Specialisation, Postgraduate Research and Philosophical Eclecticism

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Introduction

The changing perceptions of academic philosophy by aspiring postgraduates, especially those who intend to pursue future academic careers, should be an essential consideration of university departments and the wider academic community. The perceptions of academic philosophy by current and potential postgraduate students will influence their professional aspirations and their academic ambitions. Many graduates with great philosophical potential may be discouraged from pursuing postgraduate studies if they consider that the prospects for research funding or eventual employment are too slight. This will not only affect the financial health of academic departments, where the recruitment and retention of postgraduate students is an important source of funding (the rather unattractive ‘cash cow’ principle). There are also negative possible long-term consequences for the vitality of academic philosophy.

There is a danger that graduates with the potential to make significant contributions to academic philosophy are absconding in favour of careers elsewhere. Of course there is no demand that students with such potential pursue
academic careers, and doctoral funding is notoriously scarce to come by. In an ideal world there would be sufficient funding monies for all those students who wished to undertake doctoral studies; but in today's academic marketplace the competition for funding and tenure is fierce. It is, to use Thomas Hobbes' famous phrase, 'a war of all men against all men'. The stereotypical image of philosophising as an activity confined largely to armchairs and comfortable studies has been abandoned in favour of a fraught and competitive professional arena. Philosophy has gone corporate. Or as one academic philosopher once remarked to me, 'it's war out there.'

These concerns over the increasingly competitive and corporate nature of professional philosophy are not new. Academic philosophers discuss and critique their profession as much as butchers, bakers and candlestick makers, and certainly many of the concerns being raised are common to a range of subjects. However there is perhaps a need to consider the perceptions of postgraduate students of academic philosophy.

Although postgraduates are not yet active members of the academic philosophy community, they will come to fill its ranks as time goes on, carrying their early perceptions and impressions with them. Therefore it is important for the academic philosophy community to consider and respond to the perceptions of postgraduate students, both to correct misperceptions and to respond to justified concerns. A constructive dialogue between current professional philosophers and their successors is therefore of essential concern to maintaining the long term integrity of academic philosophy.

This article is, accordingly, an examination of my own personal perceptions of academic philosophy, both from my own experience and following discussions with fellow postgraduate students in philosophy and other disciplines. It is not intended as a comprehensive critical study, nor as a 'sociology of academic communities', as has been offered by Pierre Bordieu. My aim is simply to outline and critically examine some of the recurrent criticisms made by postgraduate students of academic philosophy, with particular reference to specialisation and career 'trajectories', before concluding with some suggestions for counteracting these criticisms.

**Specialisation, trajectories and conservatism**

Postgraduate students are constantly reminded that their academic and professional progression is dependent upon their specialisation. A doctoral project, for instance, is a specialised study of a particular problem or issue in an area of philosophy which interests the student. A budding academic philosopher must demonstrate increasing specialisation within a particular area of philosophy as he or she progresses through undergraduate and postgraduate education.

Although there are convincing intellectual and pragmatic arguments for the importance of specialisation, there are also important criticisms to be made of it. Friedrich Nietzsche described the sad figure of the scholar 'sitting in front of his inkwell ? his head bowed low over the paper', portraying this rather miserable figure as a man trapped in the ironic and ultimately ineffectual pursuit of seeking knowledge by exposing himself, physically and intellectually, to only a small portion of the world. This is a critique of the pretensions of the specialist for 'his zeal, his seriousness' and his 'overestimation of the nook in which he sits'. The bright light of these minds are being increasingly concentrated upon a single spot, like a searchlight, which threatens both to obscure its object and blind its spectators with its intensity. As Nietzsche complained, in 'having a speciality one pays by also being the victim of this speciality', one becomes 'possessed by it and obsessed with it'.

In particular, specialisation can function to constrain the intellectual interests, disciplinary freedom and professional manoeuvrability of postgraduate philosophers, and encourage an inadvertent conservatism in the academic profession. These are broad claims and would certainly benefit from an extended discussion, and so in this article I would simply like to introduce and outline these criticisms.

Pierre Bordieu argued that the organisation and stability of an academic community is most effectively ensured by the establishment of a process of 'academic initiation' consisting in 'an enforced prolongation' to implicit 'procedures of co-option'. During one's postgraduate philosophical education and early academic career an 'ideal career path' is
implicitly established, from doctoral study through to professorship.

Advancement depends upon the cumulative acquisition of academic and professional merit, in the form of publications, research awards, university appointments and so forth. Although this process is an effective method of training postgraduates and initiating them into professional academia, it may be criticised as encouraging a degree of conservatism; yet before moving onto this criticism it is first necessary to briefly remark upon the merits of this educational format of gradual specialisation and academic initiation.

