

1. Does the word ‘philosophy’ particularly matter to you?

It matters to me that the work I do—the questions that interest me and the methods that strike me as apt for answering them—all this—falls under the heading of “philosophy.” Fifteen years ago, an anthropologist I was working with told me she used the terms “philosophy” and “theory” interchangeably. Her view was that the hallmark of philosophy is abstractness. Since then, I have worked with a variety of social scientists who, influenced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, think of philosophy as the production of concepts, taking the social sciences to be charged with proceeding in a maximally concrete manner, and taking philosophy to have a corner on what is seen as the abstract business of concept-generation.

My attachment to “philosophy” is grounded in a different understanding of what philosophizing is. Certainly, philosophers grapple with abstract questions about, say, what the world is like and about what is involved in knowing it. There is a tradition—running back as far as Plato and clearly expressed in Kant—that treats the activity of trying to arrive at acceptable responses to these sorts of questions as having two competing aspects. One is an aspiration to a kind of systematicity associated with science and technical specialization. Another is an aspiration to an exoteric appreciation both of the source of human fascination with these sorts of questions and of the peculiar demands that addressing them poses. Philosophy, as I cherish and aspire to practice it, must be accommodating of the second of these aspects—and, specifically, must leave room for the prospect that the kind of thinking that it thereby aims to foster presents irredeemably practical difficulties.

2. How ought we to be doing philosophy?

This strikes me as a good question to be asking, though I wouldn’t want to give a univocal answer to it. There’s an important relativity to one’s educational stage, or stage in life, and also to one’s cultural context. It matters very much who the “we” of the question picks out. Learning to philosophize is finding one’s voice in a conversation that is already ongoing. In order to get started, one has first to find one’s bearings, immersing oneself in the work of philosophical thinkers, including historical figures, and also in the work of contributors to the other humanities, the social sciences and the arts. That means that, to some extent, at the very beginning, one cannot help but rely on the authority of those—texts or, more likely, individuals—who play the role of teachers in one’s life.

This reminds me of a passage in the work of Christine Korsgaard in which she talks about the “inherent element of subordination in the position of a student” (*Sources of Normativity*, 106). When I first read these words, more than twenty years ago, I was taken aback by what I thought of as their suggestion of conservatism. It may well be that Korsgaard is more conservative about these matters than I am, but now it strikes me as possible to hear her words as expressing nothing more and nothing less than the truism that philosophy bears the irredeemable mark of a moment of inheritance. I would certainly say that, as philosophers, we cannot help being heirs to particular intellectual traditions, and I would add that we don’t properly receive this bequest unless, in accepting it, we undertake a standing

responsibility to critically survey it. Part of what it is to come into one's own philosophically is to insist on one's readiness to assume this critical stance.

The model of philosophical practice I just sketched is capable of making sense of, and affirming, philosophical projects that involve revolutionary criticisms of established modes of philosophizing. Suppose that—guided by the work of great feminist philosophers, Marxian philosophers, critical race theorists and critical theorists more generally—one arrives at the conviction that a great deal of the activity that gets placed under the heading of “philosophy” in the intellectual traditions in which one grew up is ideological production that contributes to sustaining and reproducing the current social and economic order with its entrenched injustices. This form of self-understanding would bring with it the obligation to turn on and rigorously rethink received philosophical methods and categories and to try to develop new modes of thought capable of illuminating and bringing into question existing institutions and practices. It would be fair to say that over decades I have come to understand aspects of my own philosophical education as imposing this obligation.

How would you bring your views about how we ought to be doing philosophy to bear in talking to students about how to approach their study of philosophical topics at Oxford?

One of the distinctions of the Oxford system is that you approach your study of philosophical topics by doing papers that, while given concrete form by individual tutors, are structured by lists of topics and readings that are settled on by the Philosophy Faculty. This is a deliberate and thoughtful attempt to circumscribe the tradition that students doing joint courses in Philosophy ought to inherit. It is neither surprising nor bad if sometimes, in the course of doing a particular paper, you find yourselves chafing at this tradition—chafing, that is, at what you see as the restrictions either of your particular tutor's reading list or of the Faculty's. As I understand things, it is a misconception to think that members of the Faculty, in their role as examiners, are looking merely for the reiteration of established critiques and positions. (Sometimes this is expressed partly in terms of the idea that Faculty reading lists are not “normative.”) No doubt the reiteration of established views, when reflecting a breadth of reading and sharpness of intellect, is indeed rewarded to a large extent. But among the very best students are those who wind up feeling constrained by the materials they have been asked to master and who, having read widely and arrived at a good understanding of those materials, are capable of insightfully making a case for transforming the framing of issues suggested within them, and of moving in new directions.

