

Can philosophy be an academic discipline?

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Abstract

Richard Rorty notoriously maintained that philosophy is not an academic discipline. He thought that the only viable candidate for philosophy to be an academic discipline—where philosophy consists in a collection of permanent, pure topics—depends on a Cartesian conceptual framework. Once we overcome this framework, he maintained, there will be nothing left to be the distinct subject matter of philosophy. This article argues that there is a conception of philosophy that can be an academic discipline, even if we take Rorty's challenge seriously. It remains even if we overcome the Cartesian conceptual framework. In the end the article goes beyond Rorty's challenge and considers two further criteria for philosophy to be an academic discipline: that it have a distinct method, and that it be able to be done for the public good. The article argues that philosophy can fulfill these two criteria, and therefore that it can be an academic discipline.

KEYWORDS

academic discipline, mind, Rorty, Sellars, uniquely philosophical problems

1 | INTRODUCTION

Richard Rorty notoriously maintained that philosophy is not an academic discipline. But why? The answer is to be found in his “Keeping Philosophy Pure” (1976). There, he holds that there are three ways in which philosophy is usually conceived of: (1) as a sort of “synoptic vision,” a kind of study that he understands to be captured by Wilfrid Sellars's phrase “How things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term” (Sellars 1963, 1); (2) as a collection of permanent, pure topics discussed by most (and only) philosophers (such as: mind and matter, subject and object, and so on); and (3) as a batch of issues that are currently in fashion within philosophy departments.

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Philosophy in the first sense cannot be an academic discipline according to Rorty, because the task is so wide it cannot fall upon only one academic discipline to do it.¹ Philosophy in the third sense would make it the same as other sciences. That is, Rorty maintains, in this sense it could be an academic discipline of some sort, but then it's not really distinguishable from other disciplines. For example, if philosophy were a discipline in that sense, it would not be especially pure (nonempirical), as it is sometimes thought of. Nor could it in some other way be set off from other disciplines if it is thought of in this third sense.

Hence, only the second sense remains as a candidate for philosophy as a (unique) academic discipline—as a collection of permanent, pure topics discussed by most (and only) philosophers (such as: mind and matter, subject and object, and so on). Rorty then goes on to argue, in the manner of the later Wittgenstein, that trying to solve such permanent, pure problems is futile. He argues that these problems have been an illusion, and that there is nothing of this sort to solve. In other words, the only candidate for philosophy as an academic discipline, according to Rorty, is something we should realize consists only of illusionary problems.

In this paper I ask whether we can find some way of understanding what philosophy is other than the three options we get from Rorty. I offer a redescription of his first and second conceptions of philosophy, to arrive at a conception that is a serious candidate for an academic discipline. After responding to Rorty's challenge, I go beyond Rorty in the last section, to ask what other criteria would need to be fulfilled for philosophy to be an academic discipline. I consider the two criteria that it must have a distinct method, and that it be able to be done in service of the public good. In a rough sketch I show how our conception of philosophy that we have built from Rorty's considerations also has the resources to fulfill these two criteria.

2 | WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

As I indicated in the Introduction above, Rorty holds that there are three ways in which philosophy is usually conceived of: (1) as a sort of “synoptic vision,” a kind of study that he understands to be captured by Sellars's phrase “How things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term” (Sellars 1963, 1); (2) as a collection of permanent, pure topics discussed by most (and only) philosophers (such as: mind and matter, subject and object, and so forth); and (3) as a batch of issues that are currently in fashion within philosophy departments (Rorty 1976).

2.1 | A synoptic vision

Rorty takes the first, synoptic-vision kind of philosophy to be too broad to be philosophy alone. He thinks that for a synoptic vision, we also need contributions from other kinds of “intellectuals.” He might hereby think of historians, artists, novelists, and so on. And on the other hand, not all whom we call philosophers contribute to something like a synoptic vision of things,

¹Rorty deliberately uses the German term “Fach” instead of “academic discipline.” He argues:

