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# Stephen Gaukroger, "The Failures of Philosophy: A Historical Essay."

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**Stephen Gaukroger.** *The Failures of Philosophy: A Historical Essay.* Princeton University Press 2020. 316 pp. \$35.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780691207506).

When first approaching this volume, it is hard not to think of Bertrand Russell and his famous concluding chapter to *The Problems of Philosophy* (Henry Holt & Co. 1912). But it quickly becomes clear that Gaukroger's objectives are quite different from Russell's, just as their respective characterizations of the very nature of philosophy are quite disparate. Russell argues that much of the value of philosophy as a discipline derives from its attempts to grapple with a set of persistent, often insoluble problems or questions, whereas Gaukroger examines the history of philosophy to problematize the very notion of philosophy as a monolithic discipline that addresses a consistent set of questions. It is not, Gaukroger argues, that we have a single, continuous discipline that wrestles with a set of venerable questions, but rather we have a series of philosophical projects—each driven by a specific agenda of questions, each collapsing due to a failure to fulfill that agenda, and each subsequently replaced by a new project.

The titular *failures* refer to the collapse of an epochal philosophical project, followed by a replacement approach to answering the fundamental question of that failed project. The first of these collapses is the attempt—and ultimate failure—in antiquity to provide an account of the good life. The collapse of this project gives way to the Christian account of the good life. Following this collapse and replacement, we see a 'repurposing' of philosophy, with a focus on metaphysics (and epistemology) to account for natural phenomenon. Due to a cluster of historical and intellectual variables, this project collapses in the mid-eighteenth century. Finally, we have the emergence of Kantian idealism and its failed attempt to construct a theory of everything. This third collapse did not signal the end of philosophy, but rather its transformation into a 'meta-theory of science,' and 'a shadow of its former self' (5).

Appropriately, the volume is divided into three main parts, with each part covering one of the points of development/collapse. In Part I, entitled 'The Rise and Fall of Philosophy in Antiquity,' Gaukroger presents a rethinking of the stock narrative according to which the Presocratic philosophers ushered in the rise of philosophy in antiquity by marking a shift from a purely mythological understanding of the world to a proto-philosophical understanding or perspective. Anyone familiar with a particular account of the development of Western philosophy will recognize the 'from myth to reason' trope characterizing the Greek intellectual climate of the 5th and 6th centuries BCE. In place of this characterization, Gaukroger suggests that what we actually see during this period is not a move to reason, but a move to a 'second-order enquiry' (33) in which abstraction takes on a more prominent role. This development takes place among the figures traditionally lumped together as the group known as the Presocratics, as the transition from the more empirically-focused postulations of Thales to the abstract theories of Heraclitus and Parmenides is striking.

This emphasis on abstraction informs the complex epistemological frameworks of Plato. There is a moral complexity involved, as well, since for Plato virtue *is* knowledge. For Aristotle, of course, there is more to virtue than mere knowledge, but this prevalence of abstraction, along with a level of moral complexity, underpins the defining objective of philosophy in antiquity, viz the pursuit of an account of the good life (*eudaimonia*). One of the fascinating developments with Plato is how metaphysics—a form of inquiry inseparable from abstraction—becomes a 'form of understanding' (59). This draws together metaphysics, epistemology and morality in the Platonic matrix. Indeed, much of the struggle in giving an account of *eudaimonia* lies in reconciling the tension between the practical and the theoretical. While taking on different shapes, this becomes the defining focus of

philosophy in antiquity.

Gaukroger considers the varieties of Platonism, as well as the Hellenistic schools—in particular Stoicism and Epicureanism—and how they take up this central focus. What transpires, nonetheless, is the gradual Christianization of philosophy in the early Roman period. This transition does not represent the failure of any individual schools of philosophy to achieve their specific aims, but rather indicates a broader failure of philosophy construed as an examination of basic questions about how to best live. Philosophy so conceived was replaced by Christianity ‘because Christianity found a non-philosophical way of dealing with [these] question’ (107).

