

Philosophy in Review



Philip Kitcher, "What's the Use of Philosophy?"

Robert Piercey

Volume 43, numéro 3, août 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1106158ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1106158ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (imprimé)

1920-8936 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Piercey, R. (2023). Compte rendu de [Philip Kitcher, "What's the Use of Philosophy?"]. *Philosophy in Review*, 43(3), 23–25.

<https://doi.org/10.7202/1106158ar>

© Robert Piercey, 2023



Cet document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Philip Kitcher. *What's the Use of Philosophy?* Oxford University Press 2023. 208 pp. \$19.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780197657249).

This slim volume brings together several of Philip Kitcher's essays on metaphilosophy from the last two decades. It is haunted by the worry that philosophy might not have a use—that it might be a dilettantish amusement that performs no valuable social function. Kitcher does not share this view of philosophy, but he agrees that certain features of the discipline as currently practiced prevent it from contributing to society in the ways it could. To put philosophy on a better path, he argues, we should 'reconstruct' it, in Dewey's sense. On this Deweyan view, philosophical problems are first and foremost social problems. They 'emerge from situations in which people—many people, not just an elite class—find themselves' (5). Thus 'the philosopher's first task is to recognize the appropriate questions that arise for his contemporaries' (9). In this way, *What's the Use of Philosophy?* continues Kitcher's longstanding engagement with pragmatism, as explored in earlier books such as *Preludes to Pragmatism* (Oxford University Press 2012) and *The Main Enterprise of the World* (Oxford University Press 2022).

The book's first essay, 'Philosophy Inside Out,' is already well known, and is the most provocative piece in the book. Originally written for a conference organized by the journal *Metaphilosophy*, the essay compares the state of contemporary philosophy to the state of music in an imaginary world in which musicians prize technical skill for its own sake. Caring only about the speed and dexterity of their playing, they turn their backs on the compositions of the past, eventually leading the wider public to lose interest in them. This image serves as a vivid way of questioning the assumption that 'the topics currently viewed as central deserve the emphasis placed on them' (2-3). Kitcher argues that in the subfields often considered 'core philosophy'—metaphysics and epistemology, for instance—intellectual pyrotechnics are frequently put in the service of questions with no clear relevance for society as a whole. Of course, other disciplines, including the natural sciences, also pose questions far removed from everyday social life. But scientists, Kitcher argues, 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' (5). Philosophers often cannot. This state of affairs is at odds with Kitcher's Deweyan conception of philosophy, and he sketches several ways in which philosophy could change in order to have greater relevance for contemporary social life. He argues, for example, that ethics should focus less on extremely general questions about reasons and moral knowledge, and more on morality's status as a concrete 'social technology' (19).

The second essay, entitled 'So... Who Is Your Audience?,' also originated in a conference presentation—this time for a meeting of the European Society of the Philosophy of Science. It reflects on the 'skeptical' (27) question of whether contemporary philosophy matters at all to anyone outside the discipline. The essay proceeds through an examination of the philosophy of science, which Kitcher thinks actually has had useful effects on wider audiences. He outlines several ways in which the field has paid dividends to philosophy as a whole, to practicing scientists, and to the general public. Kitcher points out that one of the reasons philosophy of science has been able to benefit other audiences has been its willingness, at least in recent decades, to focus on relatively concrete issues—



to downplay wholly general questions about confirmation or explanation in the abstract, in order to engage in conceptual clarification in specific debates in particular sciences. But even in philosophy of science, Kitcher thinks ‘there is plenty of room for improvement’ (56). There should be more nuanced consideration of the relation between science and values, as well as more openness to offering a ‘large synthetic vision’ (56).