“I use *Fach*, instead of ‘subject’ or ‘area,’ because the word happens to have been given an elegant and precise contextual definition by William James, in his description of Wilhelm Wundt: ‘He isn't a genius, he is a *professor*—a being whose duty is to know everything and have his own opinion about everything connected with his *Fach*. . . . He says of each possible subject, ‘Here I must have an opinion. Let's see! What shall it be? How many possible opinions are there? three? four? Yes! Just four! Shall I take one of these? It will seem more original to take a higher position, a sort of *Vermittelungsansicht* between them all. That I will do, etc., etc.’ [James to Karl Stumpf, Feb. 6, 1887, in *Letters*, ed. Henry James, Boston, 1920, pp. 263–4]” (Rorty 1976, 338). I think Rorty's distinction between “Fach” and “academic discipline” is unnecessary. It seems implied in the above quote that if we were to use the term “subject” or “area,” the one working in it would have to be a genius. That is not implied in these terms, nor is the opposite implied in the term “Fach,” at least in today's use of these terms. Therefore, I use the term “academic discipline” instead of “Fach,” even when referring to Rorty's arguments.

he says. Hence, he confronts this conception of philosophy with *two* charges: it is too broad (nonphilosophers contribute to it too), but it is also too narrow (not all philosophers do this).

I think Rorty misunderstands Sellars's suggestion that philosophy is a kind of synoptic vision. Sellars doesn't take philosophy to be just any kind of synoptic vision (one that a novelist or historian could also arrive at). Rather, it is a synoptic vision of *how (all the) things hang together* (Sellars 1963). This is a special kind of synoptic vision. How things hang together—all the things we can think of, in all the ways they can possibly hang together—is to try to understand our existence as a whole.² Sellars himself thinks that what is special about philosophy is that it is an inquiry “with an eye on the whole” (1963, 3). Hence, according to Sellars a question is philosophical if and only if it shows us how things hang together in the whole. This is not something one does accidentally. That is, it is done when done as part of an inquiry into how things hang together. If novelists or historians happen to show how things hang together in the whole, then they do philosophy. I postpone until section 2.5 the question whether or not “showing how things hang together” is something *all* philosophers do. For now, it suffices that we have redescribed Rorty's first conception of philosophy; we have redescribed it by resolving a misunderstanding Rorty had about Sellars's suggestion.

2.2 | A collection of permanent, pure topics

The second conception of philosophy—the one that remains as the only viable candidate for philosophy as a (unique) academic discipline according to Rorty—also admits of an understanding different from the one Rorty gives us. More specifically, we can think of a version of this conception of philosophy that might survive Rorty's pessimism about its value. To repeat, this is the conception of philosophy as a collection of permanent, pure topics discussed by most (and only) philosophers, such as the relationship between mind and matter, subject and object, and so forth. Rorty thinks, with Wittgenstein, that once we have overcome certain confusions brought to us by the Cartesian framework, we will no longer conceive of these as problems to be solved. They will be revealed as confusions that came about by a picture (a conceptual framework) that held us captive. Hence, philosophy in this sense will have come to an end. Since Wittgenstein's *Investigations* were published, Rorty thinks, we are to expect that this is indeed the future trajectory of philosophy—the status of philosophy as an academic discipline is thus already breaking apart.

But what is it that makes this conception of philosophy the one that Rorty thinks is the only viable candidate to be an academic discipline? He thinks an academic discipline needs certain terms, distinctions, or topics that only this discipline has, in order to set it apart from others. And the Cartesian distinctions—mind and matter, subject and object—have functioned as such distinguishing terms for philosophy since Descartes. Once they are gone, philosophy as an academic discipline will be gone.

This seems to assume that once *these* distinctions are gone, there won't be any others that come up in their place. There is reason to doubt this. What if it is rather like the following: We as human beings are gripped, often for centuries, by more or less the same metaphysical or transcendental questions and problems. Every once in a while, a shift or step of progress happens—such as overcoming Cartesian assumptions. What happens then is not that we are “in free conceptual space,” as it were. Rather, there will be other metaphysical or transcendental questions and problems that arise. The assumption here is that no matter in what terms we

²“It is, therefore, the ‘eye on the whole’ which distinguishes the philosophical enterprise. Otherwise, there is little to distinguish the philosopher from the persistently reflective specialist; the philosopher of history from the persistently reflective historian” (Sellars 1963, 3). And assuming that we cannot have a view from nowhere, trying to understand our existence as whole from an outside perspective, this “understanding as a whole” must take the form of trying to understand *all the relations* (of hanging together), from the inside, as it were.

