

History of Philosophy

81 Philosophy Today and Tomorrow

By Dr. Arthur Holmes of Wheaton College

Abstract:

In this lecture, Dr. Arthur Holmes provides a retrospective and forward-looking analysis of the **modern philosophical landscape**. He identifies a persistent divide between the **analytic traditions** of the English-speaking world and the **phenomenological styles** of continental Europe, though he notes that these categories are becoming increasingly fluid. A significant portion of the discussion highlights the **resurgence of Christian theism**, particularly within the philosophy of religion, marking a shift away from the mid-century dominance of **scientific naturalism**. Holmes also examines the rise of **applied ethics** and the challenges posed by **postmodern anti-realism**, which he views as a contemporary reimagining of ancient skepticism. Ultimately, he encourages students to view philosophy as an **exploratory, perspectival process** rather than a finished product. He concludes by emphasizing the importance of **intellectual stewardship**, urging future thinkers to maintain a holistic, Christian presence across diverse specialized fields.

Briefing Document:

Philosophy Today and Tomorrow: Current Trends and Future Directions

Executive Summary

The contemporary philosophical landscape is defined by a historical divide between Continental phenomenology and Anglo-American analytic traditions, though both are currently undergoing significant internal shifts. While scientific naturalism remains the dominant worldview in Western academia, Christian theism has achieved a remarkable resurgence, particularly within the philosophy of religion where it now occupies a "cutting edge" position.

Key developments include a transition from meta-ethical inquiry to applied ethics, a self-sustaining revival of metaphysics focusing on the mind-body problem, and the

emergence of virtue ethics as a bridge between philosophical and theological concerns. Postmodernism, characterized by various forms of anti-realism, is identified as a significant contemporary challenge, though it is framed as a modern iteration of historical skepticism rather than a permanent paradigm shift. The future of the discipline depends on "intellectual stewardship," requiring a holistic, perspectival approach to emerging issues in science, metaphysics, and aesthetics.

The Methodological Divide: Analytic vs. Continental Thought

Current philosophy is characterized by a persistent split between two primary traditions. Despite some "bridge-building" efforts, these schools often operate with a lack of mutual understanding and respect.

1. Analytic Philosophy (Anglo-American)

- **Evolution of the Term:** The term "analytic" has broadened significantly. It no longer refers strictly to Russell's logical analysis or ordinary language analysis. It now encompasses any philosophy that "tries to analyze concepts and analyze arguments" with minute attention to detail.
- **Methodology:** This tradition is characterized by amassing arguments and reasons for and against specific conclusions.
- **Dominance:** Most philosophy departments in the United States are overwhelmingly analytic.

2. Continental Philosophy (Phenomenological)

- **Methodology:** The phenomenological tradition focuses on description rather than the construction of deductive arguments. The goal is for truth to "show itself" through the descriptive process.
- **Presence:** While less prevalent in the U.S. than the analytic tradition, it maintains strongholds at institutions like Duquesne University and SUNY Stony Brook.

3. Efforts at Integration

- Notable figures attempting to bridge the divide include:

- **Richard Rorty:** His work *Philosophy in the Mirror of Nature* draws from both traditions (e.g., Wittgenstein, Gadamer, Foucault).
 - **Hubert Dreyfus:** Known for interacting across both camps from Berkeley.
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The Resurgence of Christian Theism

A major shift in the "general position" of Western thought has occurred since the mid-20th century, particularly regarding the tension between scientific naturalism and theism.

- **From Secularization to Dominance:** In the 1950s, theism was often dismissed as "couldn't possibly be true." Today, Christian theism is the dominant philosophy within the philosophy of religion in Anglo-American thought.
 - **Key Figures:** The professional standing of Christian philosophers is evidenced by the election of several as presidents of the American Philosophical Association (Central Division), including Alvin Plantinga, William Alston, Alan Donegan, and Nicholas Wolterstorff.
 - **Influence Beyond Religion:** While dominant in the philosophy of religion, theistic influence is also present in metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, though scientific naturalism remains the broader university-wide standard.
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Postmodernism and Anti-Realism

Postmodernism is identified as a key issue for the coming decades, though its long-term dominance is doubted.

- **Manifestations:** Postmodernism appears as "anti-realism" across several sub-disciplines:
 - Philosophy of science and ethics.
 - Epistemology (notably through Richard Rorty).

- Theology (where it is currently more prevalent than in the philosophy of religion).
- **Historical Context:** Postmodernism is described as "old hat with new trim," a contemporary resurrection of the long history of skepticism and relativism dating back to the Greek and Roman skeptics.
- **The Organic Model:** Unlike the Newtonian science model that influenced Hume's skepticism, postmodernism relies on an "organic model" emphasizing the interdependence of race, sex, and socioeconomic class in determining philosophy.

