

More on Anti-Philosophy

Kai Nielsen

I have been arguing in several recent papers for an anti-philosophy stance either going at it Wittgensteinian style by proceeding therapeutically with an anti-philosophy *philosophy* or still more starkly as anti-philosophy *tout court*. In two very short papers on another subject, “‘Afterlife’ Persuasively Redefined” and “On Sufficient Reason”, I at least seem to be taking back all that I have argued in my anti-philosophy papers because I argue in the above two papers philosophically, and not just negatively philosophically using a negative philosophical position to refute a philosophical position but straightforwardly and consistently doing philosophy there in a standard fashion. In the above mentioned two little papers I neither show that the perplexities I examine there are, when correctly viewed, nonsense-burdened nor do I refute false philosophical positions *tout court* without using a philosophical stance myself, or at least what seem to me to be so. I just do philosophy. But this seems to run against my anti-philosophical claims. Is this so? It seems, at least, to be clearly so in my “‘Afterlife’ Persuasively Redefined” and somewhat less so in “On Sufficient Reason”. I argue in the first mentioned paper using conceptual analysis (a standard philosophical technique) that the perplexities I am concerned with can be straightforwardly considered. They are not disguised nonsense nor are they matters that can be rightly just ignored. Moreover, I do not assume or argue that they are up for dissolution.

Consider, to see this, the question of whether, if we come to know that we will all be obliterated in six months' time or two years' time or some other relatedly short time, that then we would find our lives without point. It seems this is a legitimate issue. An issue that cannot be taken as a straightforward empirical issue that can be answered by a questionnaire or the like. But neither can it be answered *a priori*. But, or so it seems, by something that takes a philosophical response. A philosophical ethical response. If, for example, 90% of people told about the imminent deadly catastrophe that awaits them and believed what they were told still believed that life was worth living and if we rely on a vote, then the answer should be yes. If it is assumed that numbers count by way of an answer here. If 40% said they would still believe their lives had worth and 60% thought not, then the answer would be no. That is what we should conclude if we go with these numbers as we should go over what clearly are vote issues. If, instead, some answered yes and some answered no and some answered undecided such that there was no majority, then the question, if we treat the issue like a vote issue as it should be treated, then the answer would be undecided. But it is unlikely that anyone over issues like this would treat them as vote issues. There are issues, as C. D. Broad reminded us years ago, that are not vote issues. There would, as well, or so I conjecture, be very few who would regard my above issue as even being a complicated empirical issue. But what kind of an issue is it then? It is certainly not an *a priori* matter. Moreover, what is also at issue is whether it is reasonably an issue that has a reasonably determinate response. What, if anything, reasonably would decide it? It surely looks like it is neither empirically decidable nor *a priori* decidable. Could it be reasonably decidable if we could get a consensus about it in a wide equilibrium of considered judgments? That would make it a philosophical matter, Rawls style, but it is very unlikely

that we will get a wide equilibrium of considered judgments one way or another over it. Moreover, such a reliance is problematic. It is contestable here. We clearly at least seem to have a philosophical issue. But it is clearly not an empirical issue or something that is decidable by pure practical reason or by a vote. Do we not have a philosophical question here that we cannot legitimately rule out of bounds or reasonably take to be nonsensical? Does this not put into question anti-philosophy? I shall gesture at a response in what follows.