think, in what terms we make sense of ourselves and the world, there will be open questions and problems *about these terms*. Short of having a final explanation of everything, or a view from nowhere, there will be questions about the terms in which we make sense of ourselves. And these questions will hence be metaphysical or transcendental questions. So, it does not seem to matter much whether these terms are Cartesian or not. We can even set aside the question whether such a shift away from Cartesian thinking would be progress, or just something like a paradigm shift in the Kuhnian sense. We can also set aside whether the *Investigations* indeed started such a shift or not, and set aside the question whether the main philosophical problems we've had in the past few centuries have indeed been Cartesian problems or not. None of this matters in order to say that it is conceivable, and I think very likely, that there will always be terms, and therefore questions and problems, within which we maintain our understanding of ourselves, and which transcend empirical questions, and questions other sciences can answer. Hence, there will always be questions, problems, or terms that set philosophy apart from other disciplines. They just do not need to always be the same questions and terms, permanently, in order to be distinctly philosophical. Let us see why this is so.

The question is in what sense questions and terms can be distinctly philosophical, if we assume that philosophical frameworks can change over time. We thus need a way of characterizing what makes philosophical questions distinctly philosophical, which still allows for the current frameworks to change.

Already in the way Rorty has set things up, this would have to be possible. Consider how Rorty could make sense of the change of framework from Platonic and Aristotelian times to the Cartesian. He takes the Cartesian framework to be “the one” that gives us the idea that there could be any distinctly philosophical terms. Hence, he must either say that the Platonic and Aristotelian frameworks were the same as the Cartesian one, or that the Platonic and Aristotelian frameworks were not yet philosophical. Either option seems implausible.

Perhaps, according to Rorty, both Platonic and Aristotelian thinking were philosophical, but not the kind that lent itself to being an academic discipline. But this would be hard to understand. Platonic and Aristotelian thinking seem to fulfill exactly Rorty's criteria for philosophy as an academic discipline: that there be distinctions and problems that only this discipline uses, and that they be problems that cannot be answered empirically—problems that are transcendental or metaphysical.

2.3 | The character of uniquely philosophical problems

So here, then, the problem becomes evident: What is the general character of uniquely philosophical problems and questions? Is there something all the genuinely philosophical frameworks have in common—for instance the Platonic, Aristotelian, and Cartesian frameworks—that allows us to say that they are all uniquely philosophical, while suggesting fundamentally different frameworks of thinking?

It seems to me that Rorty wants to say that the Cartesian framework is of a character fundamentally different from the others, and that only this framework triggered in us the confusion that there is such a thing as philosophy, understood as a pure academic discipline. This hangs together with the Cartesian idea that the mind is an essentially independent substance different from the other aspects of human nature. Rorty seems to think that the idea of philosophy as a unique discipline depends on the idea of philosophy being *pure*. Pure, in the sense of not being about empirical matters, and in the sense of not being about quotidian (practical) matters but about, let's say, the pure mind and that which transcends daily life. If this is what is required of philosophy to be a unique discipline, then the Cartesian framework indeed seems to lend itself especially well to it. Or, as Rorty might think, then the Cartesian framework indeed might have been the origin of the very idea that there is such a thing as (pure) philosophy.

But do we really need the idea of a pure mind, and therefore pure philosophy, in order to have unique terms, problems, and questions in philosophy?

Rorty's intuition here is not as easy to dismiss as it first might seem. The idea of a pure mind, in some form, seems to be present in most of the frameworks that have been taken to identify philosophy (such as those of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant)—even in the ones where we explicitly have a more complicated picture, as in Aristotle's hylomorphism. So, again, do we need the idea of a pure mind, in some form, in order to think that there is such a thing as philosophy? In some sense, this might be right. It might be right exactly in the way that Rorty puts forward: namely, that we take philosophy to *somehow transcend* other questions and matters. Philosophy is about the questions that are still open when all is said and done in terms of empirical and quotidian questions. And if we now don't want to say, “These are not *real* questions, they're only ruminations, a sign of psychological disorder,” then we have to assume that there is something *about us*, something real, something nonpathological, *that goes beyond* empirical and quotidian questions. It must be a nonpathological fact about us that we have such transcendental questions, if the questions are not to be a sign of pathology. And to this fact about us, philosophers have often given the name “mind.”