Believing that your university system is in these ways extremely thoughtful and well-designed for students of philosophy is consistent with sympathizing with those who are convinced of the need for change. I know that some of you would like to see additions to the list of papers, and that some of you also hold that many existing reading lists ought not only to include works from a much more diverse set of great thinkers but also to reflect a wider range of actual and historical philosophical traditions. That the topics and reading lists of Philosophy papers are slow to change reflects some of the system's virtues. But this slowness can also be problematic, and I would happily stand shoulder to shoulder with you in agitating for revisions to reading lists of some existing papers as well as for additional papers. I regard these efforts as justified and important, and I think they can be effective. They are part of what created the conditions, for example, for the recent and welcome introduction of Feminism and Philosophy as a special subject for Philosophy.

How are your views about how we ought to be doing philosophy reflected in your work as a moral philosopher?

A leitmotif of my writing here is the idea—which I originally inherited from Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, John McDowell and Iris Murdoch and which I now connect with a range of historical and actual philosophical traditions—that the world to which moral concepts are responsible is a realm that is not somehow bequeathed to us prior to moral exertion. This world is brought into focus by moral thought and activity. So, any adequate account of the sphere of moral thought needs to be capacious enough to include, in addition to the use of specifically moral concepts, efforts to illuminate the features of the world to which these concepts are responsible. I take this understanding of moral thought to be morally and politically consequential. I argue in different contexts that we must treat the use of moral capacities as necessary for getting in view the world of moral concern if we are to identify egregious wrongs and decisive occasions to do good. I discuss these things, for example, in relation to horrors that humans inflict on animals, injustices visited upon individuals with cognitive disabilities and overlapping gender-, ability- and race-based modes of oppression.

Within analytic and, more broadly, analytic-influenced philosophy today, the conception of the nature of moral thought that I favor is rarely given a hearing. Mostly it is not that it gets dismissed as untenable. More often it isn't considered as a possibility. That is because it is a view on which we need moral capacities to adequately capture features of the world that moral concepts pick out, which means that it is a view that goes against the grain of entrenched assumptions about what the real fabric of the world is like. At issue is a set of interrelated assumptions aptly thought of amounting to an engrained understanding of what objectivity is like. It is overwhelmingly common for philosophers to conceive objectivity in a manner that excludes the possibility that the objective world encodes ethical values, and thereby excludes the possibility that we might require moral capacities to know it. The underlying idea is that objectivity has as its hallmark the banning of everything subjective. Most accept some version of this view without defending it, but there are arguments for it. In tracing these arguments and critically examining them, I have come to think that the conception of objectivity they purportedly support has a presence, in and well beyond philosophy, not accounted for by their ultimately weak character. This conclusion is not of merely technical interest. Because I am convinced that ethical methods contribute necessarily to uncovering morally and politically significant aspects of the objective world, I regard the assumptions about objectivity taken to speak against this view as harmfully ideological.

That is a sketch of how my inheritance of central strands of the ethical traditions in which I was trained made it seem obligatory—morally and politically so—to fundamentally rethink received philosophical methods and categories.

Do these reflections have a bearing on other parts of your work? Say, on what you're working on now?

Similar themes also inform my work in the general area of social philosophy. I have been cheered by the turn to the social taken by anglophone philosophy in the twenty-first century, and I admire much research now being done under the heading of "social philosophy." But the new social trend is often conceived as involving nothing more than an add-on to existing areas of philosophy. The supposition seems to be that it is possible to develop this philosophical subdiscipline without needing to rethink metaphysical and epistemological

categories—without, say, needing to explore debates, within nineteenth and twentieth century sociology, about whether social phenomena are ontologically distinct and such that we require distinct methods to know them. All too frequently this manner of proceeding involves simply imposing the artificial restrictions of a received, subjectivity-suppressing conception of objectivity. This is misguided in more than one way. It wrongly constrains the resources available to us for understanding the objects of our study, making it impossible to bring into focus some morally and politically decisively social phenomena. There's also another problem. Granted the constraints of a widely accepted conception of objectivity, it appears that no subjective endowments can contribute internally to our understanding of elements of the social world. This jars with many strains of liberating social thought, above all, with the here familiar idea that there are social phenomenon that only reveal themselves from particular cultural or evaluative perspectives. A further problem with social philosophy conceived as “applied ethics” is, then, that it tends to involve assumptions about objectivity that compel us to reject this idea. Following this line of thought, it seems that particular cultural perspectives cannot be cognitively obligatory. So, it doesn't appear urgent to explore social criticism illuminated by the experience of oppression, and it appears reasonable to ignore the voices of actual and historical emancipatory social thinkers. An organizing preoccupation of my work in this region is countering these appearances—by showing that particular evaluative perspectives can directly inform social understanding and that listening to the voices of insightful social critics is here internal to the philosophical enterprise.