I think, for starters, it puts the knockers on the ubiquity of Wittgensteinian conceptual therapeutic dissolution by Wittgensteinian philosophical therapy. Such Wittgensteinianism only works for a limited range of questions or perplexities concerning philosophy. Still, we might argue, as I have, that philosophy should be set aside, including philosophizing about that issue, because of our ghastly human situation and the urgent need to confront it. Here we have an instrumental argument for standing aside from philosophy. For our situation now at least there are many questions that are plainly answerable and urgently, sometimes desperately, need an answer and that we should turn to questions concerning these matters rather than turning to philosophy. But this is not affected by anything being askew with philosophical considerations like the ones considered in my "Afterlife' Persuasively Redefined" or my "On Sufficient Reason". And these are examples of many questions that are up for philosophical response. These issues are not affected by Wittgenstein's questions or by logical positivists' questions concerning their intelligibility or by Schiffer's and Berlin's beliefs about their resolvability and about their just being batted around for centuries to no avail. The argument I am making here for setting philosophy aside is the empirical political and moral and instrumental one that in our situation philosophy is expendable and should be expended and set aside. These are situations where instrumental, political and moral

considerations go together. There are more urgent and demanding things that we intellectuals should do in our societies in the demanding task to in some way be public intellectuals or aides to such intellectuals. We, including philosophers, have better things to do, more urgently demanding things to do, in our situation than to engage in philosophy. Now and in situations like ours we should not expend our energies on philosophy. That is idle irresponsibility. We should follow the First Nations' slogan "Idle No More". (Am I preaching? Well, if so, so be it.)

Some philosophical questions may be distinctive, intelligible and *pace* Wittgenstein not disguised nonsense. There the move to anti-philosophy cannot be Wittgensteinally sustained and the Schiffer contention that philosophy has been batting things around to no avail and probably pointlessly does not justify setting all philosophizing aside *pace* Berlin. What, if anything, does? What does the trick in justifying removing ourselves from philosophy is the pragmatic argument, instrumental argument, that there are more important things for we intellectuals to do, as long as we are blessed with our unnecessarily wretched world. This does not come down to the hackneyed claim that philosophy is not useful. It is rooted in the empirical and moral claim that the situation that we human beings are living in is in one way or another a horror. In some places more so than in others; Sweden less than Sudan. For some people more than others. But a worldwide a horror it is in various ways. That *a few* do not suffer does not gainsay it. Those of us who live well to often blind ourselves too much to the worldwide horror when in our minds, hearts and most importantly in our actions we should be fighting it with all our energies, including our intelligence. Those of us who are intellectuals should use our cognitive powers to engage ourselves in attempting to eradicate or at least ameliorate the horror. Realizing that

ameliorative or eradicated talents are in short supply, work to put them to work to right as much as we can in such a wretched situation. I am not asking for or expecting miracles. Indeed, I am pessimistic but not at all quietistic. However, philosophers, as many others, for the most part have some such talents that enables them to in some way help in the righting of the human situation. And they should in such a situation put their shoulders and minds to the wheel to fight against human horror. Philosophers in some sense should take leave of philosophy and instead put their shoulders to the wheel and work here in tackling these problems not addressed by philosophy, clearly attending to and acting on the ways where they can best help the commonweal. Their talents can in some minor ways sometimes be humanly useful.

I allowed myself in the two short papers mentioned above to have some good philosophical fun. But that clearly is not where the action should be. Anti-philosophy as Wittgenstein realized can be somewhat useful when it leads people with philosophical intellectual talents and proclivities away from the *philosophenweg* and to, in one way or another, challenge the established order and with that, among other things, make we human beings aware that there are alternative ways of living that will help to establish a world which has some more kindness and wellbeing in it than our wretched world now has and indeed the world has historically had. It has not for long been a place to sing songs about.

Realizing that we are now faced with a not unlikely disappearing world as far as human life is concerned and much, if not all, of other animal life as well, such that, if this obtains, we cannot even be blessed with being in a wretched world for we will, along with all or at least most sentient life, not be living at all. *Perhaps* nothing can be done to save us, but all the same, philosophers, like everyone else, should get firmly in gear to engage in this