The process of academic training encourages postgraduate students to identify a particular philosophical problem or issue and produce a focused examination of it. The students’ energies will be increasingly concentrated on this defined area of inquiry, enabling him or her to produce a doctoral thesis which will serve as a demonstration of their academic rigour and as a basis for future researches. Of course this is an effective format of research training; the student can work on the philosophical issues which interest them with the support of a supervisor who is expert in that area. And there is no greater intellectual pleasure than to follow one’s interests wherever they might lead and to discover, almost by chance, new ideas and interests which otherwise one might never have realised.

Moreover, participation in the research environment of an academic department or a wider academic community will prepare the postgraduate for further research and teaching. Specialisation also ensures that a postgraduate, or a new academic, is able to make sophisticated original contributions to their area of expertise. A successful doctoral postgraduate will therefore begin his academic career with the requisite experience and expertise to begin an effective academic career.

My criticism is not of specialisation per se, since the attraction and intellectual and practical benefits of academic study consists in part in specialised researches. Instead, my objection is to an overemphasis on specialisation to the exclusion of an awareness and familiarity with other areas of philosophy and indeed of other disciplines. Now, there are of course problems with this advocacy of eclecticism, which I will address in section six. However before addressing those concerns, the disadvantages of ‘over-specialisation’, as one might call it, will be discussed in greater detail. In particular I would like to make three criticisms.

**Three criticisms of specialisation**

The three criticisms I would like to make of ‘over-specialisation’ focus upon its negative implications for academic philosophy, and in particular upon the problems generated by the proliferation of, and lack of communication between, specialised philosophical disciplines. Firstly, professional philosophers are increasingly working within localised research communities which have motivated the bifurcation of philosophical disciplines into a growing number of subdisciplines. Although this on the one hand reflects the natural growth of specialised research communities, it also tends on the other to create autonomous research communities, detracting from the unity and coherence of the overall academic philosophical community.

The second problem, following from the first, is that specialisation encourages the fortification of disciplinary boundaries through the development of specialised terminologies and methodologies. The consequence is that philosophers cannot easily participate in the discourse of other disciplines, because even general philosophical terms such as ‘agency’ or ‘realism’ may have radically different meanings. A considerable amount of effort must be expended simply in familiarising oneself with the terms of another discipline, before one can even begin to participate in it. Of course one cannot and should not wander between disciplines at will, but academics should be able to communicate with colleagues from other disciplines who are engaged with the same problems as they?

Thirdly, specialisation discourages eclecticism, or the capacity (and perhaps willingness) of philosophers to consult and engage with other areas of philosophy and indeed other academic disciplines. On these terms, interdisciplinarity may be characterised as a tolerant and open attitude towards one’s own intellectual activities and those of others, as
much as a set of methodological or epistemological commitments. There is much to be gained from an eclectic research methodology, including the importation of novel ideas and inspirations and the identification of fruitful interdisciplinary research areas. Jonathan Lowe has recently criticised the compartmentalisation of philosophy into discrete specialisms. His criticisms of specialisation emanate from his defence of the unity of truth thesis, that reality is one and hence that truth is indivisible. Although the various special sciences may aspire to provide accurate accounts of certain portions of reality, they cannot aspire to the fundamental task of unifying these otherwise disparate accounts. This unification can only be attempted by philosophy—or more specifically to metaphysics. Yet the proliferation of independent philosophical specialisations undermines this project since communication and collaboration between the specialisms becomes increasing problematic. As Lowe argues, considering the ‘universal purview’ of philosophy, ‘this increasing compartmentalisation is very dangerous? if philosophy itself becomes segmented, that’s a danger to its survival’.

The danger is that if philosophers are confined, to use explicitly negative language, into a narrow disciplinary speciality? a cage of their own expertise? then the boons of eclecticism may never be realised. Of course there are no explicit interdictions preventing a philosopher from breaking out of his or her specialisations, and indeed most academic philosophers enjoy research interests in a variety of areas, related or not as they might be. My points are simply these. Firstly, the contemporary emphasis upon specialisation may produce a generation of academic philosophers who are unable to profit from the benefits of researches outside of their own specialities. This concern may perhaps be allayed by the current trend towards interdisciplinary research, but that is an issue for consideration elsewhere. Secondly, on this critical reading, specialisation is a major factor in the increasing compartmentalisation of philosophy into a number of autonomous research communities, between which the communication and exchanges of ideas and inspiration is becoming increasingly difficult.

