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The underestimated horizons of philosophy

Dr Ilaria Galasso

A complicated question

One of the most complicated questions I can be asked - and unfortunately, like most people, I have been asked that question many times - is what I do. Or what my job is, what my field is, what my background is. The complexity of this question is not (only) related to the fact that the world of academic research is still quite esoteric, so that people who are not part of it often do not have clear ideas of what researchers do. In my specific case, it is complicated because, in any contexts, answering this question requires a series of specifications, of clarifications, and even of justifications.

The odd one out

I cannot just answer by mentioning the institute I am affiliated to. This would only generate confusion and misunderstandings. Currently I work at the UCD School of Business. Before that, I worked at the European Institute of Oncology. Before that, among others, I attended classes at the Department of Physics. And the most (apparently) odd thing is that, originally, I studied philosophy.

You can imagine the puzzlement of people I have not had contact with for a while, who remember me studying philosophy, when they find me in a molecular medicine institute. Or when they find me at a School of Business if they remember me at the European Institute of Oncology, or at the Department of Physics, or at the Department of Philosophy. Any of them. This is indeed something that requires some explanation. Am I desperately fickle? Well… maybe! But not in this case anyway. Then, am I a sort of "know-it-all"? I wish! But not at all. Quite the opposite: one of the main difficulties of my "tortuous path" is exactly that I have always been a sort of "do-not-know-anything" about the different subjects I was at different times immersed in, at least with respect to the people I was surrounded by. In all these contexts, I (and a few other people with me) have always been the different one, the odd one out.

Not to be mistaken for somebody I am not, I cannot be, and I do not even want to be, means that every time I have to specify my diversity, both outside and within the institutions I have been based in: I am at the Business School BUT I am not in the field of business. Actually, I studied philosophy. I was at the European Institute of Oncology BUT I am not an oncologist or a molecular biologist. I studied philosophy…I was attending classes in physics BUT I am not a physicist. I was studying philosophy…

Philosophy is useless

To explain what I do by starting the other way around - which is, by first saying that I originally studied philosophy - does not make things much simpler. If most people are puzzled about finding a person with a background in philosophy in a molecular medicine or in a business institute, it is because most people have an incomplete idea of what doing philosophy means.

This is not the case with all people, and this is demonstrated by the very fact that programs to include people with a philosophical background in hard sciences classes and in biomedical and business institutes actually exist.

However, the widespread idea is that doing philosophy means to spend the whole life thinking, and thinking of totally abstract things, questions that can never be definitively answered and/or questions that have no concrete relevance. Questions like "does this chair exist?" or "how can I know I am not dreaming?" or "are concepts independent objects or mere names?". Philosophers are often seen as a sort of very romantic poets, fascinating and picturesque but useless characters, dreamers totally disconnected from the real world, living in the clouds and falling in wells for looking at the stars.

So, when explaining what I do I start by saying I do philosophy, I feel obliged to "justify" myself by immediately adding "I do philosophy BUT I also attend classes in physics and other hard sciences, I do philosophy BUT I work in a biomedical institute, I do philosophy BUT I work in a school of business", which is a way to say: I do philosophy BUT I do not spend my life disconnected from reality with absurd and useless ravings!

Stop justifying: it's not "but", it's "because"!

I think it is very important for all human beings at some point in their lives to interrogate themselves on such not immediately or concretely useful issues as the definition of existence, but I understand that in the face of the big and small problems of our world, metaphysical reasonings could sound to someone as a non-priority.

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However, once and for all, philosophy is not (only) this. Even if most times the effects of philosophical activities are not visible in the short term, the most effective contributions to the most concrete problems stem exactly from a philosophical approach - not necessarily the approach taken in the philosophy departments, but by anyone who, independently from their academic background, is committed to questioning and justifying even the most basic assumptions, in any field. It is then by following a philosophical approach that we can question, and possibly determine, vital issues such as priorities in resource allocation, methodological reliability, deeper meaning and long term consequences of scientific discoveries, entitlement of all human being to the same rights and the extension of this entitlement to animals, wrongness of totalitarianism and the very meaning of wrongness.

Philosophy proceeds side by side with other disciplines: it benefits by learning from them, but it also questions their very concepts and assumptions, and it contributes to their advancement by sketching new frontiers.

I have been researching on conceptual and ethical issues around social equity, health equity, and the connections between the two. This has included learning from, as well as questioning: scientific foundations and methods; the mechanisms at the interplay between biological and societal factors for health and illness and the strategies to address them; the market dynamics and the negotiations influencing healthcare innovation and accessibility. This is the long and apparently tortuous path that conducted me from one field to another, and to MISFIRES.

The crucial point, and the most complicated thing to explain when I am asked what I do, is that actually I have not been at the Department of Physics, at the European Institute of Oncology, at the School of Business ALTHOUGH I do philosophy. It is exactly BECAUSE I do philosophy.