Out of step?
Reimagining the role of moral philosophers in a changing world

Giovanni SCARAFILE
Associate Professor, University of Pisa

Abstract: This paper analyzes the evolving role of moral philosophers in addressing contemporary challenges, arguing for a more dynamic "philosophical posture" that balances theoretical rigor with practical relevance. It examines how philosophers can effectively engage with complex ethical issues while maintaining their core principles, envisioning them as modern argonauts navigating diverse fields from bioethics to artificial intelligence. The discussion critiques the potential reduction of philosophical knowledge to technical expertise and emphasizes the need for actionable insights grounded in community realities. The paper concludes by calling for a renewed philosophical engagement that combines comprehensive understanding with practical wisdom to address our era's existential challenges. Concluding, the paper calls for philosophers to actively engage with societal and ethical issues and reclaim philosophy's foundational vocation. This involves a comprehensive understanding and wisdom to navigate the existential and global challenges of our era.

1. Philosophy in Step with Time: Reflecting on Method and Adaptation in a Changing World

In this paper, I would like to discuss the possible existence of a "philosophical posture" suitable for the times in which we are living. When I speak of "posture", I am mainly referring to the method used in philosophy. In this regard, some preliminary clarifications are required:

a. Obviously, there are clearly many areas of philosophy (the history of philosophy, moral philosophy, theoretical philosophy—just to name a few). Although it may be too obvious to reiterate this, I do not intend to argue that all these dimensions of doing philosophy should be reduced to a single frame of reference to be adopted in practice;

b. In principle, I mean to refer to the moral philosophy called upon to erect the bridge that connects theories to practices. Now, staying within the metaphor of the bridge, my impression is that not all bridges are identical and that some of them, because of the architecture adopted in construction, are more effective than others. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that while principles and theories are fundamental, moral philosophy, like any other discipline, should never lose sight of human reality in all its complexities. Consequently, the bridges we are talking about should be robust and flexible, able to bear the weight of the toughest ethical issues and adapt to the changing conditions of the real world. Out of metaphor, my discussion is therefore aimed at trying to isolate at least some characteristics of the work that the moral philosopher must do in order to be true to his mission. Regarding the work of the moral philosopher, in my view, this is based on a twofold responsibility: on the one hand, the rigorous analysis of ethical theories, their assumptions and implications; on the other hand, the commitment to communicate the results of these analyses in an accessible and meaningful way. It is only through this balance between intellectual rigor and communicative commitment that the moral philosopher can hope to erect bridges that are not only solid, but also walked concretely by those who are called upon to do so in everyday life;

c. From these two premises, a third follows. Indeed, I do not rule out the possibility of proposing an extension of the posture best suited for the moral philosopher to those militating in other areas of philosophy as well. Such an extension, however, should always be understood as enriching and listening to each other, rather than as a forced alignment or assimilation. Finally, the idea of extending the moral philosopher's approach to other areas of philosophy should not be seen as an attempt to impose a kind of monolithism. On the contrary, it stems from the conviction that interdisciplinary dialogue and respect for the specificities of each field can only enrich philosophical research as a whole, allowing for constructive confrontation and a deeper understanding of the issues being reflected upon.

These three premises can be summarized in a single metaphor that gives my paper its title. It is absolutely necessary to prevent the philosopher from being in the same situation as someone who persists in dancing the twist while house music is playing in the background. This metaphor means that it is imperative that the philosopher, in whatever area of philosophy he or she is operating, adapt to the pace of current times, keeping a cohesive pace with the social, cultural and ethical

dynamics that are shaping our world. That said, this does not mean that the philosopher should necessarily abandon the cardinal principles of his work. On the contrary, the need for adaptation should encourage reconsideration of those principles in light of changed circumstances. This will be somewhat like the dancer who, while remaining true to his skill and mastery, must know how to use his skills in different dance contexts without ever risking finding himself out of step.