Revival of Metaphysics and the Evolution of Ethics

The Return of Metaphysics

- **Self-Sustaining Growth:** Metaphysics, once dismissed as "meaningless" by positivists, has seen a resurgence. While initially revived by developments in the philosophy of language, it is now a self-sustaining field.
- **Focus Areas:** The "mind-body problem" is a primary area of inquiry, with defenders of mind-body dualism, such as Richard Swinburne, gaining prominence.

The Shift in Ethical Inquiry

- **From Meta-ethics to Applied Ethics:** For the first half of the 20th century, ethics focused on "meta-ethical" concerns (the meaning of ethical terms). Following the activism of the 1960s, there has been a massive return to "applied ethics."
- **Applied Fields:** This is currently the "biggest philosophical industry," encompassing business ethics, bioethics, media ethics, and social ethics (e.g., the ethics of war).
- **Virtue Ethics:** Precipitated by Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, this movement shifts the focus from decision-making principles to the development of character. This provides a bridge for Christian thinkers (like

Bob Roberts) to integrate concepts of human nature, sin, and grace into philosophical analysis.

Defining the Future of Christian Philosophy

The document outlines a four-fold characterization for the future of Christian engagement in philosophy:

Characteristic Description

Perspectival	Philosophers should be "straightforward" about their starting points, avoiding the "self-deception" of total neutrality while acknowledging how beliefs, attitudes, and values guide their thinking.
Exploratory	Philosophy is a "process, not a finished product." It is an ongoing historical dialogue that must address new issues as they arise.
Pluralistic	Diversity in methods and theological traditions is healthy, acting as a self-corrective measure against "lopsided" human thinking.
Holistic	Philosophers should work with the "whole picture" (the Christian worldview) in mind rather than maintaining narrow "tunnel vision" in sub-disciplines.

Strategic Recommendations for Future Study

To ensure a balanced "stewardship" of intellectual gifts, the document suggests that future philosophers should move beyond the over-saturated field of philosophy of religion and focus on neglected areas:

1. **Metaphysics**
2. **Philosophy of Science**
3. **Aesthetic Theory** (identified as the "most neglected of all the philosophical fields").

Ultimately, the future of philosophy is "indeterminate" and "in the making," shaped by the contributions of individuals acting within their historical context.

Study Guide:

Philosophy Today and Tomorrow: A Comprehensive Study Guide

This study guide provides an overview of the contemporary philosophical landscape, the evolution of major traditions, and the role of Christian thought within the discipline, as outlined by Dr. Arthur Holmes.

Part I: Review Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided text.

1. **How does Dr. Holmes distinguish between the methodologies of phenomenology and analytic philosophy?** Phenomenologists tend to use descriptive methods, believing that truth reveals itself once an object or concept is accurately described. In contrast, analytic philosophers focus on amassing arguments and reasons for and against a position to draw logical conclusions.
2. **According to the text, how has the definition of "analytic philosophy" changed over time?** The term has loosened from its narrow origins in Russell's logical analysis or ordinary language analysis to refer to virtually any philosophy that analyzes concepts and arguments in detail. It is now characterized more by a style of minute attention to issues rather than a specific set of rigid empirical doctrines.
3. **What is the current state of professional relations between analytic and phenomenological traditions in the United States?** The two traditions often suffer from a lack of mutual understanding and respect, leading to a politicized and divided profession. While most U.S. departments are overwhelmingly analytic, a few remain primarily phenomenological, and very few individuals or departments successfully bridge the gap between the two.
4. **How has the status of Christian theism in the philosophy of religion evolved since the 1950s?** In the 1950s, Christian theism was often met with

skepticism or outright dismissal by the philosophical establishment. Today, it has become the dominant perspective in the philosophy of religion, with Christian thinkers frequently defining the cutting edge of the discipline and serving as presidents of major philosophical associations.

5. **Why does Dr. Holmes characterize postmodernism as "old hat with new trim"?** He views postmodernism, with its emphasis on anti-realism and relativism, as a recurrence of skepticism that has appeared throughout the history of philosophy. He argues that while it may be a key issue for a few decades, its roots in ancient epistemological skepticism prevent it from being a truly "new" or revolutionary takeover.
6. **What caused the shift from meta-ethics back to applied ethics in the mid-20th century?** The shift was driven by the social activism of the 1960s, particularly the moral dilemmas surrounding the Vietnam War, which forced a return to practical moral questioning. This followed a period dominated by meta-ethics, which focused narrowly on the meaning of ethical terms rather than actual moral decision-making.
7. **How does Dr. Holmes define "Virtue Ethics" in the context of recent philosophical developments?** Virtue ethics, revitalized by figures like Alasdair MacIntyre, marks a return to the Aristotelian tradition by focusing on the development of moral character rather than just principles of decision-making. This approach bridges the gap between philosophical and theological ethics by addressing the "dynamics of the moral life," including concepts like sin and grace.
8. **What is the distinction Dr. Holmes makes between a "presupposition" and a "perspective" in Christian philosophy?** He avoids "presupposition" because it implies a deductive, foundationalist premise that might not be indubitable. Instead, "perspective" suggests a framework of articulated beliefs, attitudes, and values that guide the selective and thinking processes of a philosopher.
9. **Why does Dr. Holmes advocate for a "pluralistic" approach to Christian philosophy?** He believes diversity within the Christian tradition is healthy because the built-in critical process of disagreement keeps thinkers self-

corrective and modest. Pluralism prevents the tradition from becoming lopsided and encourages ongoing intellectual growth.

