



British Philosophical Association

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Dear Shearer

Following our conversation last week, I am writing to you to suggest some rewording of the AHRC's 'core areas', as described on pp.6-7 of the Future Directions consultation document. The BPA's concern is that much of philosophy does not fall within the descriptions of any of the four headings. I have a couple of proposals for rewording the 'History, Thought and Systems of Belief' area, which I'll start with, and then explain why the current wording is inadequate for describing large portions of philosophical enquiry.

Suggested rewording:

History, Thought and Systems of Belief: Research in these areas REVEALS FEATURES OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PEOPLE AND THE NATURAL AND SOCIAL WORLD THEY INHABIT. This includes how people have lived in the past in different environments; how they have expressed themselves in legal, political and popular documents, legislation and texts; and what this tells us about the values they share and where divergence lies. Research in these areas also identifies AND EVALUATES the MORAL, RELIGIOUS, PHILOSOPHICAL [rather than 'spiritual, moral, ethical'] and legal bases of human thought and behaviour.

Rationale:

The overall problem with the current wording is that it focuses exclusively on what people actually think (how they have lived, what values they share, how they express themselves, etc.). This fits very uneasily with a good deal of philosophy, for three reasons.

First, in a lot of philosophy the subject matter is not primarily what people think about something, but the nature of the thing itself. Philosophers worry about the nature of conscious experience, the relationship between the mind and the body, whether God

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exists, how to make sense of the nature of the world as revealed by quantum mechanics, and so on. Of course what people (philosophers and non-philosophers) believe about these things can play a role, but it does not constitute the subject-matter of the enquiry, any more than chemistry is the study of what chemists think about elements, compounds and so on. Hence the suggested addition at the beginning ('reveals features of the relationship between people and the natural and social world that they inhabit').

Second, a lot of philosophy is normative: the subject matter is not, again, what people think, but what they *ought* to think. We have added 'evaluates' to the last sentence indicate this normative aspect of philosophy.

Third, philosophy does not confine itself to the ethical (or indeed 'spiritual') bases of human thought and behaviour. Epistemology, for instance – one of the core areas of philosophy – concerns how we ought to proceed in our attempts to find out about the world: what constitutes justification for a belief, what we can genuinely be said to know, whether scientific progress amounts to knowing more about the underlying nature of the world or merely inventing better tools for building bridges and curing patients, and so on. Epistemology thus identifies and evaluates 'bases of human thought', but not specifically its spiritual, moral or ethical bases. We have therefore also substituted 'moral, religious, philosophical' for 'spiritual, moral, ethical' to cover those areas of philosophy that are excluded by the current wording.

We hope that you will find the proposed amendments satisfactory; if not, I would of course be happy to discuss this with you further.

With best wishes



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