2. From Ivory Towers to Grassroots: Philosophy's Adaptive Dance with Contemporary Contexts

Perhaps now more than ever before, the staggering number of crises that modern societies face has increased calls for philosophical intervention. It is not easy to define exactly what is asked of philosophy in these times. In an era defined by disintermediation, where expertise is often dismissed, the common perception of a philosopher's role is unclear. People certainly don't expect philosophers to readily solve the problems before us. Instead, they are probably perceived as unique intellectuals capable of providing a holistic perspective on ongoing debates. This synthesizing ability is what often eludes industry specialists, who are understandably focused on their own areas of expertise. Thus, the philosopher might be seen as a modern argonaut, navigating the boundaries of knowledge, seeking connections, pondering the existence of possibilities, and imagining breakthroughs. Such anticipations of a future to be hastened are not a game for philosophers, quite the contrary. The serious reason why this unique cross-disciplinary expertise is sought by non-philosophers is apparent. In most cases, the issues at stake are severe, and people turn to philosophers when it seems all options have been exhausted. In such scenarios, seeking philosophical insights is not merely an act of faith in others' expertise but rather a last-ditch attempt before surrendering and declaring oneself unable to solve a particular problem.

Under such environmental pressure, the philosopher—and particularly the moral philosopher, which will be the primary focus of this discourse—is required to show great versatility. They might deal with bioethics, ICT ethics, doctor-patient communication, artificial intelligence, or ethics and eco
nomics, to name a few fields.

Given these coordinates, practicing philosophy must balance at least two distinct yet converging demands:

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1) The first demand concerns the effectiveness of the philosopher's prescriptions. Their solutions cannot be seen merely as testimonies. The philosopher's guidelines must have prescriptive value; they must embody the reasons that induce listeners not to remain indifferent towards them. Therefore, once a rule has been defined, it must have binding force. Simone Weil aptly noted, "Nothing that is ineffective has value".[1] Such an observation captures the expectations vested in philosophers' work. While they may approach problems from legitimately different perspectives (the notorious scientific-disciplinary sectors!), they cannot refrain from contributing to the needs of the community they operate within;

2) The second demand, arising from the first but of a different order, concerns how the philosopher interacts with contexts where their prescriptions must be implemented. A widespread tendency considers contexts merely as application sites for philosophical theories. This tendency derives from a specific—and now outdated—conception of knowledge, according to a top-down model, which attributed the task of defining knowledge content only to certain institutions or authorities. Both sociology of knowledge and philosophy of science have abundantly signaled how this model is outdated. In a hypothetical map of contemporary knowledge, we should include stakeholders, decentralized network animators, and so-called "totipotent" citizens who, due to their digital devices, feel entitled to opine on any topic. Such grassroots demand for protagonism has been labeled the "demotic turn",[2] referring to the increasing visibility of the "common person" who becomes media content through celebrity culture, reality TV, DIY websites, talk radio, etc. Of course, contexts remain ideal places where philosophical theories are applied, but the transformation of the dynamics within these contexts requires the philosopher—and intellectuals in general—to adopt a more inclusive posture than in the past. These considerations suggest that contexts are not optional and should not be considered as mere receptacles. Interactions within a context, such as those between doctors and patients in a hospital ward, are crucial to define the action rules to be followed there. If these interactions are disregarded, we risk devising decontextualized norms that become impossible to implement, which would undermine the efficacy of the moral norm. To avoid such an outcome, philosophers must adopt a receptive stance towards the demands of the

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[1] Weil, Simone. *Quaderni*, Vol. 1. Translated by Saverio Gaeta. Milan: Adelphi, 1994, p. 334.
[2] See Turner, Graeme. 2010. *Ordinary People and the Media: The Demotic Turn*. Theory, Culture & Society. Los Angeles: SAGE.

contexts. Intellectuals must be able to interpret these demands, setting aside any semblance of arrogance, which would be completely unjustified given the changing conditions under which their authority is recognized.

Three questions arise:

1. How can philosophy effectively engage with and contribute to the diverse needs of the modern community without compromising its holistic perspective?
2. Considering the shift from a top-down model of knowledge to a more inclusive one, how can philosophers adapt their approach to ensure their theories remain relevant and implementable?
3. Given the dynamic and decentralized nature of contemporary contexts, how can philosophers maintain their authority and credibility while also embracing a receptive, interactive stance toward these contexts?

