The Importance of Philosophy in our Days
Dialogue between Tudor Petcu and Peter Simons[*]

1.)   First of all, I think we should focus on the general idea of *philosophy*, so that we can talk about the significance of philosophy in the contemporary society. We know very well that there are a lot of philosophical disciplines, a lot of perspectives, but how should we understand, from your point of view, the philosophy itself as a discipline?

Philosophy is and remains what it always has been since its origins in Ancient Greece and elsewhere: the attempt to formulate, understand, explain and apply the first principles and fundamental concepts embodied in our knowledge and action. The difference between contemporary philosophy and philosophy in earlier times lies in good part in its institutionalization in Philosophy Departments in universities, and the concomitant professionalization of the discipline, which have increased the rigour of the subject but also distorted its relationship to society and other disciplines by rendering it increasingly esoteric. As a result of the post-war explosion in tertiary education, there are more philosophers than ever before: I once calculated that of all the people calling themselves philosophers that have ever existed in the world to date, more than half are alive now. That gives rise to an increasingly inward-looking community where success and failure is independent of engagement with wider scientific and societal issues. That is not a good thing.

In part as a result of this relative lack of engagement, some authoritative people, such as the physicist Stephen Hawking, claim that philosophy is dead and that we should look to natural science instead as our source of new knowledge and insight. Of course philosophy no longer pretends to be a science in the same way as physics or zoology, but Hawking is wrong. Great scientists such as Newton, Darwin, Mach, Einstein and Schrödinger straddled the boundaries to philosophy, and experience tells us that where philosophers don't look critically at foundational issues, others step in and do it for them, generally without the same precision and caution. I am thinking of retired scientists and business people, and other amateur enthusiasts who wrongly think that philosophy has no standards and no consensus, so anything goes. No it doesn't. Philosophy may not be a source of positive knowledge, but it still requires

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discipline and training if it is to be done well, and it still retains its critical and constructive role, even if many professionals distractedly forget this.

    2.) Philosophy had in its entire history a huge importance in determining social, ethical and political changes, so we can say that philosophy has been a necessity for the society. On the other hand, now we are living in a society based on a lot of principles and values considered by some theorists as being pragmatic. I'm not sure if this term "pragmatic society" is apt, but I would be tempted to discuss it. So, how would you characterize, how would you describe the so called "pragmatic society" and which could be the main role of philosophy in such a society?

    I have not come across the term 'pragmatic society' but I have a rough idea of what is meant. It is I suppose a society where theory and ideology play a diminished role in the life of individuals and communities in comparison to matters of individual wellbeing. In the past, the existential uncertainties of life and death, poverty, famine, war and illness loomed larger than they do today, thanks to medical, economic and technological advance. The great ideological divides of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are either behind us or so muted as to be insignificant. Nationalism bred war; the communist experiment was a failure. In the West at least, there is a broad consensus that society should be based on market capitalism and liberal democracy. Political parties differ in emphasis rather than fundamental ideology. Modern Western society is largely secular and areligious. Even the more extreme forms of religious fundamentalism are symptoms of the wider erosion of conviction based on supernatural authority.

    As to the role of philosophy in such a society, it *should* be enhanced by comparison with earlier, because the old sources of authority—religion and tradition—are no longer credible, and again the philosopher by training is best suited to play a critical and constructive part in informing and shaping the way such a society should be and should develop. Philosophy however cannot and should not undertake to replace old certainties with new ones. It should be more modest, honest and credible than that. Bertrand Russell wrote in *The History of Western Philosophy*, "To teach how to live without certainty, and yet without being paralysed by hesitation, is perhaps the chief thing that philosophy, in our age, can do for those who study it." As a motto for today's use of philosophy, that cannot be improved upon. Consider ethics, investigating the principles, concepts and applications of the notion of right and wrong action. In the past this was largely handed down by whatever religion was dominant in a society, and in some parts of the world, from Tehran to Texas, this still holds. So one

might expect philosophy to step into the breach. But even the most superficial examination of contemporary philosophical writing shows a disconcerting lack of consensus: utilitarians, Kantians, Aristotelian virtue-ethicists, Stoics and others vie for position in explaining the basis of ethics. So far, so uncertain. Yet when it comes to the application to real questions such as war, euthanasia, poverty, abortion, capital punishment and so on, an equally stunning convergence can be found. It is not complete, but it is reassuring. Does that mean philosophical reflection on morality is useless or out of date? By no means. It simply means that more work is required, more input from scientific psychology, more understanding of the sources of value, and—though it is hard for a professional to say this—less careerist concern to rush into print with what strikes its author as "The One True Theory".