What the later Wittgenstein (and with him Rorty) does, by contrast, is this: he says these are not real questions, they're ruminations, a sign of psychological disorder. Wittgenstein might not call them psychological disorders in today's terms—an *individual* disorder that might even be caused by a chemical imbalance in one's brain—but rather something like a *collectively shared* psychological disorder, which has its cause in our current language (our currently available terms), which we exactly inherited from such thinkers as Descartes. Hence, the question for us is: Is there a sense in which questions that transcend empirical and quotidian matters can be *nonpathological*? Can they be more than futile ruminations, can they be *real* questions? And can we believe this without assuming something like a pure mind?

I have given Rorty credit for linking the claim that there are nonpathological questions like this with the idea that there is such a thing as a pure mind. That is, thinking that there are *real* questions that transcend empirical and quotidian questions presupposes the idea that there is something about us that transcends empirical and quotidian questions too—namely, our mind. But what this doesn't presuppose is that we think of this mind *in a Cartesian sense*—a second kind of substance, a “something” by itself. In other words, “mind” can just be the name we give to *that about us which transcends empirical and daily questions*, without giving a substantive theory about what “it” is. It can just be the name for “that which we pursue, or try to understand, if all empirical and quotidian matters are settled.” Of course, it is not clear that *there indeed* is something to be pursued or understood beyond empirical and quotidian matters. It is also not clear, however, that there *isn't*. In other words, Rorty's being sure that these questions are mere confusions is just as short-sighted as Descartes's being sure that there is such a sphere of pure thought.

2.4 | Philosophy's searching, self-reflective nature

In other words, philosophy is bound to pursue something that we can only *hope* exists but cannot be *sure* it does. It will always be *possible* that philosophical questions are mere confusions. But it will never be *certain* that this is so. So, anyone claiming that philosophy has come to an end must have misunderstood the character of philosophy—that is, must not have understood that philosophy necessarily has a *searching* nature. That is, philosophy is not only searching in the sense that it searches for answers; it is also searching in the sense that it must ask whether its own activity is a real search or only a confusion. This is what makes philosophy self-reflective—in the sense that it reflects on its own conditions of being. This might sound like hopeless confusion. It might indeed sound as though we're just going down a rabbit hole of ruminations, a

never-ending search for something that might simply not be there. But this is fine—we don't have to stop pursuing questions just because we cannot be sure that they're real questions, *so long as we're also not sure that they're not real*. Rorty seems to be sure that whatever we search for when we do philosophy does not exist, and that with a revision of terms (an emancipation from the Cartesian framework), we'll be freed from this search. An alternative view, the one I pursue, is to say that the search is a hope we are simply bound to pursue as human beings. We cannot really free ourselves from the questions that go beyond the empirical and the quotidian. Whether or not this search makes sense is not a matter we can settle as human beings. If the search does not make sense, then we are simply tragic beings—bound to pursue something that does not make sense. If the search *does* make sense, we're not tragic beings, but we are still beings who will never be sure whether we are tragic beings or not, bound to do philosophy. In a way, this is just the perspective Kant suggested we take on with respect to these questions, by suggesting that it is a *practical necessity* for us to hope that the questions make sense.

All of this makes it plausible that there will always be terms, questions, and problems that transcend empirical and quotidian questions and thus transcend questions other sciences can answer. Hence, there will always be questions, problems, or terms that set philosophy apart from other disciplines. So, we do not have the problem Rorty predicted—that there will no longer be a unique set of problems that belongs to the academic discipline of philosophy once we overcome our Cartesian confusions. We can have such a set of problems, moreover, without a substantive theory about a pure mind. “Mind” is just the name we give to “that which we try to understand if all empirical and quotidian matters are settled.” There is no sense in which this is a purer inquiry than others. It's simply a *different* inquiry—a nonempirical one. We don't need to suppose anything monastic or otherwise suspicious about this different kind of inquiry. We can be down-to-earth inquirers about nonempirical and nonquotidian matters.

Hence, in this sense there will be “permanent” problems that only philosophy can tackle. The frameworks and terms in which they are understood will change, and even the questions will change. But the *character* of the questions and problems will not change: “that which we try to understand if all empirical and quotidian matters are settled.” Again, there is no reason to assume that such questions will all disappear only because, for instance, the Cartesian framework will disappear. I think it is part of human nature to have questions that go beyond the empirical and the quotidian.

