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CHAPTER ONE: WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

Four ways of getting at the meaning and nature of philosophy may be proposed. The first is to look at the word itself. "Philosophy" comes from a Greek word that means "love of wisdom." It was first used by the ancient Greek thinker Pythagoras (about 600 B.C.), who likened philosophers—pursuers of wisdom—to spectators at ancient games: To be sure, something of the spirit and character of philosophy is suggested in this way by the very meaning of the word—but not much. We must know more about this "pursuit of wisdom."

THE MAIN FIELDS OF PHILOSOPHY

The second approach to the meaning of philosophy from a different standpoint—namely, from the standpoint of its several fields or areas of investigation. Not all lists of the fields of philosophy agree, but most of them would almost certainly include four: metaphysics, epistemology, value theory, and logic. Some of these terms may seem to be taken from a foreign language, but they are not as difficult as they sound.

Metaphysics means, usually, the study or theory of reality. The question of metaphysics is, What is reality? What is real? This involves, of course, many related questions, such as, Is reality some kind of "thing"? Is it one or is it many? If it is one, then how is it related to the many things around us? Can ultimate reality be grasped by the five senses, or is it supernatural or transcendent? And so on. It should be mentioned that sometimes the word "metaphysics" is used in a narrower way to concern only transcendent reality—that is, reality that lies beyond the physical world and cannot therefore be grasped by means of the senses. Therefore supernaturalists do metaphysics in the first sense because they raise the question of reality, and they do metaphysics also in the narrower sense because they believe in supernatural or transcendent reality—say, God. On the other hand, materialists do metaphysics in the first sense because they too raise the question of reality, but their belief is not metaphysical in the narrower sense because they deny that anything is real except matter.

Epistemology is the study or theory of knowledge. The question of epistemology is, What is knowledge? What does it mean "to know"? This too implies many other questions, such as, How is knowledge acquired? What, if anything, do the senses contribute to knowledge? What does reason contribute? Can we be really certain of anything? What is truth? Some philosophers think that the fields of metaphysics and epistemology are, in a way, the pillars of all the rest. Why would one say this? Are the questions, What is real? And how can I know it?, in some sense the most basic questions of all? Is it possible that how you answer these questions will determine your whole philosophical outlook?

Axiology/Value-theory is, obviously, the study of value. The question here is, What is value? It should be noted that this question does not involve any particular sort of value, but value of all

sorts—the value of tables, steaks, political ideologies, laws, actions. Most philosophers study value-theory in one of its subfields, where the focus is on a particular sort of value. Ethics is concerned with value as it applies to personal actions, decisions, and relations; it is concerned with moral value. Ethics raises questions such as, What is morally good? What is right? Are there any absolute or universal moral principles? Does the end ever justify the means? Am I my brother's keeper? Closely related to ethics is the study of social and political values, the values that determine the principles and institutions of our life together in society and the state. Questions here include, What is justice? What is the basis of political authority? Which form of government is best? What rights do individuals possess? A third specific type of value-theory is aesthetics, which studies the values involved in art and our experience of beauty. It raises the questions, What is beauty? What is art? Are there any objective standards by which artistic works may be judged (or is beauty in the eye of the beholder)? Ethics, social/political philosophy, and aesthetics are all properly subfields of value-theory, but are more commonly studied than the question of value as such.

Logic is the study of the principles of reasoning. The question of logic is, What are the principles of right reasoning? We have saved logic for last, since traditionally it stands in a somewhat different relation to the philosopher than the other fields do. The other fields suggest something that is studied by the philosopher—reality, knowledge, value, and the like. Logic is a tool philosophers employ as they set about to investigate these issues.

This was recognized already in antiquity. Aristotle was the first to formulate in a systematic way the principles of right reasoning, and the writings in which he did this (his "logical" writings) came to be called the Organon, which in Greek means "instrument" or "tool." This view of logic as a tool has, however, changed somewhat in recent years. With the rise of mathematical and symbolic logic, logic itself has become for many a proper object of philosophical study.

When we distinguish in this way the several fields of philosophy, we suggest something of the diversity of philosophical questions: the question of reality, the question of knowledge, the question of morality, and so on.