I find allies for this undertaking in the overlapping areas on which my research primarily focuses—feminist theory, critical disability studies, critical race theory and critical animal studies. I also find allies in European traditions of social philosophy, including the tradition of Critical Theory associated with the University of Frankfurt's Institute for Social Research. This tradition's tools make it possible to place central preoccupations of my work in a wider political context. One of its leitmotifs is that the distinctive ills of advanced capitalist societies can be traced to processes of depoliticization reflecting the overreach of instrumental reason, and a key ambition is refashioning our image of reason so that it is capable of revitalizing the political sphere. The majority of philosophers associated with the Frankfurt School today attempt this refashioning project while taking for granted constraints of the metaphysics of objectivity I reject. This tendency is lamentable not only because it is philosophically questionable but because it wrongly limits the social theoretical resources available to inform critical reflection and, at the same time, makes it impossible to properly accommodate perspectives and insights of the subaltern. One concern of some of my recent lectures and writings about these topics is showing that the unfortunate tendency is traceable partly to a series of notable exchanges between analytic philosophy and Critical Theory beginning back in the early nineteen sixties. But a further concern is showing that an outlook that isn't marred by the relevant, artificial and limiting, metaphysical and epistemological restrictions gets developed in the writings of members of the Frankfurt School's first generation—above all, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno—as well as in the writings of some of their contemporary heirs. It is in the spirit of this philosophical corpus to insist that evaluatively inflected modes of thought contribute internally not only to genuine—world-directed—social understanding but also to properly critical, liberating political discourse.

How can students work to prevent the silencing of or problematic approaches used for certain discourses and *people* in their curricula and university?

A good starting point for this work is a willingness to ask whether, in analytic philosophy today, the silencing of people and the sidelining of challenging methods are more than incidentally related. The last fifteen or so years have brought an enormously welcome, widespread acknowledgment of the disgraceful homogeneity of philosophy as well as of the need for outreach to members of historically underrepresented groups. The emphasis of many illuminating discussions of these topics is on reorganizing institutions so as to reduce things like implicit bias and stereotype threat. There is in these contexts sometimes a recognition that the science-indexed style of philosophizing characteristic of much of contemporary analytic philosophy is a factor in the persistence of damaging gender- and race-based stereotypes. Even so it is rare to find questions about the rightness of presupposing, in philosophy, that the empirical methods we rely on should be limited to the sorts of ethically neutral methods associated with the natural sciences. We are seldom asked to take seriously the possibility that analytic philosophy's bedevilment by issues of inclusiveness is a reflection, not merely of an accidental alignment with harmful stereotypes that need to be contested, but also of insistence on methodological axioms that leave no room for discursive forms that some individuals from underrepresented groups regard as essential for expressing what they most want to say. But we should be open to exploring this possibility. We should make room for the politically powerful and philosophically striking step of contemplating connections, within philosophy, between the exclusion of individuals and the exclusion of methodologically heterodox discourses.

How can students who question the boundaries of our discipline balance their sense of responsibility and urgency with their own survival, reserving the time they need to succeed in their own work?

Suppose that—I assume this is at least one of the central cases at issue—you are trying to make room, within the context of a currently science-oriented understanding of philosophy, for different critical discourses that explore and take seriously the possibility that we need morally and politically non-neutral methods in order to get aspects of the world in focus. Finding allies is important, and these may well include not only fellow students and members of your Faculty, but also faculty members in other disciplines at your university, students and faculty members in Philosophy and other disciplines at other institutions and supporters outside the academy. But it shouldn't be a surprise if, even with notable allies, such efforts encounter great resistance. It is not merely that what is at issue is a challenge to engrained assumptions about the nature of reason, although philosophically speaking that is already huge. It is also that these assumptions structure research programs that are the grounds of careers involving salaries, other funding sources and social privileges and, moreover, that it is not an accident that, in social contexts dominated by capitalist or instrumental logics, these social goods are often used to support science-oriented intellectual enterprises.

Given the obstacles to the sort of change you are after, it is important to find a balance between, on the one hand, pursuing relevant activist aims and, on the other, getting through your studies in a manner faithful to the philosophical ideals that speak for those aims. Fittingly, the difficulties of this two-fold balancing act are at bottom the sorts of irreducibly practical difficulties that have historically been associated with philosophy. To question the boundaries of the discipline in the envisioned manner is to raise afresh the classic philosophical question of what knowing the world is like. We are sounding venerable philosophical themes if we allow that successfully addressing this question—successfully

turning ourselves around to determine whether our eyes have perhaps long been fixed firmly on the back wall of the cave—is inseparable from practical struggle.