Abstract Philosophy in the West divides into three parts: Analytic Philosophy (AP), Continental Philosophy (CP), and History of Philosophy (HP). But all three parts are in a bad way. AP is sceptical about the claim that philosophy can be a science, and hence is uninterested in the real world. CP is never pursued in a properly theoretical way, and its practice is tailor-made for particular political and ethical conclusions. HP is mostly developed on a regionalist basis: what is studied is determined by the nation or culture to which a philosopher belongs, rather than by the objective value of that philosopher’s work. Progress in philosophy can only be attained by avoiding these pitfalls.

Keywords analytic philosophy · continental philosophy · history of philosophy · horror mundi

I: Philosophy in Three Parts

Philosophy in the West now divides into three parts—Analytic Philosophy (AP), Continental Philosophy (CP), and History of Philosophy (HP). Analytic Philosophy, although it comes in many varieties, has four striking properties. First, it is cultivated with every appearance of theoretical rigour. Second, its practitioners do not, by and large, believe that philosophy is or can be a science, i.e., they do not believe that it can add to the stock of positive human knowledge. Third, the philosophers who until very recently were the most influential models in the pursuit of philosophy as a theoretical enterprise—Chisholm, Davidson, Armstrong, Putnam, Kripke, Searle ...—have no obvious successors. Finally, AP has succeeded in the institutional task of turning out increasing numbers of highly trained, articulate, and intelligent young philosophers. Each of these properties reflects a relatively uncontroversial empirical claim.

Continental Philosophy comes in almost as many varieties as does AP but is always decidedly anti-theoretical. This is particularly true of those varieties which sport the name “Theory”, but it holds in general of all those CP philosophical traditions in which political goals are more or less pre-eminent. The heroes of CP—Heidegger, Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida—also belong to the past and they, too, have no obvious successors. The History of Philosophy is pursued by both analytic philosophers and their continental consoeurs. In Continental Europe—with the exception of Scandinavia and Poland—philosophy is, in large measure, just the history of philosophy. In the Anglosaxophone world most philosophers are not historians of philosophy. The almost total identification of philosophy with its history in Continental Europe reflects massive scepticism about any theoretical ambitions on the part of philosophy. These claims are also uncontroversial,
as an examination of the publications of philosophers in Continental Europe easily shows.

How is it possible for so many analytic philosophers to pursue philosophy in a more or less rigorous and always theoretical way and yet believe neither that philosophy can be a science nor that it can add to the stock of positive human knowledge? Sometimes this combination is due to a conviction that philosophy can never be other than aporetic. Sometimes it is due to the belief that philosophy can aspire at most to negative results. Sometimes it is due to the belief that philosophy’s final goal is not theoretical (however much theory may enter in along the way) but practical, for example, therapeutic. Sometimes it is due to caution; sometimes to self-deception; and sometimes to the insidious influence of Kant.

II: Analytical philosophy

Perhaps the most striking illustration of these claims is provided by the fields of metaphysics and ontology which, with logic, constitute the heart of theoretical philosophy. Although metaphysics and ontology have always been part of philosophy, and are perhaps more popular within AP today than ever before, they are still, there, the object of a scepticism which does not apply to epistemology or even to practical philosophy. The source of this scepticism is not difficult to locate. If you think that philosophy is or can be a science, then metaphysics and ontology clearly deserve their traditional central place within philosophy. If you are sceptical about philosophy’s scientific ambitions, your scepticism will be at its strongest in connection with metaphysics and ontology.

Suppose we say that ontology is the study of what there might be and metaphysics of what there is. Then metaphysics is clearly inseparable from empirical science. But it is thereby also inseparable from an interest in the real world. Such an interest, it might naturally be assumed, will extend for example to an interest in the metaphysics of boundaries, such as the boundaries between death and life or between health and sickness, or to the metaphysics of quantities and qualities, of powers and of functions, or indeed to the metaphysics of any one of a number of domains which are today of theoretical interest in the world outside philosophy.

But this interest in the real world is not, as it happens, a characteristic of analytic ontology and metaphysics. Consider, for example, the metaphysics of social objects and of social facts (of money and contracts, wills and corporations). The questions proper to this part of metaphysics might reasonably be thought to be of great interest for any philosophy, practical or theoretical, of political, social, and cultural phenomena. But analytic metaphysics of the social world only begins with the publication by John Searle in 1995 of *The Construction of Social Reality* and it has still gone little further than Searle.

Another example of the lack of interest in the real world in analytic ontology and metaphysics is provided by the sad story of current work in such fields as bioinformatics, artificial intelligence, and the so-called “Semantic Web”. Ontology and metaphysics ought surely to be acknowledged as of great importance in fields such as these. In fact, however, philosophical confusion is the order of the day, because AP-philosophers with some knowledge of ontology, manifesting their *horror mundi*, have shown little interest in grappling with the problems thrown up by these fields, leaving it instead to philosophically naïve exponents of other disciplines to wreak ontological havoc. Philosophers, for their part, occupy themselves with in-house puzzles, ignorant of the damage their neglect is wreaking in the wider world.

And what is true of ontology and metaphysics is true of other parts of AP, too. In the recent history of AP a series of puzzles have been mooted, flared up as trends, attracted a significant portion of graduate students, then died down again with no obvious solution having established itself and the world not much the wiser. These problems include: paradigms, rules, family resemblance, criteria, “gavagai”, Gettier, rigid designation, natural kinds, functionalism, eliminativism, truth-minimalism, narrow versus wide content, possible worlds, externalism versus internalism, vagueness, four-dimensionalism, and, just now, presentism.

Although all the issues mentioned are genuinely philosophical ones, they are pursued, still on the basis of the attitude of *horror mundi*, among practitioners of philosophy whose horizon extends little further than the latest issue of *Mind* or *The Journal of Philosophy*. The AP system of professional philosophy encourages introspection and relative isolation because philosophy is not seen as directly relevant to the scientific concerns which prevail in the wider world. As a result, once the main options have been explored, which takes between 2 and 10 years, it becomes hard to base a new career on contributing to the debate, and so interest shifts elsewhere, on to the next trend. The result is a trail of unresolved problems. The problems are not unsolvable, nor are they unimportant, but the attempts to solve them are insufficiently constrained by matters outside philosophy conceived in a narrow and

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1. “Gene Ontology” already receives eight million google hits.