3.) In my first question I have made reference to the fact that there are a lot of philosophical disciplines and one of the most important disciplines is called "metaphysics". From this point of view I would like to put you the following question: would metaphysics be necessary for a right-minded philosophical understanding of the contemporary society, characterized by a lot of technological revolutions?

I like this question because I regard myself as first and foremost a metaphysician and feel directly addressed by it. I may say I am also pleased that metaphysics is described as "one of the most important disciplines", and indeed I consider it to be the single most important subdiscipline of philosophy. Metaphysics applies the basic tasks of philosophy to the ontological question of what exists in the world, and as such provides the framework for everything else in science and in philosophy, or at least tries to do so. Metaphysics has frequently and erroneously been pronounced dead, but its current astonishing revival carries dangers too, leading me to worry that incautious enthusiasts will cause it to reacquire the bad reputation for *a priori*, unscientific abstraction and *Weltabgewandtheit* that it often richly deserved. Attention to contemporary science, common sense, the need for application, and the usual caution about pronouncing final solutions, are all required, and the esoteric culture of the discipline mentioned above is not helping.

However, to return to your question, the answer is an unequivocal "Yes". Metaphysics can be useful in understanding our contemporary technological society. Modern technology has impinged on our modes of living in ways which we are struggling to assimilate and understand. The use of computers, the internet, mobile devices, cheap long-distance travel, social media and so on are changing human societies and interactions in ways we

have yet fully to fathom. The boundary between oneself and the environing world is less obvious than before. Smartphones supplement our memories and senses, they remind us of appointments, inform us when transport is late, advise on stock-market trends, allow us to move money, book flights, and talk to others from mountain-tops or the stratosphere as well as from home and on the street, host our reading matter, bank balance and medical data. Our nearest and dearest are no longer in the same house or city, but across the world and yet in instant contact. People talk and text on the street to others half a world away and are no longer thought odd to be talking out loud in public to no one visible. Social media, blogs and chatrooms give people "friends" they have never met and never will, one's closest colleagues are scattered across the globe. Social proximity is no longer geographically dictated.

Yet in all this, what has changed? The "new media" are different in immediacy and reach, but not in kind from letters, telegrams and telephones, and indeed mimic these in their operation. Online encyclopedias resemble print encyclopedias, books and music are downloaded rather than bought in shops, but the principles and the end-users and producers remain the same. Air travel is quicker than sea or land travel, but the starting points and destinations are as before. Philosophers can bring a sense of proportion and historical depth to this, under the motto of Douglas Adams: "Don't panic!" This is not to say that even more astonishing changes will take place, but it cautions against either undue pessimism or uncritical "gee-whiz" enthusiasm. Keep calm and carry on innovating.

4.) Many thinkers have spoken about the differences between science and philosophy, but if we want to talk about such a subject, I think we shouldn't forget a very important aspect: science is evolving on and on without reexamining its own history (maybe that's why there is such a moral crisis), but philosophy has the tendency to revalue its own history. Do you agree with this perspective, do you think is this the difference between science and philosophy? And if philosophy is reevaluating its history, its ideas, can we say that by doing this philosophy is able to eliminate the moral crisis? And I wouldn't take into account only the moral crisis, but also the crisis of ideas.