But the questions posed by these various fields cannot, after all, be so neatly separated. In many ways these questions (and their answers) rise and fall together. Do not the questions of value-theory bear directly upon ethics, aesthetics, and metaphysics itself? Would not one's theory of reality (for example, one's affirmation or denial of God) probably hold implications for one's view of morality, knowledge, and reality? Would not the opinion that there is no certain knowledge whatsoever cast a certain light—or darkness—over all questions of reality, value, or anything else? In this way we must emphasize also the unity of philosophical questions.

• *Metaphysics: The study of reality (sometimes also the study of transcendent reality).*
• *Epistemology: The study of knowledge.*

- *Value-theory: The study of value, including moral, aesthetic, social, and political values.*
- *Logic: The principles of right reasoning.*

SECOND-ORDER INQUIRIES

An ordinary question, such as What is X? is called a first-order question. A question about a first-order question is called a second-order question—for example, What is the meaning of the question, What is X? Second-order questions are also called meta questions, or "talk about talk." Sometimes whole studies can be oriented in the direction of second-order concerns. Thus metaethics is talk about ethical talk. Philosophical areas such as philosophy of religion, philosophy of science, philosophy of law, and philosophy of education tend to be second-order inquiries. On the other hand, it is often difficult to separate talking about talk from the primary talking itself. Why would you raise a second-order issue unless you were interested in the primary issue in the first place?

In addition to the standard fields of philosophy some further areas should be mentioned—namely, where philosophical concern relates itself to other disciplines, the "philosophy of _____" category. Examples are the philosophy of religion, philosophy of science, philosophy of education, and philosophy of law. Here a particular discipline is viewed and treated philosophically; the philosopher is concerned with such issues as the nature of that discipline's subject matter, the adequacy of its methodology, the meaning and clarification of its concepts, its logical coherence, and its relation to and implications for other fields. In the "philosophy of _____" studies, it is sometimes difficult to separate the primary subject (religion, science, education, law) from the secondary questions raised by the philosopher (questions concerning methodology, concepts, logic relations). Nonetheless, it should be clear that the "philosophy of _____" studies are largely second-order studies—that is, studies about studies. If, for example, you ever take a course in the philosophy of science, you won't light any Bunsen burners, collect any specimens, or dissect any frogs. What you will do is think and talk about science. That is, you will analyze the meaning of science, scientific language and concepts, scientific procedures, conclusions, and implications.

It should be noted, though, that in actual usage the distinction between the fields of philosophy and the "philosophy of _____" areas is not hard and fast. Aesthetics, for example, could accurately be represented as the philosophy of art, whereas philosophy of religion would certainly raise, say, the metaphysical issue of God's existence and nature.

PHILOSOPHY AS A RATIONAL, CRITICAL ENTERPRISE

In our third attempt to characterize philosophy we propose something more illuminating than giving the root meaning of the word and something less cumbersome than defining its several fields. And we come to the heart of the matter when we suggest that whatever else it may be, philosophy is a rational and critical enterprise. *Philosophy involves reason, criticism, examination, analysis.*

The word "rational" is important. Sometimes in philosophical discussion the words "rational," "rationalist," and "rationalism" are used with a rather technical meaning. But here we intend these words in a more ordinary and loose sense. They have to do with reason and reasonableness. A rational argument, for example, is one that makes sense, is coherent, and is well founded. A rationalist is a person who is given to argument, investigation, and evaluation. And rationalism is the position that affirms reason as one of the highest authorities—maybe even the highest authority—in matters of belief and conduct. There is, in all of this, a certain critical activity that must not be missed. In being a rational enterprise, philosophy seeks to eradicate from our perspectives every taint and vestige of ignorance, superstition, prejudice, blind acceptance of ideas, and any other form of irrationality. It challenges our ideas, analyzes them, and tests them in light of evidence and arguments. It presses us to coherent and valid expressions of our ideas.

