Why Philosophy of Religion should be taught in Secular Universities

Philosophy gets plenty of bad press.

- Stephen Hawking: "Philosophy is dead."

So, too, does philosophy of science.

- Steven Weinberg: "Philosophy of science is murky and inconsequential; it is of no use to the working scientist."
- Richard Feynman: "Philosophy of science is as useful to scientists as ornithology is to birds."
- Lawrence Krauss: "Every time there is a leap in physics, it encroaches on these areas that philosophers have carefully sequestered away to themselves, and so then you have this natural resentment on the part of philosophers."
- Neil Tyson: "When a scientist encounters someone inclined to think philosophically, his response should be: 'I'm moving on, I'm leaving you behind, and you can't even cross the street because you're distracted by deep questions you've asked yourself. I don't have time for that."

Philosophy of religion gets additional bad press.

- John Loftus: "When it comes to religious faith, we need a global perspective, and that's best taken up inside the confines of scientific and comparative religion departments."
- James Lindsay: "To publish in the philosophy of religion requires taking theism seriously. [Boghossian] doesn't think people should take theism seriously. Neither do I."
- Peter Boghossian: "Being published in philosophy of religion should disqualify you from sitting at the adult's table."

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1. **Philosophy**

I say that philosophy is the discipline that addresses questions for which we do not know how to produce—and perhaps cannot even imagine how to produce—consensus answers among experts using methods more or less universally agreed by experts.

In any other discipline, there are borderline questions for which we do not know how to produce—and perhaps cannot even imagine how to produce—consensus answers among experts using methods more or less universally agreed by experts: there questions belong to the *philosophy of* that discipline.

The contours on the map of the disciplines—including the contours of the regions of the philosophy of disciplines—are constantly changing. Once established, disciplines continue to expand in size. But new disciplines continue to appear, both because of fission from philosophy, and because previously unconceptualised domains emerge. Moreover, as established disciplines expand in size and as new

disciplines emerge, it continues to be the case that all—or, at any rate, nearly all—disciplines shade into philosophy at their boundaries.

Although the contours on the map of the disciplines are constantly changing, there are substantial areas on the map that have belonged to philosophy since the dawn of inquiry, and that appear destined to continue to belong to philosophy into the foreseeable future. It is characteristic of questions that belong squarely to metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, logic, and so forth that we do not know how to produce—and perhaps cannot even imagine how to produce—consensus answers to those questions among experts using methods more or less universally agreed by experts.

That we do not know how to produce—and perhaps cannot even imagine how to produce—consensus answers to certain classes of questions among experts using methods more or less universally agreed by experts is apt to provoke scepticism about the pursuit of those questions. However, it is worth remembering that it is rarely obvious in advance that questions that have long had this status are about to be answered. Consider, to take just one example, the question of the composition of the stars. Speculation about the composition of the stars dates back to our pre-history. Even in the decades after Fraunhofer discovered spectral emission lines, the composition of the stars was widely believed to be something that we could never know. It was not until well into the twentieth century that expert consensus on the composition of the stars emerged.

This is not to say that there is good reason to continue to invest a lot of effort in all of the traditional questions of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, logic, and so on. There is a lively debate in contemporary philosophy about, *inter alia*, the question whether philosophers should focus most of their efforts on those questions that sit closest to the borders of other disciplines. But it does seem to me to be unduly pessimistic to suppose that we shall never crack any of the longstanding 'central' questions in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, logic, and so forth.

Reply to Hawking: Rumours of the demise of philosophy are greatly exaggerated. There are many productive current research partnerships between philosophers and scientists in such diverse fields as physics, biology, ecology, neuroscience, psychology, economics, and computer science. Given the nature of the questions that are investigated in these research partnerships, it seems very far-fetched to suppose that philosophy will not remain a fixture on the intellectual landscape into the very distant future.

2. Philosophy of science

In the sciences—natural and human—there are borderline questions for which we do not know how to produce—and perhaps cannot even imagine how to produce—consensus answers among experts using methods more or less universally agreed by experts: these question belong to the philosophy of science.