10. **What is the significance of "holism" for a Christian philosopher?** Holism requires a philosopher to look at specific sub-disciplines through the lens of a total Christian worldview rather than working with "tunnel vision." This comprehensive view helps guide the philosopher in selecting which strategic problems to address for the benefit of the larger enterprise of Christian thought.

Part II: Answer Key

1. **Phenomenology vs. Analytic:** Phenomenology describes to reveal truth; Analytic amasses arguments/reasons to conclude.
2. **Broadening of Analytic:** Shifted from narrow logical/language analysis to any detailed analysis of concepts and arguments.
3. **Professional Relations:** Divided/politicized; little mutual respect; departments usually favor one side (mostly analytic) with only "token" representation of the other.
4. **Christian Theism Evolution:** Moved from a marginalized position in the 1950s to a dominant, "cutting edge" position in the philosophy of religion today.
5. **Postmodernism as "Old Hat":** It is a modern manifestation of long-standing skeptical and relativist traditions dating back to the Sophists and Hume.
6. **Return to Applied Ethics:** 1960s activism (e.g., Vietnam War) moved the focus from the meaning of terms (meta-ethics) to practical decision-making (applied ethics).
7. **Virtue Ethics:** A return to Aristotelian focus on character (virtue) and the moral life's dynamics, allowing for better integration of theological concepts.
8. **Perspective vs. Presupposition:** Perspective is a guided framework of values/beliefs; presupposition is a deductive/foundational premise.

9. **Pluralistic Approach:** Disagreement fosters self-criticism, prevents lopsidedness, and encourages a healthy, self-corrective thinking process.
 10. **Holism:** Prevents "tunnel vision" by ensuring specific work is guided by the overarching Christian worldview and strategic stewardship.
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Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the themes discussed in the source context to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Methodological Divide:** Analyze the historical and contemporary differences between Continental and English-speaking philosophy. How do their differing intentions regarding description versus argument shape the way they approach "truth"?
 2. **The Resurgence of Theism:** Explore the transition of Christian theism from a marginalized view in the 1950s to a dominant force in modern philosophy of religion. What specific figures and organizational shifts illustrate this change?
 3. **Postmodernism and Realism:** Evaluate Dr. Holmes' critique of postmodernism as a form of "Easter resurrection" of old skepticism. To what extent does the text suggest that postmodern anti-realism will impact the future dominance of scientific naturalism?
 4. **The Evolution of Ethics:** Discuss the transition from meta-ethics to applied ethics and the subsequent rise of virtue ethics. How did historical events and specific philosophical publications (e.g., MacIntyre's *After Virtue*) influence these shifts?
 5. **The Nature of Christian Philosophy:** Dr. Holmes defines Christian philosophy as perspectival, exploratory, pluralistic, and holistic. Detail each of these four characteristics and explain how they differentiate his vision of philosophy from a strictly "neutral" or "foundationalist" approach.
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Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Analytic Philosophy	Broadly, any philosophy that focuses on the detailed analysis of concepts and arguments; traditionally associated with the English-speaking world.
Anti-realism	A manifestation of postmodern thought appearing in science, ethics, and epistemology that challenges objective reality or fixed truths.
Applied Ethics	A branch of ethics focusing on practical moral decision-making in specific fields such as business, medicine, and war.
Christian Theism	A philosophical position asserting the existence of a personal God; currently the dominant framework in the philosophy of religion.
Foundationalism	A model of thought where philosophy is built upon indubitable premises or "presuppositions" to form a deductive system.
History of Ideas	A field distinct from philosophy that focuses on the chronological study of human thought and its past manifestations.
Holism	In a philosophical context, the practice of thinking with the "whole picture" or a total worldview in mind, rather than focusing on isolated sub-disciplines.
Meta-ethics	The study of the meaning of ethical terms and the nature of moral judgments, rather than the practical application of moral principles.
Phenomenology	A continental European tradition that focuses on describing experiences and concepts to allow truth to show itself.
Scientific Naturalism	A general position in Western thought that prioritizes scientific knowledge as the only bona fide variety of knowledge; often equated with secular humanism.

Virtue Ethics

An approach to ethics, rooted in the Aristotelian tradition, that emphasizes the development of moral character and the internal dynamics of the moral life.