The early Greek philosopher Socrates (ca. 470–399 B.C.) has always been regarded as a kind of symbol of philosophical activity, especially its rational and critical nature. It is no wonder. Socrates was constantly pressing himself and everyone else for clarity and answers. His method was to engage someone over the meaning of some term or idea, usually a moral concept, and then to cross-examine his opponent mercilessly until some progress or clarity was achieved. According to Plato's Apology (an account of Socrates' defense at his trial), Socrates likens himself to a gadfly that incessantly stings and disturbs and challenges the citizenry:

If you put me to death, you will not easily find anyone to take my place. It is literally true, even if it sounds rather comical, that God has specially appointed me to this city, as though it were a large thoroughbred horse which because of its great size is inclined to be lazy and needs the stimulation of some stinging fly. It seems to me that God has attached me to this city to perform the office of such a fly, and all day long I never cease to settle here, there, and everywhere, rousing, persuading, reproving every one of you. You will not easily find another like me, gentlemen, and if you take my advice you will spare my life. I suspect, however, that before long you will awake from your drowsing, and in your annoyance you will take Anytus' advice and finish me off with a single slap, and then you will go on sleeping till the end of your days, unless God in his care for you sends someone to take my place. . . .

It is from this same context that perhaps the most famous line of all philosophical literature comes: "The unexamined life is not worth living":

I tell you that to let no day pass without discussing goodness and all the other subjects about which you hear me talking and examining both myself and others is really the very best thing that a man can do, and that life without this sort of examination is not worth living. . . .3

As in Socrates, the accent in all philosophy clearly falls on reason and criticism. But can everything be reasoned? Must every proposition, idea, and belief be exposed to the searchlight of critical reflection? Some philosophers would answer with a loud Yes. Others would not be so optimistic, insisting that there are limits to the rational and critical enterprise. If true, then this in itself is an important fact about philosophy and must be reckoned with constantly. Many philosophers do in fact recognize that reality and our experience of it are, after all, bigger than philosophy: Not everything can be grasped intellectually; not everything can be reduced to an argument; not everything can be expressed in language. But what happens at the point where reason gives out? Do we simply draw a blank? Some would say that it is at this point that the non-rational too plays a role, and even an inevitable role. But it is important here that we do not confuse "non-rational" with "irrational." That which is irrational is incompatible with general experience or reason itself, whereas that which is non-rational is simply different from and maybe even higher than experience or reason.

If we do believe in non-rational knowledge, what forms might it take? Certainly philosophers disagree among themselves about the possible significance of the claims of intuition in the sense of an immediate and direct apprehension of truth, mystical experience as a transcendent and ecstatic union with ultimate reality, various forms of religious and inner illumination, poetic visions or feelings, and the like. On the other hand, many would agree at least on the inevitable presence of ultimate presuppositions (also called basic assumptions, faith assertions, etc.) that are known with certainty as the foundations of all of our other ideas but that themselves cannot be proved. This view is known as foundationalism. Probably the most common defense of this view is the claim that from a purely logical standpoint not everything can be argued or there would never be an end to the arguing. A long time ago Aristotle pointed out that every argument finally rests on something that cannot be proved, and that it is the mark of an uneducated person not to realize that. There must be, as it were, a last outpost or final court of appeal. Do you believe with foundationalists that every philosophical system or position or argument necessarily rests at some point or other on some idea or ideas that are certain and basic and undemonstrable? If so, then you must believe that here, if no place else, the non-rational too makes a contribution.

A WORKING DEFINITION OF PHILOSOPHY

Perhaps, finally, we may pose a working definition of philosophy, one that does some justice to what we have seen to be both its theme and its variations: ***Philosophy is the attempt to think rationally and critically about the most important questions.***

The theme is that philosophy is a rational and critical activity. Philosophizing in all forms seeks to think and to think hard about something. But about what? Here we have the variation. There are quite differing ideas as to what philosophy should be rational and critical about. Still, even here philosophers have in common that they see themselves as addressing the really important questions, questions that are fundamental to everything.

PHILOSOPHY, RELIGION, AND SCIENCE

If this is what philosophy is, then how does it stand in relation to those two other great enterprises, religion and science? As if we did not already have enough problems, "religion" is a slippery word indeed, as is evident from looking in any dictionary. But two things are clear. **First**, religion has to do with many of the same things philosophy has to do with: ultimate reality, the meaning of life, good and evil, immortality, human nature, and so on. In fact, religion usually involves beliefs about such things and beliefs that are worked out and adhered to in a fairly systematic and fixed manner, though perhaps not in as critical a manner as in philosophy. **Second**, in addition to this intellectual aspect of religion is a more important one, one that concerns not so much the thinking as the willing side of our being. What is really distinctive about religion is the commitment it involves.