The terms “empirical” and “quotidian” need some clarification, however. As I point out below, a philosophical inquiry *can* at the same time speak to quotidian and empirical questions while remaining philosophical in nature. But what is philosophical about the inquiry is not the same as that which speaks to the quotidian or the empirical problem. If a philosophical inquiry does speak to the empirical or the quotidian, it does so in addition to being philosophical, as it were.

What is it, then, about the quotidian and the empirical that makes them nonphilosophical? Let us distinguish different ways in which philosophical understanding can bring benefit to the quotidian and the empirical. This way, we can see how the philosophical, on the one hand, and the quotidian and the empirical, on the other, are different but intertwined. First, benefits to the quotidian. We can distinguish the following two cases. The *satisfaction* of understanding something philosophically can bring some quotidian benefit. I might generally be a more satisfied person by having some philosophical understanding of some matters. This is sometimes expressed by the idea that philosophical understanding has intrinsic value. And this satisfaction might make a general difference in my daily life—I might have a generally deeper sense of meaning in the things I do. From this, one needs to distinguish quotidian benefits that follow not from *the satisfaction* of understanding generally but from *what* one has understood, from having gained some kind of philosophical knowledge. For instance, I might be a better friend by having philosophically understood what friendship is about. In this case, it's not my satisfaction drawn from understanding but *what* I understand better about friendship that makes a difference in my daily life.

Similarly, we can distinguish two ways in which philosophical understanding benefits the empirical. Let's assume a case where conceptual clarification helps reorganizing how we categorize and thus diagnose mental illness. The “mere” philosophical understanding of mental illness (what it, most generally, is; aiming for the most coherent categorization of it) might also benefit practitioners by giving them the satisfaction of a generally deeper sense of meaning of what they do (as psychiatrists). This case is thus analogous to the way we described the first quotidian case above. Again, here it is the *satisfaction* from philosophical understanding that brings benefit in an empirical domain, despite not being geared toward an empirical question. From this we can distinguish, again analogously to the quotidian case, a way in which philosophical inquiry benefits the empirical by *what* is understood, thus from having gained some kind of philosophical knowledge. That is, a psychiatrist might be a better psychiatrist by philosophically understanding what mental illness is, just as I might be a better friend if I philosophically understand what friendship is about. For instance, through philosophical inquiry a psychiatrist might understand that there is a nonbridgeable difference between correlation and causation. She might be able to understand this specifically within the domain of mental illness—for example, that even though certain medications almost always work to alleviate a certain illness, this does not show that the chemical imbalance in the patient's brain necessarily is the original cause of the illness. This might influence her medical practice. This is an example in which a philosophical inquiry (What is mental illness?) comes together with empirical inquiry and might even influence the empirical (and the practical) domain but is still distinct from it. It does influence the empirical (and the practical) in a way that is different from that in the first case, in which the “mere” *satisfaction* of understanding philosophically what mental illness is gives a deeper sense of meaning to what the psychiatrist does.

These considerations should open up the path for us to understand what it is about the quotidian and the empirical that is nonphilosophical. Which is an inverted way of asking what it means for the philosophical “to go beyond” the empirical and the quotidian. The philosophical inquiry, in our examples, helped one to be a better friend by understanding what friendship is about and to be a better psychiatrist by understanding an important aspect (correlation rather than causation) about mental illness, and in both cases the *satisfaction* of having philosophical understanding helped one to have a deeper sense of meaning in the things one does. So, what would the quotidian and the empirical be without philosophical understanding? One can still be a good friend or psychiatrist without having philosophical understanding in these domains.

To answer this, remember what we said is distinct about philosophical inquiry: its self-reflective, searching nature. That is, while conceptual frameworks (Cartesian, Aristotelian, and so on) might change over time, what remains is the *character* of the questions. Philosophy does not only search for first-order answers, it also has to keep asking what the nature of its own pursuit is. This leads to its distinctive self-reflective character. Philosophy is a practice of running against the limits of understanding in the currently available conceptual frameworks and, if necessary, of questioning and replacing these conceptual frameworks.