3. Philosophy Unbounded: A Call to Reclaim Comprehensiveness in a Fragmented Epoch

Recently, the Italian philosopher Vittorio Possenti in *Considerazioni sulla filosofia italiana contemporanea*[3]*,* suggested that the very versatility of philosophy, recalling the broad spectrum of topics philosophers are called to deal with today, could be the basis for reducing philosophical knowledge to "technical knowledge". This would represent a paradoxical outcome, and therefore, Possenti's thesis should be given due consideration. If confirmed, we would be facing a profound subversion of the tasks traditionally assigned to philosophy.

The broad perspective inherent in philosophy is nothing more than the ability to grasp the connection between various fields of knowledge, or otherwise stated, the unity of knowledge that is today divided among countless disciplines. Mastering this perspective implies the flexibility to break disciplinary boundaries, understanding the reasons that lift our gaze from the specialization that is often considered the only viable option today, thus giving rise to technicism. If, as hypothesized, the

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[3] The text *Considerazioni sulla filosofia italiana contemporanea* (Observations on Contemporary Italian Philosophy) is available at the following address: https://shorturl.at/gmqyB.

philosopher's method becomes a "technical method", we are witnessing a short circuit: it's as if philosophy has lost its vocation.

In an attempt to clarify this dynamic, it is useful to listen to what Possenti observes: "Contemporary philosophy [he writes] tends to live in the present and has significantly lowered its horizons, it is content with the everyday, it is reluctant to project, it is rather retrospective. In this sense, it is a time of Lent, especially in the theoretical-metaphysical field. We are witnessing a persistent decline of theoretical thought and an explosion of moral and political philosophy that dominate the field. When a problem of any kind arises, we turn to the expert in ethics". Within such a scenario, Possenti continues, we should ask "whether the philosophy scholar has become an academic expert, a professional holder of technical knowledge".

It is only a matter of observing that a philosophy transformed into technical knowledge represents the subversion of the philosophical enterprise itself, which is called to provide an integrated and profound vision of human reality and the world, to stimulate critical thinking, to interconnect the different fields of knowledge, and to guide ethical and political action, rather than to reduce itself to a mere tool of specialized analysis.

A number of issues flow from this warning. Although I do not have time to develop them, I would at least like to recall them:

1. Since when did philosophy begin to move away from its root, thus losing its holistic view of knowledge and ending up focusing only on specific areas of thought, resulting in its transformation into "technical knowledge"?
2. Is there a way to recover the original vocation of philosophy, so that it does not become a mere technical tool, but returns to its role as a guide for understanding and navigating the world?
3. Could the current perception of philosophy as "technical knowledge" be related to its reluctance to engage with worldviews other than its own, and how might we overcome such self-referentiality? Is Western philosophy willing to question itself and recognize the limits of its own perspective while integrating ideas and concepts from non-Western philosophies?

4. The Solitude of Echoes: The Struggle for Original Thought in Modern Philosophy

In his essay, Possenti refers to the current setting where philosophy operates. He notes the "rethinking of A in the light of B, replacing direct view of reality with theories of theories and cross-references of authors". It's noteworthy how Possenti's analyses were somewhat anticipated in 1973 by Walter Kaufmann, a German scholar teaching at Princeton. Indeed, analyzing the operative modes of his contemporaries, he noted a certain resistance towards incisiveness. They preferred extensive commentary, avoiding the risk of personal exposure or providing solutions from their perspective. To describe such situations, Kaufmann coined the term "decidophobia" of the philosopher. Unable to use his voice, the philosopher becomes a kind of exegetic device, focusing on minutiae details, but losing sight of the whole: "The exegetic thinker avoids standing alone and saying what he thinks, because he might be wrong and wouldn't know what to say if others followed his example and said what they think".[4] This temptation affects all philosophers, regardless of their disciplinary sector.

These words are not meant as an accusation against contemporary philosophy or its interpreters. The main intention is to outline the field, i.e., to inventory the tools available to the philosopher. From the issues discussed so far, there might be some responsibility on the philosophers' part—especially those in academia. Of course, we cannot exclude that there might be responsibilities in a sort of new version of the *Trahison des Clercs*,[5] or shirking their responsibilities. However, if this is the case, I believe it would involve mainly individual responsibilities or small interest groups.