It may be helpful to note that this latter aspect of religion is true to the very origin of the word: "Religion" comes from the Latin religare, which means "to bind one thing to another." The religious individual is someone who is personally bound to something. This something is usually understood to be God, and the worship of God and active participation in rituals, ceremonies, and proclamation are further evidence for the existential rather than intellectual character of religion. We might ask, however, whether the object of such commitment must be God. Perhaps the object of such commitment need only be something ultimate—as the German-American theologian Paul Tillich said, one's "ultimate concern." Could this something as easily be a political cause? the pursuit of pleasure? the acquisition of wealth? But then again, Tillich reminds us that some things may be perceived as being ultimate that really are not. Is it possible to be bound "religiously" to something that is not ultimate, to have an idolatrous faith, to be worshipping an idol instead of a real thing? Be that as it may, religion would appear to have mainly to do not so much with our intellects as with our decision, action, worship, and love—not so much with what we think as with what we do.

Science brings us back to the study of something. In fact, our word "science" comes from the Latin scientia, which means simply "knowledge." It was in this sense of the word that it was held (and still is by some) that "theology is the queen of the sciences and philosophy is her hand-maid."

For most people the word has lost this original meaning and is now used sometimes to refer to the social sciences (such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, etc.) but more often to the

natural sciences (such as physics, biology, chemistry, astronomy, etc.). Almost always the words "science" and "scientist" are associated with such things as test tubes, dissections, microscopes, telescopes, periodic charts, nuclear fission chambers, and laboratories occupied by people wearing white jackets.

Taken in this usual sense, science is easily related to philosophy. Like philosophy science is the pursuit of knowledge: It is an intellectual activity and it studies something. Unlike philosophy, however, its focus is much more restricted. Specifically, it narrows its focus to the study of the natural world alone, whereas our experience of nature may be but one aspect of the total reality that interests philosophers. Likewise, the scientific method is more restricted than the philosopher's method may be. Inasmuch as scientists are interested in the world of nature, they naturally employ primarily the tools of observation and experimentation: the test tubes, dissections, microscopes, and telescopes mentioned above.

LOGIC: THE KEY TO PHILOSOPHIZING

But back to philosophy. We have seen that philosophers and careful thinkers strive to make their arguments, positions, and pronouncements rational—that is, well conceived, well evidenced, well stated, and persuasive. To ensure this goal philosophers pay attention to the philosophical discipline of logic, which we have already defined as the study of right reasoning. Not that there is any choice about it. The philosopher, and others who reason critically, can no more do without logic than the physicist can do without mathematics. It is the tool or, as someone has suggested, the "key" to philosophizing.

From the traditional logic first formulated by Aristotle to the various forms of contemporary symbolic and mathematical logic (which seem to many like a foreign language), the science of logic has become a very complicated and sophisticated business. A real course in logic would have to take up many matters: the nature and uses of language, problems of definition, types of propositions, types of arguments, the construction and use of symbolic languages, probability theory, the nature of hypotheses and theories, and so on. We cannot do much here, but a beginner in philosophy should be introduced at least to some of the bare elements of logic, especially arguments and fallacies.

When you see the word "argument" you might think of disagreements or quarrels, often accompanied by shouting, clenched fists, tears, and the like. Well, an argument might or might not involve these things. Consider the following interchange:

A: Capital punishment is immoral.
B: No it isn't!
A: Yes it is!
B: Well, what do you know about it?!

A: I know more about it than you do!
B: Oh yeah? You're an idiot!
There is plenty of disagreement and lots of noise here but no argument. An argument is an attempt to show that something is true by providing evidence for it. More technically, it is a group of statements in which one is said to follow from at least one other. The statement that follows from the others—that is, the "something to be shown"—is called the conclusion; the statements from which the conclusion follows—that is, the evidence—are called premises.