struggle. We philosophers should take leave of philosophy and use whatever capacities and talents we have in the struggle against the deluge that largely human-made climate change will deal—is dealing—us. If it is not halted or at least extensively lessened, we will be in for it. That is, we will be in for a life of horror, probably ending in no life. To help achieve adequate climate change it is essential that we philosophers give such priority to our efforts here. But that is something we are not doing. No doubt, even if we do, and, of course others do in their own ways as well, much of our wretched world will remain. But when it comes to philosophy, put first things first. After our very existence has been sustained we should switch our priorities to making our sustained world non-wretched. But first we should defossil-fuelize ourselves as rapidly as possible. Priorities now should go to fighting climate change. There, of course, remain other urgencies, including prominently those that we intellectuals who are philosophers can and should engage in that take priority over philosophy. Stick firmly in the fight for a clean non-destructive environment, but there are other horrors that we should attend to as well. After some corrections have been made here toward achieving more decencies—and there are a lot to be made—we should full speed struggle for a world of reciprocal caring and kindness. When we have achieved something considerable in the way of that there will be a place for philosophy again. But not only because for some, as it is for me, it is interesting and good clean fun and intellectually challenging. But also, and more importantly, because it may help us humans and other animals to gain a better world order. To get a better grasp on what it would be and a better grasp on how it is to be gained. And with that, a gaining of it. Keeping in mind what Bertrand Russell, Simone de Beauvoir and John Paul Sartre did in old age, we will find in them models. We must not be *quietists*.

But we must not delude ourselves into thinking philosophy will play more than a bit part here. It is the sciences, both natural and social, as well as literature and the other arts that will be the big league players here, though often in reality they now are not. But it is from those activities properly carried out that the cure, if there is one, will come. Conceptual clarification from philosophy may help a bit, but it will be an under laborer's job, and indeed not a very important one at that. Philosophers should come to realize they are playing in the minor leagues. That is not where the major efforts of critical intellectuals should go. Thorsten Veblen early on saw the way, his philosophy degrees notwithstanding.

It may be thought that I do not follow my own advice. I got on doing philosophy. I initially, when I was very young, wanted to be a novelist but I was a flop at that. I thought as a graduate philosophy student to switch to anthropology which I also liked as well as philosophy. But in the midst of my graduate school days, analytic philosophy and, for me most crucially, Wittgenstein came along. I thought there was gold in the ground there and that it could be turned into good things for humankind, so I stuck with philosophy. I no longer think that and if I had it to do over again I would have studied anthropology or history, something initially I as a literature student ignorantly had contempt for, though I fear I might have lacked even with training some of the crucial talents for either. I can't see myself in the archives or attending to the detail that sociological or anthropological investigations require. I do not mention economics, not because I deny its importance but because in spite of my Marxism I do not have much in the way of understanding or talent there. I have no head for it, to my regret.

I am pleased when my students turn to the social sciences (including history). But I am approaching 90 years old and it's a little late for me to try to change academic roles. So I

do what I can with philosophy to help in the task of making a better world. It may be precious little. As part of my task here I include leading some students away from philosophy to political economy, political studies, anthropology, sociology, geography (after the fashion of David Harvey) and history in the way of Perry Anderson. I am not very confident that we are going to get a better world. I fear that it is not very likely but it is not impossible. So I struggle toward such an end with whatever talents and capacities I may have. We must—morally must—struggle on to change and better a world that very much needs a fundamental transforming. Indeed a revolutionary transforming. We must not be *quietists*; we must not give up.

I am not at all bitter over my choice of profession. At the time it was an intelligent choice and I have enjoyed my work and my relations with the academic staff and students. They have enriched my life. I have enjoyed the work I have done and am still doing. I do not say that philosophy is useless. I say only that there are, if we are nascent public intellectuals or their assistants, better, equally interesting things and humanly more emancipatory things that we can do, particularly as the human situation is.

Bibliography

Nielsen, Kai (2015a). "On Sufficient Reason." Published online at <http://phil.ucalgary.ca/profiles/kai-nielsen>

Nielsen, Kai (2015b). "'Afterlife' Persuasively Redefined." Published online at <http://phil.ucalgary.ca/profiles/kai-nielsen>