The real point is to consider the objective conditions in which today's academic philosophers are called to do their work. Therefore, the reluctance towards personal exposure, as mentioned by Kaufmann, indirectly receives reinforcement from the dynamics of evaluating the work of those in universities.

Among others, three issues seem particularly significant to me:

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[4] Kaufmann, Walter Arnold. 1973. *Without Guilt and Justice: From Decidophobia to Autonomy*. New York: Delta, p. 6.

[5] I am referring to the volume by Benda, Julien. *La Trahison des Clercs*. Paris: Grasset, 1927. Benda's book is a critical examination of the role intellectuals played in shaping the political and social landscape of early 20th-century Europe. Benda argues that intellectuals, whom he refers to as "clerks", have betrayed their duty to remain detached from practical affairs and to uphold universal values and truths. Instead, they have become involved in the nationalist and ideological movements of their time, thereby abandoning their commitment to objectivity and universalism. Benda's work is a passionate call for intellectuals to return to their role as custodians of eternal truths and moral values, rather than becoming servants of political or nationalist causes.

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1. How does the contemporary academic environment influence the philosophical approach, particularly in terms of personal exposure and decisiveness in expressing personal viewpoints?
2. Given the influence of evaluation dynamics within universities, how can philosophers avoid the trap of "decidophobia" and regain their unique, personal voices?
3. Is there a potential for philosophers, especially those in academia, to reclaim their roles and responsibilities in the face of societal and institutional pressures, or is this challenge primarily an individual struggle?

5. Unscrewing the Mind: Rethinking the Philosophical Toolkit in the Modern Era

In what precedes, I have tried to highlight how we are currently witnessing a radical transformation of the general context in which philosophical activity takes place, which consequently requires a transformation of the forms of philosophizing and the posture of the philosopher. Choosing not to govern such a change means risking proposing practices no longer in line with the needs of our time. In *Mind the Gap*,[6] I had identified a metaphor that I would like to bring forward here.

Every philosopher, I observed, belongs to a specific scientific-disciplinary field. This is not a mere formal and insignificant membership since the tools of one's trade are provided by the sector in which one is situated. Thus, every philosopher, considering their interdisciplinary specialization, carries with them a toolbox. Until now, when faced with the task of screwing any screw, the philosopher merely had to identify the most suitable screwdriver among their tools. The ongoing scenario changes are so radical that they can be compared to a screw that has a screwing system not present among the screwdrivers available to the philosopher. From this perspective, no technique will suffice. It involves rethinking the entire screwing system, a task that the philosopher can perform if they can entirely rethink their vocation, no longer taking for granted the presumed correspondence between their actions and the reality in which they are or should be carried out.

Today, for philosophy, liberating itself from the risk of technicism does not mean giving up being specialized. On the contrary: the need to achieve genuinely

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[6] See Scarafile, Giovanni. 2020. *Mind the Gap*. Pisa: ETS.

specialized outcomes requires a methodical pluralism—the opposite of single-minded thinking—and the philosopher must be free from any pre-existing schema in imagining lines of study, action and interaction. It requires a careful and critically reflective understanding of their toolboxes, a continuous review of their methodological approaches, and a renewed commitment to dialogue and collaboration with other disciplines. As we step into the future, the philosopher's role should not be limited to that of an academic expert or holder of technical knowledge. Instead, they should be a bridge-builder, a critical thinker, an explorer of the unknown, and a seeker of wisdom, harnessing the power of their specialization while retaining a holistic view of knowledge.

In the face of the existential and global challenges of our era, we need philosophers who are ready to contribute to the comprehensive understanding of our reality, engaging with societal and ethical questions with courage and conviction. As Possenti observes, the philosophy scholar's evolution cannot be merely a response to changing contexts or an adaptation to academic environments. It must be an active choice to take up the responsibility to understand, interpret, and guide our collective journey through the complex tapestry of human knowledge and experience. In conclusion, whether the philosophy scholar has become an academic expert or a professional holder of technical knowledge is a question best answered by each philosopher individually, as they carefully assess their relationship to their field, to their society, and to the broader quest for wisdom. The challenge of our era is not just the mastery of technical knowledge, but the reclamation and embodiment of philosophy's original vocation: the love of wisdom.