In the scientific disciplines—physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, and so on—there are borderline questions for which we do not know how to produce—and perhaps cannot even imagine how to produce—consensus answers among experts using methods more or less universally agreed by experts: these questions belong to philosophy of physics, philosophy of chemistry, philosophy of biology, philosophy of psychology, and so forth.

Consider the question whether there is an ensemble of universes. At present, I think, there is no expert consensus among cosmologists—or, more generally, among physicists—about whether there is an ensemble of universes. Moreover, I think, there is no expert consensus among cosmologists—or, more generally, among physicists—about how to determine whether there is an ensemble of universes. Some cosmologists think that the matter may be resolved by current experimental techniques; indeed, some cosmologists think that current experimental techniques have disclosed to us that there is an ensemble of universes. But many other cosmologists disagree. As things stand, it is not clear whether—or how—an expert consensus on this question is to be achieved. In my view, then, the question whether there is an ensemble of universes is a question that (currently) belongs to the philosophy of physics, and, indeed, to the philosophy of cosmology.

Reply to Weinberg and Feynman: Perhaps it is of the nature of philosophy of science—as, indeed, of philosophy more broadly—to be murky. However, it is certainly not an essential aspect of philosophy that it is inconsequential. While much that philosophers of science have said is plainly of no use to working scientists, it is clear—if only from the productive research partnerships between philosophers and scientists—that philosophy of science is of use to those scientists who work near the philosophical frontiers of their disciplines. It may be—as Feynman suggests—that philosophy of science is no more useful to scientists working well away from the philosophical frontiers of their disciplines than ornithology is to birds; but, philosophical speaking, that just isn't where the action is.

Reply to Krauss: I think that it is just a mistake to suppose that philosophers 'sequester away areas to themselves'. Once we know how to produce consensus answers among experts in an area using methods more or less universally agreed by experts in that area, there is typically nothing left for philosophers to think about in connection with detailed questions in that area. Philosophers no longer speculate about the composition of the stars; nor do philosophers reminisce nostalgically about the good old days when philosophers engaged in speculation about the composition of the stars.

Reply to Tyson: I think that a study of the relative competence of philosophers, as against other academics, when it comes to crossing roads, would likely be a contender for an Ig Nobel Prize. However, until such a study is conducted, I see no reason to believe that philosophers are less competent than other academics in this respect. If what I've said about the nature of philosophy is correct, then it simply isn't possible for scientists to 'move on' and 'leave it behind': when it comes to questions on the borderline between science and philosophy, scientists must 'have time for them'.

3. Philosophy of religion

There are many borderline questions about religion for which we do not know how to produce—and perhaps cannot even imagine how to produce—consensus answers among experts using methods more or less universally agreed by experts: these questions belong to the philosophy of religion.

One very important part of philosophy of religion is the comparative assessment of worldviews. In principle, at least, the comparative assessment of worldviews is a three-stage process. In the first stage, we construct detailed elaborations of the worldviews to be compared. In the second stage, we check to see whether any of the worldviews is inconsistent, i.e. fails on its own terms. In the third stage, we try to establish whether one worldview is more theoretically virtuous than the others, i.e. whether one worldview makes a better trade-off between theoretical commitment and explanation

of data than do the other worldviews. In practice, we have not yet come anywhere near carrying out this process.

Reply to Loftus: I agree wholeheartedly with Loftus' claim that the study of religion requires a global perspective. However, it simply doesn't follow from this that there is no proper role for philosophy of religion. Of course, where we know how to produce consensus answers to questions about religion among experts using methods more or less universally agreed by experts, then we are squarely in some domain other than philosophy of religion: sociology of religion, or anthropology of religion, or psychology of religion, or the like. But when—as is often the case—we are confronted with questions about religion for which we do not know how to produce—and perhaps cannot even imagine how to produce—consensus answers among experts using methods more or less universally agreed by experts, we are no less squarely in the domain of philosophy of religion.