So there is an ‘essential tension’, to use Thomas Kuhn’s phrase, between the advantages and disadvantages of specialisation within philosophy. On the one hand, specialisation allows postgraduate students to pursue their personal research interests to a more advanced level of inquiry and affords them the opportunity of participating in and contributing to a research community of likeminded scholars. It also increases the scope and depth of philosophical research by developing expertise and understanding over a wider range of issues and problems. On the other hand, specialisation can tend to confine postgraduate students into narrow areas of research, increasingly circumscribing their energies into a specific area of discourse.

The consequent lack of exposure to other philosophical areas makes their consultation difficult, and contributes to the isolation of disciplines from one another. It is possible that the academic philosophy of the future will consist in a broad range of autonomous specialisms with minimal interaction and exchange. In the next section, I would like to propose a possible counter-strategy to the proliferation and isolation of specialisms by making an appeal for a revival of eclecticism.

An appeal for eclecticism

The criticisms of specialisation made in the last section concentrate upon its tendency to narrow the intellectual range of researchers to narrow specialisms. There is no explicit enforcement of disciplinary boundaries, which are fluid and mutable in any case, and of course there is significant interdisciplinary exchange. Jean-François Lyotard argued that the dissolution of classical disciplinary boundaries is a consequence of postmodernist thinking, that ‘disciplines disappear, overlappings occur at the borders between sciences, and from these new territories are born’ and resulting in ‘an immanent and, as it were ‘flat’ network of areas of inquiry, the respective frontiers of which are in constant flux’.

Yet there is still the problem that the proliferation of divergent philosophical specialisms needs counteracting; otherwise philosophers may all disappear into ultra-specialised niches and fail to benefit from the researches of other researchers. Hence I would like to make a plea for eclecticism, defending the merit and importance of exploring and consulting a range of ideas and theories from a range of philosophical disciplines, as well as from the wider arts, humanities and sciences. A contemporary example of such eclecticism is medical humanities, or ‘cultural studies in
An editorial in the *Journal of Medical Humanities* remarked that:

> [Medical humanities] has been variously described as multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary, pandisciplinary, and even aggressively antidisciplinary? By refusing to separate topics and methodologies that are fundamentally complementary, the epistemological hallmarks of cultural studies are diversity and flexibility. 16

An important aspect of the diversity of disciplinary perspectives represented in medical humanities is the multi-perspectival approach to research problems and issues. For instance ‘medical ethics’ could be examined with reference to philosophical biomedical ethics, or examinations of medical educational curricula, or the debates over animal experimentation, or through a critical reading of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, or a historical assessment of Nazi experimentation upon human subjects, or upon representations of issues such as abortion or euthanasia in popular literature and media. As Martyn Evans and David Greaves have argued, the emergence of medical humanities will necessitate:

> the gradual emergence of a new viewpoint, in which philosophy and ethics, alongside a whole range of other disciplines, will jointly become reconfigured and so better equipped to address the challenges of contemporary medicine and health care. 17

A single problem or issue can be approached in very many ways and this is what an eclectic methodology offers. An important consequence of this, in my opinion, will be the gradual abandonment of disciplinary distinctions in favour of a focus upon research problems. For example one would no longer describe oneself as working within ‘philosophy of science’ but instead as researching ‘the influence of public perceptions of scientific authority’, which would include not only the history and philosophy of science but also literature, political theory and cultural studies. Following from this contemporary example of eclecticism, it will now be useful to draw some lessons from the history of eclecticism.

**Eclecticism and the history of philosophy**

Some philosophers may object to the argument that philosophy should return to a sort of eclecticism, on the grounds that ‘philosophy’ is such a flaccid and amorphous term that it is inherently eclectic anyway. Hegel once remarked that:

> Philosophy threatens to become quite indefinite in extent?Has not everything been called Philosophy and philosophising? [One must consider] the close connection ? in which Philosophy stands with its allied subjects, religion, art, the other sciences, and likewise with political history. 18