I agree that science doesn't dwell on its history as philosophy does, and there are reasons for this. Progress in science is more nearly monotonic and cumulative than in philosophy. We rightly no longer believe in the fixity of species, the geocentric universe, or the four humours. Old theories do get revived and revamped from time to time: the atomic theory and the corpuscular theory of light are two examples, but, as in fashion, the old is

never exactly replicated. Science however absorbs and incorporates its successful past history, so it is not without historical depth. As an undergraduate mathematician, I was told in the first lecture my degree study would take me from the seventeenth century to the twentieth, and that was right. We still used the ideas Newton, Euler, Hamilton, Galois and Lebesgue, and mentioned them by name, but did not examine their ideas in their original and largely inaccessible original context. Likewise in science it is modern textbooks that replace the greats of the past for the new generation of students.

In philosophy, the past holds lessons for us now because there is less evidence of progress and improvement. When genuine progress begins to take place, it generally hives off and becomes a new science, such as psychology, linguistics or cognitive science. In part that is because the problems philosophy faces are less obvious and more intractable than those of science. Nevertheless, though falsification in philosophy is slow, indirect and hard, there is some progress in philosophy. The tools of modern logic, wrought in the attempt to grasp the (philosophical!) foundations of mathematics, have given philosophers much greater scope for addressing difficult conceptual problems. Attention to linguistic subtleties, provided it is not made an end in itself, enhances conceptual clarity in addressing difficult questions. Some positions, such as Parmenidean monism, epistemological idealism, and radical scepticism, are clearly of the past and behind us, even if a few contemporary representatives can be found battling against the tide and the evidence. Philosophy, most especially that deriving from what is called the analytic tradition, does have standards of intellectual rigour, clarity and integrity. In this it contrasts prominently with trendy pseudoscientific charlatans who proffer cute wordplay and deep-sounding nonsense in place of reason and argument, and who excite feuilleton readers and artists more than do the sane and mundane considerations of less pretentious philosophers.

On whether philosophy can and should help to offer a way out of the crises of morals and ideas, my answer is a qualified "Yes". On moral matters, I already gave an answer in response to question 2. I do not think philosophy is uniquely or predominantly capable of eliminating the uncertainty about morality. Long historical experience tells us that dramatic events like wars, famines and other catastrophes have a far greater purchase on the human imagination than the calm pronouncements of reasonable philosophers. It was after all the philosopher David Hume who taught us, long before Freud, that people are moved by passion, not by reason. So I am cautious to pessimistic about the prospects of philosophy as a force for change.

As to a "crisis in ideas", I am unsure what this means. The term 'crisis' reminds me that in the 1930s the leading German philosopher

Edmund Husserl wrote a book on what he called "the crisis of the European sciences". Husserl was just plain wrong that there was such a crisis. European science was doing just fine on many counts, and that included European philosophy. What European crisis there was was economic and political: depression, fascism and bolshevism, racism versus humanism, nationalism versus cosmopolitanism, the weakness of European democracy. Husserl's solution was tellingly not political but philosophical: it was to recognise his own philosophy, transcendental phenomenology, as the answer. I think his was the wrong answer too: idealism is no remedy for problems whether of science or of society; only a more discerning realism will serve. Nor do I think contemporary science is in crisis, though there are unsolved problems, such as how to reconcile quantum theory with relativity theory. That is a task for trained scientists: most philosophers can at best look on and shout encouragement from the sidelines.

There are practical and maybe even existential crises facing humanity: overpopulation, climate change and the rise in religious intolerance. They should not be underestimated, but philosophers can play only a minor role in keeping people aware and honest in facing them, for example in exposing the fallacies in arguments of climate change deniers, or the perils of basing morality on the supernatural.

Perhaps after all the deepest remaining crisis of ideas is that of seeing our way clear to a moral and political theory that is fit for our time, given the demise of the old authorities. It cannot be said philosophers have been slow to respond. From as early as the seventeenth century, philosophers like Locke, Hume, and Kant and their many later successors have grappled with the question of how a just and moral society can be based on sensible, rational, secular principles. The distance we perceive to their Enlightenment perspective is one not of lack of sympathy for their aims, but our cold recognition of the feebleness of reason in the face of passion and tradition. As philosophers, we have to accept this and consider together how to overcome it.