd checked out and the philosophy crowd checked in. The NFL people were large, some very large, most quite good-looking, confident, well-dressed, big-tipping, successful-looking folk; the epitome of what Americans should be, I suppose, according to the dominant ethos. We philosophers were mostly average-sized, mostly clearly identifiable as shabby pedagogues, clutching our luggage to avoid falling into unnecessary tipping situations. We included many bearded men—some elegant, some scruffy—all sorts of interesting intellectual-looking women; none of the philosophers, not even the big ones and the beautiful ones, were likely to be mistaken for the football players, cheerleaders, sportscasters and others who were checking out. The looks from the hotel staff members, who

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J. Perry (✉)  
Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA  
e-mail: johnperry43@gmail.com

clearly sensed that they were in for a few days of less expansive tipping and more modest bar-tabs, were a mixture of curiosity and apprehension. The talk, as philosophers recognized each other and struck up conversations, was unlike anything that ever had been or would be heard in that hotel lobby: whether there are alternative concrete possible worlds; whether there is anything in Heidegger not better said already by Husserl; whether animals should be eaten; not to mention topics that aroused truly deep passions, mostly related to proper names.

What a wonderful group of people, I thought, and how wonderful, and lucky, that the world has managed to find a niche for us. Even if philosophy had no real intellectual content at all—was as silly as astrology or numerology certainly are, or as I suspect, in dark moments, that certain other parts of the university are—it would still be wonderful that it existed, simply to keep these people occupied. Especially me. What would I be doing without this wonderful institution? Helping people in some small town in Nebraska with their taxes and small legal problems, I suppose, and probably not doing it very well.

But of course we philosophers do intellectually valuable and often socially useful thinking. For the past three years Ken Taylor and I have put on a weekly radio program in San Francisco, “Philosophy Talk,” in which we discuss all sorts of issues philosophically, most far beyond the areas of expertise that either of us possesses. We are joined by philosophers from all over the world, mostly by telephone, who do know something about the topic at hand; some are famous, many I had not heard of before. I have been struck by the depth and breadth of relentless questioning of our inherited habits and painstaking elaboration on how things could be different by philosophers of all sorts on all sorts of topics. I am inevitably struck by what a great contribution this or that person must be making to students and colleagues at their university.

Every so often I read that there are more scientists alive today that there have been in all the history of the world up until now. I suppose the same must be true with philosophers. There seems to be a lot of philosophy going on. When I was a graduate student, 45 years ago, one could pretty much keep track of the new books that were published, at least in English, and one didn't even feel terrifically overwhelmed by the

number of journals and articles. Now there seem to be as many books coming out each month as there were articles then. At the APA conventions, in the reviews, at some bookstores with good philosophy collections, one sees more interesting-looking books than one could possibly read.

The old codger in me is tempted to suppose that this is because standards have fallen since I was a boy, and besides word-processors have unleashed floods of drivel. But that doesn't really seem to be the explanation. An enormous percentage of these books and a good percentage of the even more overwhelming number of articles that are published seem to be, when one digs into them, interesting contributions to interesting topics. And, unless my perceptions are totally off, I think the more or less continentally inspired books are getting more rigorous, and the more or less analytically inspired ones are getting more adventurous.

I am a pessimist about almost everything. We inhabit a fragile planet, which has been warm enough for a couple of thousand years to produce philosophers, but is now doomed, due to our folly, to get too hot, and then, because of the remorseless uncaring cycles of sun and earth, to get too cold. Space travel isn't going to work. The American government, run by mediocre minds and mean spirits for much of its history, has sunk to new lows. There are too many people. Universities sell out. Women will always prefer undeserving men, and men will always prefer undeserving women. More animals suffer every year to produce a less inspired cuisine.

All of culture, philosophy included, is a huge trick on nature, breaking the natural connection between pain and pleasure and the things Mother Nature cares about—reproduction of one species in service of the digestive needs of another, for the most part—and using them for our own purposes. Mother Nature will eventually catch on and reassert herself. But for right now, if one lives in a free society, or at least one that allows philosophers to read what they want and say what they think, and if one can find a job or a stipend, it's a wonderful time to be a philosopher: so much to read, so much to think about, so much to write about, so many places to expose one's thoughts to whoever will read or listen. What's to be done? As *Topoi* say, it's a delightful activity. Read, talk, write, enjoy.