What would be “missing” in some sense, then, if one did not reflect philosophically upon friendship or mental illness while being a friend or a psychiatrist, is perhaps a sense of the limits of one's own understanding of these practices, and the resulting self-reflective character of one's attitude toward it. That is, the philosophical goes beyond the empirical and the quotidian by providing a *distinct sense of one's limits in understanding* such practices. This sense of one's own limits of understanding has an impact on how one relates to what one understands (whether one takes it to be a definitive answer or not, for instance). That is, a friend or psychiatrist who has not thought philosophically about friendship or mental illness might not *do* anything substantially different but do it with a different sense of their own limits of understanding. It is in that sense that the philosophical goes beyond the empirical and the quotidian, even when it is intertwined with a quotidian or an empirical inquiry.

Sellars—whose position we encountered in the first conception of philosophy, as synoptic vision—would have agreed that philosophy is that which goes beyond the empirical and the

quotidian, but he would have given a different answer as to how it does so. According to Sellars, what is distinct about the philosophical is that it is done with an “eye on the whole.” He says that “otherwise, there is little to distinguish the philosopher from the persistently reflective specialist; the philosopher of history from the persistently reflective historian. To the extent that a specialist is more concerned to reflect on how his work as a specialist joins up with other intellectual pursuits than in asking and answering questions within his specialty, he is said, properly, to be philosophically-minded” (1963, 3). That is, empirical (other sciences) and quotidian pursuits are specialist pursuits, according to Sellars. One can either pursue a specialist pursuit with an eye only to this pursuit (for example, what I need to know about mental illness in order to treat it). Or one can pursue it “with an eye on the whole,” that is, with an eye on how this question hangs together with other questions. If (and only if) done in the latter way, it is properly speaking a philosophical pursuit according to Sellars. This is how, according to him, the philosophical goes beyond the empirical but is intertwined with it. Philosophical questions might *arise* from empirical ones in the sense that one might be engaged in a specialist pursuit, and *then* wonder how this hangs together on the whole. But once we move to the question of how it hangs together, it is a purely philosophical pursuit. This pursuit, that is, although it has arisen from an observation from an empirical pursuit, is not empirical anymore but goes beyond it according to Sellars.

While the Sellarsian suggestion shares some aspects with our account, it does not go far enough, I would argue. This is so because the hanging together of things is not present in all philosophical questions—hence, it is only *one kind* of uniquely philosophical question and thus not fit for the most general characterization of philosophical inquiry. Let us, then, go back to our redescription of Rorty's first conception of philosophy that he takes from Sellars, and ask what its relation is to our suggested account.

2.5 | How things hang together: Only a subset of the uniquely philosophical problems

How does our account of the general character of philosophical questions as “that which goes beyond the empirical and the quotidian” relate to “how things hang together, with an eye on the whole”? One possible answer is this: the hanging together (of things) itself is not an empirical or a quotidian matter. So, the question of how things hang together is a question that goes beyond the empirical and the quotidian. That is, the question of how things hang together has this special character of being a philosophical question, according to our account. Sellars's claim goes further than that, however. He maintains that the hanging together is *the* philosophical question; *all* philosophical questions are a version of the question of how things hang together. If one thinks, as Sellars does, that “having an eye on the whole” *is* philosophy, it is clear why the question of how things hang together is *the only* philosophical question. It is because hanging together is what makes the difference between “a sum of parts” and “a whole.”

But the question of “how things hang together” does *not* seem to be the only, or most essential, question for all that which goes beyond the empirical and the quotidian, and thus for our conception of philosophy.³ Rather, it seems that thinking about “how things hang together” is only *one* question that goes beyond the empirical and the quotidian. In other words, “how things hang together” is not all there is when we engage in thinking about nonempirical and nonquo-

³On the face of it, “having an eye on the whole” and “looking at that which goes beyond” even seem to be two *opposite* activities. That is, either one tries to see the whole in the chaos of all things there are, or one tries to see exactly that which is outside the whole, that is, that which goes beyond. Focusing on what goes beyond seems to disrupt the view that there is a whole, and focusing on the whole seems to blind one to that which goes beyond that whole. But we haven't described philosophy as that which goes beyond “just anything.” We've described philosophy as that which goes beyond specifically the empirical and the quotidian. That is, philosophy is not that which goes beyond “all that which hangs together.” And so these two conceptions of philosophy are at least not opposite activities.

tidian questions. When we ask, for instance, whether it is possible to think beyond the limits of space and time, we do not ask about how some things hang together. And yet, it is a nonempirical and a nonquotidian, hence a philosophical, question.

