GENERAL SEMANTICS AND
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PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

From its long-time pursuit of timeless universals, general principles and abstract
theories, philosophy is changing course. As it attends more and more to the formulation
of practical problems and solutions of immediate significance, is it moving
closer to the concerns of general semantics?

In the Summer 1988 issue of the American Scholar, Stephen Toulmin, the
famous physicist, has an article on "The Recovery of Practical Philosophy." He said that in a letter written in 1932, Albert Einstein spoke of the "nakedness and poverty" of philosophy and that the Mother of Science seems to be not just aged, but barren too. Toulmin points out that the agenda of philosophy is almost contested: its scope and credentials have never been agreed upon, even by its classic authors. In the 1940s Wittgenstein tried to show how confusions over the "grammar" of language misled philosophers into vacuous speculations. Far from being profound, he said, philosophical questions only distract us from the important issues of life.

Philosophy's agenda, says Toulmin, is as problematic as ever. Must we agree to regard all philosophical writings as "autobiography"? Or can we piece together an alternative agenda?

The philosophy whose legitimacy critics challenge is almost always the seventeenth-century tradition founded primarily upon Rene Descartes, what is usually called "modern" philosophy. In Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations his arguments are directed at one particular style of philosophizing—a "theory-centered" style, which poses philosophical problems, and frames solutions to them, in timeless and universal terms. (failure to date and index) From 1650, Toulmin points out, this particular style was taken as defining the very agenda of philosophy.

Because of this fact, he says, we need to look back further in time and ask, "How far did, or could, any one style exhaust the whole scope of philosophy?"

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He argues that this definition of the subject sets on the sidelines a good half of the topics that had been discussed, as philosophy, throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages. The current critiques have left this neglected half of the philosophical field—what he calls “practical philosophy”—quite untouched. And, he says, it is those neglected topics that are showing fresh signs of life today, at the very time when the more familiar, “theory-centered” half of the subject is languishing.

What issues, asks Toulmin, did seventeenth-century philosophers set aside? In four sets of topics and spheres of thought, they were especially uninterested: the "oral," the "particular," the "local," and the "timely."

To begin with the "oral," he says, ever since Descartes, all questions about the soundness or validity of arguments are understood as referring to "arguments" in the sense of "chains of written propositions," and their soundness is seen to depend on formal relations among the propositions. The question, "Who addressed this argument to whom, in what forum, and using what examples?" is no longer a philosophical matter. So "modern" philosophy, he says, ignores argumentation—among particular people, in specific situations, dealing with concrete cases, with different things at stake—in favor of "proofs" captured in writing, and judged as written.

As to the second issue, the "particular," Toulmin points out that starting with the Cambridge Platonists, philosophers turned ethics into abstract theory, ignoring the concrete problems of moral practice. The modern philosophers assumed that God and Freedom, Mind and Matter, Good and Justice, are governed by timeless, universal "principles," and regarded writers who focused on particular cases, or types of cases limited by specific conditions, as either unphilosophical or dishonest. So, seventeenth-century philosophy again limited its own scope, excluding the examination of "particular practical cases" by definition. In a phrase, General Principles were In, Particular Cases were Out. (differences)

Likewise for the third issue, says Toulmin, the "local." The task of philosophy is to bring to the surface the general principles holding in any and all fields. For Descartes, understanding does not come from accumulating the experience of particular individuals and specific cases. (indexing) Reason always seeks for abstract, general ideas and principles to connect particulars together. Abstract Axioms were In, Concrete Diversity was Out.

Finally, with the fourth issue, the "timely," Toulmin points out that Descartes and his successors do not discuss issues that involve given moments in time (dating): now, not later, yesterday, not today. Earlier on, concrete issues of legal and medical practice had an equal billing with abstract, theoretical issues; practical issues were all decided as the occasion required. Philosophy focuses on the permanent underlying structure of Nature: the transient affairs of human beings take second place. As a result, he says, issues of practical relevance and timeliness are sidelined—as not being properly "philosophical" at all. Philosophers focus their attention on timeless principles (Korzybski's
“all-timeness”) holding good, not at one time rather than another, but at all times. From this time on, then, the Permanent is In, the Transitory is Out.

Toulmin makes an important observation that these four changes of mind—from oral to written, particular to universal, timely to timeless—were distinct. But when seen in context, they have several things in common: specifically, they choose to ignore the whole of practical philosophy. Rational judgments of practical adequacy are timely not timeless, concrete not abstract, particular not universal, local not general. The seventeenth-century "new philosophers" were theory-centered, not practical-minded. They were not interested in procedures for handling limited classes of cases or specific types of problems; they concentrated instead on abstract, timeless methods of deriving general solutions to universal problems.

Why did philosophy's agenda change so drastically at just this time, asks Toulmin. How can we explain this turning away, after 1630, from the oral, local, transient, particular aspects of language and life, and this preoccupation with written arguments, general ideas, and abstract principles? After centuries of Aristotelian practical philosophy, the years 1620 to 1660 saw not just a renewed interest in universal, abstract theory but outright rejection of traditional practical concerns. Why did philosophers find a "theory-centered" (intensional) style of philosophizing so appealing?

Toulmin says that the undogmatic suggestions of "practical philosophy" looked, not untrue, but beside the point. The system of cosmology that Isaac Newton inherited from Rene Descartes, which made the starting point for "modern" physics, was formulated in universal, timeless, mathematical terms quite foreign to the concerns of practical philosophers.

However, says Toulmin, it is now time to put forth the more constructive questions. How does practical philosophy enter into our lives today? Since 1945, what problems have called for philosophical reflection on the deepest level, with any of the same urgency that cosmological theory had for people in the seventeenth century? The answer is, matters of practice, matters of life and death. Since World War II, three sets of issues have imposed themselves on all reflective thinkers—nuclear war, medical technology, and the environment. And yet, how far do these practical problems give rise to authentically philosophical questions?

Nowadays, says Toulmin, philosophers are increasingly drawn into public debates about environmental policy, medical ethics, judicial practice, or nuclear politics. Some of them contribute to these discussions happily; others fear that engaging in applied philosophy prostitutes their talents and distracts them from their proper concern with quantification theory or possible worlds. For these purists, Toulmin has a special message. These practical debates are no longer "applied philosophy" (extensional philosophy): they are philosophy itself. To speak more precisely, they are legitimate heirs (to quote Wittgenstein) of the theoretical enterprise that formerly called itself "philosophy." By pursuing these
issues, he says, we as philosophers both demolish the barriers between practical and theoretical philosophy (non-elementalism) and reenter the very core of technical philosophy from a productive new direction.

The seventeenth-century transition by which modern philosophy and modern science were launched involved a pendulum swing away from limited, practical, Aristotelian concerns to a Platonist program for developing general theories and solutions. (intensional orientation) Toulmin believes that we are now in the middle of another pendulum swing back, from a Platonically oriented, theory-centered style of philosophy (intensional) toward the re-acceptance of more practical, Aristotelian concerns (extensional). The current recovery of practical philosophy makes available to us a spectrum of activities, from the problems of nuclear war, to the jurisprudence of capital punishment, to the philosophy of quantum mechanics. Toulmin concludes that taking "philosophy" in this practical sense, as a contribution to the reflective resolution of quandaries that face us in enterprises with high stakes—even life and death—Albert Einstein would surely think again about the "nakedness and poverty" of the subject and concede that it is time for philosophers to come out of their self-imposed isolation and reenter the collective world of practical life and shared human problems.