The broad scope of philosophy of course ensures considerable overlap or contact with other disciplines; political philosophy and political theory, for instance, or philosophy of mind and psychology and psychiatry. The apportioning of intellectual territory and the attempted enforcement of disciplinary boundaries is another issue which eclecticism can combat. Yet the concern should not be over which discipline should deal with which problems, since any singular problem will invoke a range of alternative issues which could sustain alternatively philosophical, historical or sociological analyses?this being the case in ‘science studies’. This is simply the point that ethicists can learn a lot from the history of medicine, or that metaphysicians might usefully draw upon ideas from contemporary quantum physics. Environmental philosophy may fruitfully intermingle with aesthetics and cultural history, and so forth. This attitude is simply the insistence that apparently discrete areas of philosophy can find interesting and illuminating materials from one another, and that an eclectic exchange between the areas of philosophy?and, indeed, between ot
The earliest philosophers were eclectics, being at once philosophers, ethicists, political theorists, poets and natural scientists. Aristotle might be the example par excellence of an eclectic yet systematic philosopher, his surviving books covering subjects ranging from Physics and Poetics to Metaphysics and Prophesying by Dreams. Yet this eclecticism was married to a remarkable polymathy. Aristotle did not merely chance upon a subject and explore it according to whim or caprice; his investigations were systematic and unitary. An advantage of this is that when one has a mastery of diverse subjects and disciplines, one is afforded the luxury of speculation, or of the identification and development of interrelations between subjects, with synthesis as the eventual aim. This systematicity of inquiry protects eclecticism from dissolving into mere ‘wanderings, vagaries, and disgressions’, as Schopenhauer put it.

Aristotle, like Plato before him, advocated a conception of philosophy as a ‘unified science’ and so interpreted the philosopher as ‘one who is capable of synthesising knowledge’. Julie Thompson Klein has pointed out that although Plato was the first to describe philosophy as a ‘unified science’ Aristotle moved more in the direction of specificity by delineating clearer divisions of inquiry, although both maintained that ‘it is the philosopher who has the ability to collect all forms of knowledge, to organise them and to know all? in a general, encyclopaedic sense’.

This argument that philosophical eclecticism can contribute to an eventual unification of human intellectual inquiries, recalling Lowe’s earlier remarks, might seem unfashionable in today’s post-modern age. Whether or not one subscribes to this ‘grand narrative’ however, eclecticism has other advantages which are worth remarking upon. The nineteenth century French philosopher Victor Cousin, a noted proponent of eclecticism, advocated ‘an enlightened eclecticism which, judging with equity, and even with benevolence, all schools, borrows from them what they possess of the true and neglects what in them is false’.

Eclecticism on this rendering has three positive implications: a non-authoritarian perception of philosophical schools and traditions; an acknowledgement of the significance of the history of philosophy; and an appreciation of the necessity of a liberal pluralistic attitude towards philosophical investigation. As Donald R. Kelly puts it, eclecticism enabled ‘the liberation of scholars from dependency on one sectarian view’ and ‘bound them in a sense to tradition, since one of its premises was the belief that truth was the product not of individual but of collective effort’.

Applied to contemporary academic philosophy, the reinvestiture of eclecticism could simultaneously displace the dominance of specialisation and interfere with the process of conservatism by encouraging the free exchange of ideas and inspiration from one discipline to another; scholars would be discouraged from immersing themselves ever deeper into narrow areas of specialised research and instead move out to explore other areas of inquiry. Moreover, eclecticism, particularly in its emphasis upon the historicity of philosophical activity, also encourages a sense of intellectual humility; since the contributions of any one philosophical individual, school or tradition is identified as contingent upon particular historical and cultural circumstances and accordingly interpreted as materials for future synthetic activities.

Consider the rhetorical question posed by the Renaissance sceptic Francisco Sánchez:

But, after all those great men, what fresh contribution can you possibly make? Was Truth waiting for you to come upon the scene?’

**Eclecticism, selectivity and 'cognitive overload'**

Yet there are methodological problems with eclecticism. For instance, ‘eclecticism’ is often perceived to have negative implications, seeming to imply a degree of arbitrariness or randomness in the selection of materials, or the attempt to synthesise disparate materials into a single coherent system. An eclectic might appear to be one who had bid farewell to selectivity and instead embraced a jamboree of otherwise dissolute inspirations. On these terms eclecticism seems
less like an attractive philosophical methodology and more another symptom of our post-modern age. Consider Ulrich Johannes Schneider's plausible argument that until recently:

eclecticism was held to be little more than a non-systematic form of thinking or constructing, and still today that is the generally accepted meaning of the term. Moreover, eclecticism has lost its traditional bad reputation and seems increasingly attractive to late twentieth-century thought in search of non-dogmatic and non-systematic forms of philosophizing. 27

However the word 'eclectic', and its derivatives, in fact imply quite the opposite: the word, of seventeenth century origin, is derived from the Greek eklektikós, meaning 'selective' (from eklekt, 'chosen, select'). An eclectic is not a random sampler from the buffet of intellectual history, but rather a discerning and discriminating intellectual gastronomist. On this point, consider David E. Cooper's observation that, 'No [one] has time to savour the riches of all philosophical traditions', and that therefore in philosophy as in gastronomy, the sensible response to an overstocked larder is surely to choose the best items'.28