The next essay, ‘Pathology Report’ has been newly written for this volume. It tries to give a ‘systematic diagnosis of the shortcomings of much contemporary Anglophone philosophy’ (xii). It identifies six habits of thought that, according to Kitcher, have made large swaths of the discipline insular and of questionable value to wider audiences. He calls them pathologies because they originate in ‘hyperfunctionality’ (57): they are distortions of tendencies that are healthy when confined within certain limits, but that ‘generate a diseased, even moribund, philosophical practice’ when ‘pursued with a monomaniacal fetishism’ (58). First is the ‘fetish of complete clarity,’ the desire for an ‘all-purpose instrument’ for identifying instances of concepts that ‘would leave no potential instance undecidable’ (60). Closely related is the ‘fetish of formalization’ (63)—a heavy reliance on formal techniques, even in cases where their use does not increase understanding or advance inquiry. Third is the overuse of certain kinds of thought experiments—specifically, ‘hypothetical cases so far removed from reality as to defy imaginative identification’ (81). Kitcher grants that hypothetical cases can be useful, but only when it is possible to think oneself into them. The cottage industry that generates puzzling cases about trolleys and drowning children often fails to meet this standard. The fourth pathology, called ‘sprinkling fairy dust’ (87), consists in hastily labelling the crucial premises of one’s arguments as necessary or a priori truths, despite little evidence they actually are. Fifth is the error of drawing ideas from other fields but ‘underestimating the intricacies of the domain from which the philosopher proposes to borrow’ (90). Kitcher points to evolutionary debunking arguments as a prime example, since he thinks they usually fail to appreciate the subtleties of evolutionary theory. The final pathology is an excessive deference to philosophy’s (recent) past—that is, a refusal to ask whether certain established questions are still worth asking. Throughout this discussion, Kitcher juxtaposes these pathologies with an alternative approach to argumentation that he sees as admirably practiced by Nancy Cartwright (and thus called *modus Cartwright*): ‘Here are some phenomena. Try looking at them this way’ (88).

The fourth essay, ‘The Whole Function of Philosophy,’ is an expanded version of the Dewey lecture that Kitcher presented to the American Philosophical Association in 2021. It gives a ‘positive account of philosophy’ and its value (111) by reinterpreting certain ideas from James and Dewey. The essay takes as its clue James’s remark in *Pragmatism* that philosophy’s function is ‘to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one’ (108). Kitcher’s spin on this remark is that philosophy ought to be *synthetic*. Unlike other disciplines, which ‘engage in *first-order inquiry*’ (120), philosophy should move ‘*among* disciplines and *among* all the mess of the varied lives people live’ (123). It need not and should not produce ‘world formulas’ in the sense of ‘all-encompassing theories, capable of being true’ (122). Rather, it should try to advance ‘the general project of inquiry by working among various disciplines, developing conceptual tools to remove potential obstacles’

(123). Kitcher makes some suggestions about how contemporary philosophers might do this, and points to Kuhn and Rawls as relatively successful recent examples of the attempt (131).

The book's final essay, 'Letter to Some Young Philosophers,' is exactly that: an address to philosophers starting their careers, who might be wondering how to do work that matters without harming their prospects on the job market. Kitcher suggests several possible paths, though it is not clear how appealing they will be to most newly minted PhDs. One can leave the academy and teach philosophy to precollege students. One can 'play the game,' simultaneously doing work that matters to oneself and work prized by other philosophers, at least until acquiring 'a secure position' (165). Or one can work in a university but outside the philosophy department, as Anthony Appiah and Martha Nussbaum have done (173). Nice work, if you can get it. But I suspect that for most young scholars, the inability to secure positions of *any* sort is a rather large elephant in the room.

It would be easy to caricature a book like *What's the Use of Philosophy*—to smear its vision of philosophy as philistine and crudely instrumentalist. It is no so such thing. To say that philosophy should have relevance for the social problems of its day is not to say that it must always have clear and direct practical payoffs—a point Kitcher is at great pains to stress (114). Still, it is hard to imagine this book getting a sympathetic hearing in certain corners of the discipline, especially the ones that rely most heavily on formalization and hypothetical cases. But Kitcher's main point, as I understand it, is quite modest: that 'all too often,' questions about philosophy's value 'never even arise' (119). From that perspective, *What's the Use of Philosophy?* is not a broadside, but a call for self-examination. And what could be more philosophical than that?

Robert Piercey, Campion College at the University of Regina