MISCONCEPTION OF PHILOSOPHY: OF BEARDS AND BREAD

A few final observations may be useful for understanding the nature of philosophy. For one thing, "**The beard does not the philosopher make**." In some sense we are all philosophers. We all think and reflect in our own critical way about the questions that matter most to us. Naturally, there are good philosophers and there are bad philosophers—some reason and reflect more critically than others, some are oblivious to the fallacies and mistakes in their reasoning, some are more coherent than others in their philosophical expression, some can give it more time than others, some are professionals while most are amateurs. But everyone asks the important questions and tries, however feebly, to formulate meaningful answers.

Everyone participates, more or less, in the philosophical enterprise. Some would even take philosophical awareness and activity as being constitutive of human nature; that is, philosophical activity is part of what it means to be a human being, or at least a full and healthy human being.

Mind you, it is not just thinking that makes us philosophers, but thinking critically about the biggest things. Aristotle expressed it better than anyone in the very first words of his Metaphysics: "***All men by nature desire to know***". And it is clear from what followed that he meant knowing about the biggest things, about the questions that really matter.

Another important point: "***Philosophy bakes no bread***." Sometimes this saying is intended to express the perception (often true enough) that there is little money in the philosophy business. More often, it is a way of expressing the apparent irrelevance or impracticality or uselessness of philosophy.

It has seemed to many that philosophical concerns are far removed from the everyday world of work, political parties, abortion, love, death, automobiles, euthanasia, radios, capital punishment, bank loans, and the draft. This impression is understandable. Questions about the eternity of the world, the nature of the highest good, whether tables and chairs continue to exist when we leave the room, whether a runner can pass through an infinite number of points in a finite amount of time, how the mind interacts with the body, and how many angels can dance on the head of a pin certainly appear abstract, academic, and remote from the real world. The impression is also very old. Plato tells that Thales, the first philosopher of the Western tradition, was once strolling along

while gazing into the sky and making certain astronomical observations—and fell into a well. Ever since, people have poked fun at philosophers who seem to be so preoccupied with what is above their heads that they have little idea of what is at their feet.

But the idea that philosophers merely think about the world while others live in it obviously involves a misunderstanding of the real nature of philosophy. A moment's thought reveals that the questions that may seem to be the most remote are also the most important. What we think about our own selves, God, the physical universe, value, and the like—and, as we just insisted, we all do think about these things—determines how we actually live in the world, and what we think about things like abortion, politics, euthanasia, capital punishment, death, and the draft. Everything else in our practical lives is dictated in some way by our views about those "remote" things.7 If you doubt this, a little reflection on your activities, commitments, aspirations, and decisions this very day will probably prove it.

SUMMARY

The best way to appreciate what philosophy is about is to philosophize. In the meantime, though, something important can be learned about philosophy through a consideration of the word itself (the "love of wisdom") and its several branches (metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, etc.). In an attempt to emphasize both the essence and the breadth of philosophical activity, we proposed a working definition: Philosophy is the attempt to think rationally and critically about the most important questions. One should always remember Socrates and his challenge, "The unexamined life is not worth living," as embodying the ultimate philosophical concern. On the other hand, it must be admitted that reason has its limits, and what role is to be played by the non-rational (say, ultimate presuppositions) is itself a good philosophical question.

Whatever else philosophers might be interested in, they are surely interested in coherent and persuasive reasoning. Laying down the rules and providing some techniques are the tasks of logic. Still more relevant is the nature of arguments. If philosophers aren't good at arguing, what are they good at? A real argument is a carefully devised piece of reasoning involving premises (what is reasoned from), a conclusion (what is reasoned to), and an inference (the connection that yields the conclusion from the premises). But does the conclusion follow from the premises necessarily or probably? This is the difference between a valid deductive argument, where the conclusion is guaranteed by the premises, and an inductive argument, where the conclusion is supported by the premises.

Among the most important things to be learned from an introduction to logic are the informal fallacies. As opposed to formal fallacies, mistakes with respect to the formal structure of an argument, informal fallacies arise from inattention to the relevance or clarity of language.

Everyone is more or less engaged in the philosophical enterprise, and though philosophical issues may seem at times rather remote, a moment's reflection will reveal that they really are basic and, whether one realizes it or not, they deeply affect our daily lives. Let us, then, make the most of our philosophical impulses by beginning where we are and, by critical reflection, analysis, and clarification, progress if possible to someplace even better.