

R. Trigg, *Philosophy Matters*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2002; ISBN: 0-631-22546-3; 157pp. (*Think* 3, Spring 2003, 107-111)

Roger Trigg's new book continues his discussions from *Rationality and Science* (Blackwell 1993) and *Rationality and Religion* (Blackwell 1998) on the role of reason in our thought and lives. Its fundamental premise is that philosophy is an irreplaceable discipline, and Trigg seeks to defend it from the Scylla of scientism and the Charibdis of relativism. His bold tone will engage many readers in the challenges he discusses.

Scientism (which is my word, not Trigg's) is the belief that science is the only exemplar of rationality and all knowledge must come through empirical investigation; relativism is the belief that claims to truth are relative to the believer, so what is true for one person may not be true for another. Trigg diagnoses that these views are two sides of the same coin with the common assumption that "once the constraint of empirical investigation is ignored, anyone can claim anything" (14). Therefore, either all knowledge must be established by science, or knowledge is constrained, if at all, only by cultural convention, not by how the world is.

Trigg begins his defence of philosophy by pointing out how many philosophical assumptions science makes. Three key examples: materialism makes claims that go well beyond the empirical evidence, for it claims that *everything*, including what we have never experienced, is material. It thus becomes a metaphysical claim, requiring philosophical arguments. Second, why, given its phenomenal improbability, is there a universe in which we exist at all? One popular scientific explanation of this claims, roughly, that there are an indefinitely large number of universes, so it becomes very probable that we would evolve in one of them. This claim involves many philosophical issues about whether this claim is really an explanation, about the possibility of other universes, why there are universes at all, and so on. Third, science obviously presupposes rationality, but can it explain this rationality? There seems to be a conflict between the causal determinism science assumes and the type of rational freedom that is required for scientists (and the rest of us) to create and follow arguments, such as the argument that determinism is true.

It would seem that science throws up some inescapable philosophical issues, which cannot be resolved within science. Science is right to adopt certain constraints on the types of entities (materialism) and explanations (determinism) it works with. Trigg terms this 'methodological naturalism' (27), and notes it is not a claim about the nature of reality nor the foundations of *all* knowledge.

From here, Trigg turns to argue that to retreat to the claim that reality is therefore whatever we make it (relativism) is self-contradictory. We must sustain a distinction between people's beliefs about reality and reality itself to make any claims about truth. The claim that truth is dependent upon belief, if true, is only true for those who believe it – so it ceases to be a claim about belief and truth in general! Of course, there is a more sophisticated form of relativism that points to the dependence of our conception of reality upon our language (this is the 'Sapir-Whorf' hypothesis, presented by US anthropologists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf). In its strong form, it argues that not only do different languages support different conceptions of reality, but that no 'neutral' conception of reality can be formed. The difficulty with this conclusion, Trigg claims, is that it fails to explain translation and the common everyday constraints on all human experience (such as the presence and solidity of physical objects). Finally, relativism presupposes there are alternative views of the world, but a thorough-going relativist should not be able to step back from his or her

linguistically-saturated conception of reality to conceive of the alternatives. If stepping back is possible, then rationality and thought are not entirely conditioned by language and circumstance. We can therefore form a conception of reality that transcends these limits and so separate reality from what we believe about reality. So relativism is false.

With this fairly swift dismissal of relativism, Trigg considers the problem of scientism in greater depth. There are chapters on the neo-Darwinist attempt to explain rationality, determinism, the nature of the laws of nature, and the relation between mind and brain. Each is a reflection of the fundamental question “how can reason, necessarily presupposed by science, be explained within the scientific picture of the world?” Trigg argues that reasoning is irreducible, that evolutionary and causal accounts fail, since they must presuppose reason is an *autonomous* activity aiming at *truth*. He concludes “Philosophy matters if we think reason matters” (138), for it is philosophy that tests the rationality of our beliefs and the assumptions made by science. And we must think reason matters, because if reason is an illusion, a mere effect of causal processes, the arguments that it is an illusion could not be made.

Trigg’s writing is forthright, free of technicalities, and he provides a helpful glossary of those terms that one cannot avoid using in these discussions. His approach enables him to get into deep philosophical questions very quickly, and his discussions are an admirable account of philosophical controversies raging at present. For those already familiar with the issues, reading Trigg’s book may offer helpful clarity and useful synopsis, but it is unlikely to provide much new material. Its aim is clearly to reach those who are new to the area, such as undergraduates and (that ill-defined individual) the interested layperson, who should find it an appealing introduction.

The book serves more as a warning than an answer, which is its intention. It is a call to engage in philosophy, but does not seek to provide philosophical solutions to the very difficult problems it tackles. This is understandable, but it points towards a different type of ill that many believe afflicts philosophy as a discipline, viz. the lack of genuine solutions that can command universal assent. And this, I believe, is one of the motivations for the scientism and relativism Trigg discusses. Given that Trigg is clearly seeking to undermine our temptation towards either positions, it is a shame that he does not tackle this challenge head on. The reader could well be left with a sense that Trigg has established just how difficult these questions are, but also with the sense that philosophy has done little to resolve them. From this, one might conclude that either our faith is better placed in a scientific research programme to deliver whatever answers there may be, and/or that we should abandon the hope of ‘truth’ on these matters, diagnosing all beliefs that go beyond science as subjective or relative. If I am right, Trigg has left untouched a fundamental challenge to the view that philosophy matters.

Trigg has argued forcefully that we should not abandon philosophy, for no other discipline can address the questions it addresses; and yet, do we have good reason to believe that doing philosophy will help us understand, in more than the broadest of brushstrokes, the nature of reality? On the penultimate page, Trigg claims “Without a self-conscious understanding of what we are about, we are liable to think and act uncritically, in ways that can be ultimately disastrous. If we do not know who we are, or where we are, how can we act with any autonomy or consistency, let alone wisdom?” (142) This book establishes that these are ultimately philosophical, not scientific, questions; but it does not establish that they are answerable questions. This suggests that we may still lack the “self-conscious understanding” Trigg argues is necessary for autonomous, consistent, wise action. Alternatively, if we can act

autonomously, consistently, and wisely, but we have not successfully resolved philosophical questions, then what is it that philosophy is meant to contribute to our lives?

This line of argument makes an assumption which is highly questionable, viz. that there needs to be some *positive* content to the self-conscious understanding to which Trigg refers. Given the challenges of scientism and relativism that are so prevalent in the current intellectual climate, perhaps to avoid certain ways of heteronomous, inconsistent, and foolish action that may tempt us, ways that assimilate us to machines, for instance, we need understand no more than this: that certain questions are irreducibly philosophical, for this in itself tells us something important about who we are, and certainly something important about what we are not. We are beings for whom some questions must remain open, and, as far as we know, this is a unique position to be in. As Trigg never discusses what kind of self-conscious understanding we need, I am not certain that he would endorse this conclusion, but his book contributes to it, and I welcome that result.