Part II offers an account of the first reboot of philosophy after its assimilation by Christianity. Much of Augustine’s project involved the absorption of classical philosophical frameworks into Christianity, divesting them of independent status by making them a component of a Christian worldview. Paradoxically, during this period, philosophy both loses its independence but also gains a new necessity. Transitioning from its role as an instrument of theology, philosophy finds a new voice vis-à-vis the revival of Aristotle and the emergence of natural philosophy. The rise to prominence of natural philosophy in turn shifts to a focus, in the early modern period, on epistemology.

Often, this period in philosophy is framed by the contrast between rationalism and empiricism, with Descartes and Hume as the paradigmatic representatives of these respective approaches to epistemology. However, Gaukroger instead focusses on the manner in which this particular philosophical project is exhausting itself. For example, with Hume, he argues, we find that the resources of philosophy are no longer being extended; rather, Hume ‘is devising new resources to replace those of philosophy’ (193). This is evident in terms of epistemology, of course, but is even more prominent when we turn to ethics. Along with Smith, Hume finds the basis of morality not in reason, but in the passions, or sense and feeling. Marx, for his part, also abandons philosophy—in his case, by basing an account of morality on history (198). Still, it is with Hume, especially, that we witness the revelation of the limits of philosophy—and yet again its failure to achieve its goals.

In Part III, Gaukroger explores the early modern decline of philosophy, and its subsequent re-purposing as a sort of Metascience. This decline emerges, with the likes of Voltaire and Hume, as a move away from the elaborate system-building characteristic of early modern Continental rationalists. By the time Hume issued his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Spinozistic and Leibnizian metaphysics had been ‘largely marginalized’ (204), replaced in Hume with a focus on highlighting the limits of rational inquiry. This period also sees the emergence of a ‘medicine of the mind’—an examination of the social and moral implications of the newly-developed medical science, most significantly in the work of figures such as Louis de la Caze and Antoine Le Camus. In addition, spearheaded by figures such as Rousseau, *Popularphilosophen* brought about a decline in the public standing of philosophy, as academic philosophers at universities became marginalized in the public mind—mere academics pursuing abstruse intellectual pursuits.

The only choice became for philosophy to turn to Kant’s critical philosophy as the basis for a so-called theory of everything. The development of a theory of everything can be seen in the transition from Kantian transcendental idealism to the full-blown idealism of Hegel and Schelling. However, with Hegelianism in decline following Hegel’s death, ‘a vacuum opened up,’ (251) and into this vacuum moved science as a theory of everything. Hence the replacement of philosophy by science—not just by materialist science, but also with the quantification of morality in the utilitarianism of Mill. Ultimately, science assimilated philosophy, both by reconceptualizing philosophy as a metatheory of science and in the attempt to find a scientific basis for philosophy itself (in the work of analytic philosophers such as Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein).

Contemporary philosophy is thus not the result of the evolution of a philosophical tradition over the course of millennia. Instead, philosophy as we now know it has its source in a relatively recent set of developments. Moreover, Gaukroger argues, philosophy in its current state ‘seems to have lost its bearings’ (287). However, even if Gaukroger is correct in so characterizing philosophy at present, this would not be the first time a broad philosophical project has found itself in such a position; and, as he suggests in his conclusion, there may be much to learn from this.

Gaukroger’s insightful discussions compel us to rethink how we present both the accepted history of Western philosophy, as well as how we understand philosophy as a discipline in the present day. One might take issue with the extent to which he portrays the philosophical tradition as characterized by discontinuity rather than continuity; indeed, his discussions imply that we ought not to be referring to a *tradition* at all, but rather to a series of failed projects. Scholars invested in this conception of philosophy as a single grand tradition thus may be resistant, and experts in the periods Gaukroger covers may have their own critiques of his specific analyses. Nonetheless, this is undeniably an erudite, comprehensive, and persuasive work, and in provoking a reexamination of the history of philosophy, it leads us to a much-needed consideration of the current state of the discipline. This makes *The Failures of Philosophy*, perhaps paradoxically, an indispensable work of scholarship in the field of philosophy.

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