Reply to Lindsay: Publishing in philosophy of religion requires taking *religion* seriously. But taking religion seriously does not require giving significant credence to religious worldviews. Religion should be taken seriously *even* by those who do not give significant credence to religious worldviews simply because we do not know how to produce—and perhaps cannot even imagine how to produce—consensus answers to questions about religion among experts using methods more or less universally agreed by experts. There are brilliant contemporary and near-contemporary philosophers who are religious believers: Saul Kripke, Michael Dummett, Bas van Fraassen, John Hawthorne, and many others. I see no reason at all to accept that their holding of their religious worldviews is *less rational* than the holding of non-religious worldviews by comparably brilliant non-believers: David Lewis, David Chalmers, Dan Dennett, Bernard Williams, and their ilk.

Reply to Boghossian: Where I come from, children always sit at the same table as the adults. One thing we hope that children will learn from the mixed company to which they are exposed is how to find common ground with those whose worldviews are vastly different from their own. If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem.

4. Philosophy of Religion in Secular Universities

One of the main things that religion brings to secular universities is trouble. Religion—like sex, politics, and other 'markers of identity'—creates circumstances that require negotiation of difference. For the secular university, this negotiation is often a messy juggling act. On the one hand, the secular university values freedom of speech, including free and open discussion of contested beliefs and values. On the other hand, the secular university also values respect for the diverse worldviews represented among its constituents, even when that 'respect' allegedly requires not entering into free and open discussion of contested beliefs and values.

Philosophy of religion focusses the attention of the secular university on the particular problem that arises in connection with contested religious beliefs and values. Philosophy of religion can be a domain in which there is—and in which there is expected to be—genuinely free and open discussion of contested religious beliefs and values. In that domain, it can be that there are no contested religious beliefs and values that are on the conversational scoreboard; it can be that beliefs and values only get on to the conversational scoreboard if they are agreed to by all participants in the conversation. Moreover, it can be that, in that domain, there are no religious beliefs and values that are placed off limits: it can be that all religious beliefs and values are entitled to—and required to be subject to—consideration in philosophy of religion. Whatever may be the case elsewhere in the

secular university, it can be that, in philosophy of religion, respect demands entering into free and open discussion of contested religious beleifs and values.

Needless to say, it need not be the case that the secular university allows philosophy of religion to be a domain in which there is—and in which there is expected to be—genuinely free and open discussion of contested religious beliefs and values. However, given that the primary subject matter of philosophy of religion is questions about religion for which we do not know how to produce—and perhaps cannot even imagine how to produce—consensus answers among experts using methods more or less universally agreed by experts, there is a clear sense in which it ought to be the case that the secular university allows philosophy of religion to be a domain in which there is—and in which there is expected to be—genuinely free and open discussion of contested religious beliefs and values. Even if we allow that there are circumstances—times and places—in which it is not appropriate to try to pursue free and open discussion of contested religious beliefs and values—i.e., even if we allow that, sometimes, respect for those with worldviews very different from our own require us to abstain from trying to pursue free and open discussion of those worldviews with their adherents—we should nonetheless insist that there must be places such as classrooms for philosophy of religion whose essential purpose is to facilitate the pursuit of free and open discussion of contested religious beliefs and values. For, while we may hold out very little hope that discussion in the philosophy of religion classroom will produce convergence of expert opinion on contested religious beliefs and values, we can certainly expect that free and open discussion of contested religious beliefs and values in circumstances in which nothing short of universal consensus permits claims to be entered onto the conversational scoreboard will promote improved mutual expert understanding of those contested religious beliefs and values. (Remember that detailed elaboration of worldviews is the first stage in the process of comparison of worldviews: who better to provide detailed elaboration of worldviews than those who profess to hold them?)

The account that I have just given is premised on two assumptions. The first, somewhat sceptical, assumption is that there is no prospect of global convergence of expert opinion with respect to currently contested religious beliefs and values. The second, somewhat optimistic, assumption is that we will all benefit from improved expert understanding of currently contested religious beliefs and values. Much of what passes for philosophy of religion in secular universities is taught by people who accept neither of these assumptions. In my opinion, this fact plays a significant role in explaining why philosophy of religion is currently so much less than it could be.