Hence, the relationship of the two conceptions of philosophy must be something like the following. The first conception of philosophy, as the inquiry into “how things hang together,” is a *subset* of our conception of philosophy as questions with the special character of “going beyond the empirical and quotidian.” How things hang together is thus a wide-ranging philosophical question, but there are other philosophical questions that are not well described as questions of how things hang together. Interestingly, then, the first conception of philosophy as synoptic vision is indeed *too narrow*, as Rorty had argued. That is, not all philosophers contribute to the question of how things hang together. This is so—we can now argue—because this is only one of several questions of the special character we ascribe to distinctly philosophical questions. But the question of how things hang together is, now against Rorty, a *purely* philosophical question, one which is *not* answered by nonphilosophical inquiries or intellectual endeavors (thus not too broad).

Hence, our conception of philosophy is a redescribed version of Rorty's second conception of philosophy, which manages to also comprise the redescribed version of Rorty's first conception of philosophy. In short, the distinct character of *philosophical* questions is that they're still open when all is said and done in terms of empirical and quotidian questions. We can assume that these are real questions—not just ruminations or pathologies—without assuming that there is a pure mind (that is, without depending on a Cartesian framework), and without having some other substantive theory about the mind. “Mind” is just the name we give to “that which we try to understand if all empirical and quotidian matters are settled.” That is, philosophy necessarily has a *searching, self-reflective* nature. Philosophy is not only searching in the sense that it searches for answers; it is also searching in the sense that it has to ask whether its own activity is a real search or only a confusion. The mere possibility that philosophical questions might all be the result of confusion does not force us to stop asking these questions. On the contrary, it might be part of human nature that such questions will always arise again, no matter within which conceptual framework we think. Ultimately, the searching nature of philosophy—the being unsure about whether its own questions are mere confusions—is what makes philosophy a distinctly self-reflective discipline.

2.6 | Philosophical inquiry as academic discipline

We have now established that Rorty's reason for thinking that philosophy cannot be an academic discipline can be refuted. That alone doesn't yet make philosophy into an academic discipline, however. What we have established by refuting Rorty is that philosophical inquiry indeed has a distinct, permanent character, something that can be the basis for an academic discipline. What other criteria would have to be fulfilled for it to be an academic discipline?

Within the scope of this article I can give only a rough answer to this question. I take the following general principle to be reasonable: Any distinct kind of inquiry *can* be pursued as a (distinct) academic discipline. Whether or not it will actually be pursued as an academic discipline is a matter of sociohistorical contingency—that is, a question of whether a given society has included that kind of inquiry in its institutional structures as an academic discipline.

There might, however, be more criteria that philosophy has to fulfill in order to be able to be an academic discipline that are not a matter of sociohistorical contingency. Besides the question of whether philosophical inquiry has a distinct, permanent character, these further criteria could be: Does this kind of inquiry have a distinct method, and can it be done for the public good (*if*

we think of an academic discipline as an endeavor done in the social division of labor, done in the public interest, and so on)?⁴ Let me respond briefly to these two questions.

It's an often-observed feature of philosophical inquiry that its practitioners seem to disagree about its appropriate methods more than in other disciplines.⁵ Disagreement alone, however, does not mean that we cannot have distinct methods that keep us accountable for the quality of our work. Philosophical inquiry has many such measures that keep us accountable for the quality of our work, and has various “instruments,” as it were, to achieve that quality. Some of the quality measures are: the principle of parsimony, coherence, adherence to (informal and sometimes formal) logical principles, the duty to show that one knows the literature about a topic before one can publish one's claims, and so on. Some of the instruments are: thought experiments, formal and informal logic, introspection, a range of works every philosopher is supposed to know, and so on. In short, philosophical inquiry seems to be amenable to standard requirements for scientific disciplines.⁶