However the sort of selectivity that eclecticism seems to require is problematic, since the ability to make intelligent assessments and selections of the ideas of historically, geographically and culturally diverse philosophical traditions requires not only a significant degree of philosophical acumen but also a considerable knowledge of the history of philosophy, not to mention of any other disciplines which one might wish to consult, such as psychology or anthropology. The days of the philosophical polymath are surely over. As the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus advised, '[m]en who are lovers of wisdom must be inquirers into many things indeed', before cautioning that '[m]uch learning [polyamthy] does not teach insight'.29

Although many academics might enjoy diverse research interests?including, say, ethics and the philosophies of mind and science?it is increasingly difficult to remain abreast of the developments in a single discipline, let alone multiple disciplines. As Randall Collins has remarked, it is ironic that the enormous proliferation of scholarly literature has expanded and deepened our knowledge whilst at the same time creating the problem of 'cognitive overload', wherein the mass of information available far outweighs our ability to process it. As Collins goes on to remark,

Disciplinary specialisation and subspecialisation are predictable in an academic profession that since 1960 has grown worldwide to a size dwarfing anything before ?. [W]hen several hundred thousand publications appear every year in the humanities and social sciences, and another million in the natural sciences, it may well feel as if we are drowning in a sea of texts 30

This problem of simply remaining 'up to date' is exacerbated by the proliferation of increasingly specialised journals and areas of subdisciplinary research. The traditional domains of philosophy, such as ethics or metaphysics, are now bifurcating into a gaggle of sub-domains. Subtle but significant variations begin to emerge in terminology and methodology, in the definition and prioritising of problems and theoretical commitments. One can only play the game when the rules have been decided upon. And of course these problems of divergence are inherent in any discipline, even those which enjoy relative consensus and stability.

Conclusion

These developments in academia are related to wider trends in secondary level education, to the emergence of 'managerialism' and the increasing demands imposed by a financially competitive 'academic marketplace'. The situation is different within other national academic communities?in the United States, for instance, where university level education is much broader. Even a cursory study of the educational, political and economic factors influencing academia would be an enormous undertaking; but one for which there is surely an urgent need.31
The purpose of this paper is not to offer any substantive remarks upon these wider concerns, but simply to argue that these wider developments are having negative implications for academic philosophy which are manifesting in postgraduate studies (and of course in other aspects of academic philosophical life). There are important lessons to be learned from the history of philosophical practice which suggest that over-specialisation can tend to encourage stagnation; that there is an important place for freedom of academic inquiry; that disciplinary boundaries should provide structure without imposing constriction; and that, above all, that consideration of the opinions of current postgraduates, who after all represent the 'next generation' of scholars, is of vital importance in ensuring the health, morale and vitality of academic philosophy in the coming decades.

Endnotes

- As an anecdotal illustration: a postgraduate friend of mine has a ritual of buying a lottery ticket every time he sends off a funding application, on the grounds that he has 'a greater probability with the one rather than the other'.
- Bordieu, ibid., p. 105.
- The proliferation of specialised philosophical disciplines and the increasing difficulty of a researcher exploring and benefiting from them all might also contribute to an 'embarrassment of riches' problem.
- One might compare this to the problem of incommensurability in the philosophy of science. For a useful introduction and discussion to the problem, see Sankey, Howard, 'Incommensurability, Translation and Understanding', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 41/165, 1991, pp.414-426.
- For an introduction to the educational and epistemological issues in interdisciplinarity, see Lisa R. Lattuca, *Creating Interdisciplinarity: Interdisciplinary Research and Training Among College and University Faculty* (Nashville, TN.: Vanderbilt University Press, 2001).
- See further Edgar, Andrew and Pattison, Stephen, 'Need humanities be so useless? Justifying the place and role of humanities as a critical resource for performance and practice', *Medical Humanities* 32/2, 2006, 92-98.
- Greaves, David and Evans, Martyn, 'Medical Humanities', *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 18/1, 1997, p.2.

Of course the figures of the 'philosopher' and 'natural scientist' did not exist at this time; but for present purposes these distinctions can be overlooked.

And of course Aristotle's works laid the foundations for the division of philosophical and scientific disciplines which persisted for centuries after his death.


On this point see David E. Cooper, 2005, 'Humility', *The Philosophers' Magazine*, 31, pp.54-56.


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