Can philosophical inquiry be done for the public good? It might be easier to see how research on medical issues can be done for the public good than philosophical inquiry can be. There are of course many other academic disciplines for which it is not as easy to show how they can be done for the public good as medical research. Philosophical inquiry, however, might face some distinctive challenges. I said that the distinct character of philosophical questions is that which we try to understand if all empirical and quotidian matters are settled. I said that there will always be terms, and therefore questions and problems, within which we maintain our understanding of ourselves. They do not permanently need to be the same questions and terms. Whatever the conceptual framework we have adopted within which to understand ourselves, there will be questions about this very framework and its terms, and thus there will be a task for which we will need philosophical inquiry. If we say that philosophical inquiry consists in the questions we try to understand if all empirical and quotidian matters are settled, then it might seem difficult to see how philosophy can serve the public good. Serving the public good might standardly be thought of as consisting in answering quotidian and empirical questions.

A rough possible answer to this worry is the following. If we think that wanting to understand ourselves (that is, wanting to understand the concepts and terms with which we make sense of our own existence) is something that interests not only researchers but also (at least some) people in general, then it serves the public good to pursue such questions. There is a special challenge in that way of serving the public good, however. For example, one could imagine that philosophical inquiry contributes to the public good in this sense only if it makes sure that one considers the *actual* questions and confusions in understanding oneself that are drawn from the *actual* people in a given society. That is, perhaps it wouldn't serve the public good if the discipline only took up questions that come from other philosophers, as opposed to other people in a given society, with whom the social division of labor is in place. This challenge doesn't arise for medical research, for instance, because medical research already has its starting point in (actual) practical problems of (at least some) actual people in a given society (even if these questions are not “in the minds” of the people for whom it is important to answer them).⁷ But this special challenge is not unresolvable. It only shows that there might have to be some extra considerations in place regarding how the questions of the discipline are chosen, if philosophical inquiry is to serve the public good.

⁴Kitcher (2012) and Pamuk (2021) are among those who maintain such a requirement for an academic discipline.

⁵For instance, Bartlett (1989) and Chalmers (2015) have made such an observation.

⁶I use this term in the German sense of *Wissenschaft*, which is not limited to the natural sciences.

⁷I pursue this line of reasoning about the special challenge for philosophical research in serving the public good in more detail in Kaeslin 2021.

There is much more to say about both questions, in what way philosophy has a distinct method, on the one hand, and in what way it can serve the public good, on the other. The illustrations above have merely shown that there are possible answers to these questions. Hence, we can see that philosophy *can* be an academic discipline also in terms of satisfying criteria that go beyond Rorty's worry about needing a distinct, permanent content.

3 | CONCLUSION

We started out with Rorty's reasons for thinking that philosophy cannot be an academic discipline. In short, he thought that the only viable candidate for philosophy to be an academic discipline—the one where it consists in a collection of permanent, pure topics—depends on a Cartesian conceptual framework. Once we have overcome this framework, he'd maintain, there will be nothing left to be the distinct subject matter of philosophical inquiry. We have seen here that we can think of the distinct subject matter of philosophical inquiry differently. We will always depend on *some* conceptual framework within which we make sense of our existence. This framework and its terms will raise questions. Hence, no matter what conceptual framework we use to make sense of our existence, we will have to grapple with questions of this character. The character of philosophical questions goes beyond quotidian and empirical questions. Philosophical inquiry has a searching nature. That is, it can never be *sure* that its questions are not confusions. Therefore, philosophy will always have to ask what its own endeavor amounts to. This is why philosophy is a self-reflective kind of inquiry. This searching, self-reflective kind of inquiry that goes beyond the quotidian and the empirical is the distinct character of philosophical questions. And that is the permanent content that enables philosophy to be a distinct academic discipline.

In the last section I went beyond Rorty's challenge. Even if we have seen that philosophy can have a distinct subject matter, there might be other criteria that need to be fulfilled for it to be able to be an academic discipline. We have considered the two criteria of needing a distinct method, and that it can be done for the public good. I have shown, in a rough sketch, that philosophy can fulfill these criteria, too. While there might be great disagreement within the discipline about its methods, we do have an array of measures that keep us accountable for the quality of our work. And while there might be a special challenge in practicing philosophy in a way that is amenable to the public good—that we might have to make sure that we consider the *actual* questions and confusions in understanding ourselves that are drawn from the *actual* people in a given society—there is no reason to think this could not be achieved.

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