

The Philosophical Impulse and Where It Leads

At this point, you are doubtless expecting to find a definition of the word ‘philosophy’, an explanation of the subject matter of philosophy, some statement beginning “Philosophy is the study of . . .” Well, one of the peculiarities of philosophy is that it is at best extremely difficult, and at worst impossible, to characterize it in subject-matter terms by giving a useful compact description of what it is about. To put it paradoxically, philosophy is, in its own fashion, about everything. Shortly I shall try to explain this cryptic remark, but there are some things that need to be said first.

Philosophy is, of course, something in which people engage. It is a practice or activity, something people do. And unlike, for instance, digging ditches or playing the fiddle, the practice of philosophy is fundamentally an activity of reason. By itself, however, this says very little, for any number of characteristically human practices are activities of reason. Literature and history and science are all surely activities of reason, but philosophy is neither literature nor history nor science—although it may be literary or historical or even, in an extended sense, scientific. Practicing philosophers typically present their thoughts in written form, but their first order of business is not creative literary expression. They often discuss the views of their historical predecessors in their historical settings, but their first order of business is not the scholarly sorting through of historical materials. And they often advance explanations and theories, but their theorizing is not grounded in and accountable to controlled observation and experiment in the way that the theorizing of scientists is. What, then, is the proper business of philosophers?

Let me try to remind you of something. At one time or another, almost everyone has experienced a certain impulse, and it’s likely that you have too. Typically it comes as a feeling, an intrusion in the everyday routine, a sort of wonderment or unsettling. And often it resolves itself into a vague but suggestive question: Do space and time go on forever? What if there isn’t any God? (Or: What if there *is*?) Is anyone genuinely free? Is anything ever really right or wrong? Are there any absolute truths? Can some works of art really be better than others? And, of course: What is the meaning of life? This is the sort of feeling that Aristotle had in mind when he remarked that philosophy begins in wonder. However inarticulate, the disturbing

sense that there is an important gap in one's understanding of things, a big question that still needs to be answered, is precisely an impulse toward philosophical activity.

Few people go beyond this point. The reason, quite simply, is that they don't know *how* to go beyond it. How does one think about such things? *Can* one think about such things? Perhaps it is just impossible to go beyond this point. The mind boggles. One's thinking flounders, stumbles in circles, grows cramped and knotted. Eventually the moment passes—or is made to pass. Somehow the question gets dismissed. It is postponed or rejected or repressed. And yet the feeling often remains, the frustrating sense that these are after all important questions, questions with important answers. If only one knew how to find those answers!

A practicing philosopher is, among other things, a person who tries to find them. It is part of the proper business of practicing philosophers to get beyond such inchoate feelings and to bring these vague, suggestive, big questions within the scope of an activity of reason, to move them out of the heart and into the mind. It is part of a philosopher's job to transform such questions into something that one can think about—and then to think about them. For such an undertaking, philosophers must have both a general strategy—a method—and particular tactics—techniques for applying that method. And so they do. Philosophy is an activity of reason with its own strategy and its own tactics, its own method and techniques. It is, in short, a *discipline*.

One of the initially most striking features of the philosophical discipline is its academic fragmentation into a multiplicity of diverse *philosophies* of other disciplines. Thus one finds courses of study offered in philosophy of science, philosophy of art, philosophy of religion, philosophy of mathematics, of history, of psychology, of law, of language, and so on through the whole catalog of human intellectual endeavors. Philosophy thus takes on the character of a sort of "second-order" discipline, one which, in some sense, can be about the "first-order" activities of scientists, artists, theologians, mathematicians, historians, psychologists, jurists, linguists, and their many colleagues. If one were to insist on characterizing philosophy in subject-matter terms, one would then need a very broad subject-matter description indeed, something along the lines of "the rational, cognitive, or conceptual activities of persons." Seen in this light, philosophy as an activity is the application of reason to its own operations, the rational study of rational practices. It is in this way that philosophy comes, in its own fashion, to be about everything.

Seen in this light, in fact, philosophy also comes to be about itself. Since it is itself an activity of reason, philosophy falls within the scope of its own field of study; and, indeed, there exists the philosophy of philosophy (*meta*-philosophical inquiry) as well. "What is a proper philosophical question?" and "What is appropriate philosophical methodology?" are themselves two fine examples of proper philosophical questions. And this is yet another reason that it is difficult or even impossible to give a useful compact description of the proper subject-matter of philosophical study. Any such description, including the one I have just given, is itself the expression of a philosophical thesis, position, or view.¹

¹ Charles J. Bontempo and S. Jack Odell, eds., *The Owl of Minerva* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975) is a fascinating collection of reflective essays by some fifteen contemporary philosophers on the topic: Just what is philosophy anyway?

One can see the philosophical impulse at work in the kinds of “second-order” questions that a practicing philosopher is inclined to ask. One helpful description of such questions divides them into two groups: questions of *meaning* and questions of *justification*. Notably absent from this classification, however, are questions of truth. Practitioners of this or that “first-order” discipline make a variety of interesting claims. A physicist might say, for example, that gases consist of molecules or that every material object is composed of atoms. An art critic might claim that Michelangelo’s *David* is a more fully realized work than his *Pieta*. A theologian might assert that God is merciful; an historian, that the underlying causes of World War II were primarily economic; a linguist, that the linguistic competences of human beings cannot be explained without presupposing innate, genetically transmitted linguistic capacities; and so on. Now practicing philosophers will typically not be inclined to ask whether this or that interesting “first-order” claim is in fact true. If pressed, they are likely to decline to answer on the ground that they lack the special expertise of the “first-order” practitioner that is needed to assess the truth or falsehood of such claims. But they may well insist that there is some business which is their proper concern and which needs to be gotten out of the way first.

One sort of question that philosophers in practice may pursue concerns the problem of *understanding* such interesting “first-order” claims. What does it mean to say of one work of art that it is “more fully realized” than another? What are “underlying causes” anyway? Philosophers are constitutionally disinclined to take such claims at face value, not because they are inherently more skeptical than other people, but because they are typically troubled about what the face value of such claims is supposed to be. That gases consist of molecules, for instance, may look like a straightforward enough claim. But does a gas consist of molecules in the same way that a ladder consists of rungs and sides? In the way that a jigsaw puzzle consists of pieces? In the way that a forest consists of trees? In the way that a sentence consists of words? In the way that a cake consists of flour, eggs, sugar, butter, and milk? How can something visible and colored—a chair, for example—be composed entirely of things—for example, atoms—none of which is visible and none of which can be colored?

Again, we understand reasonably well what it is for a parent or a judge to be merciful, but can a theologian who speaks of God as merciful possibly mean what we ordinarily mean? God’s mercifulness, after all, is evidently supposed to be compatible with the existence of disease, drought, famine, war, earthquake, hurricane, tornado, and typhoon, and with all the diverse human sufferings which He apparently allows such calamities to visit indiscriminately upon the innocent and the guilty alike. And that is hardly what we would *ordinarily* expect from a merciful being. Yet again, a philosopher may ask, do we have any intelligible notion of a “linguistic capacity” as something which can be genetically transmitted in the way that eye color, for instance, is genetically transmitted? If we think of the fundamental philosophical impulse as expressing a need to make sense of the world and our place in it, we can begin to see how it finds articulate application in the more limited project of making sense of the interesting and provocative, but often puzzling and peculiar, things that practitioners of the various “first-order” disciplines from time to time say about the world and our place in it.

Second, a philosopher may in practice pursue an inquiry into “first-order” practitioners’ *entitlement* to make the various interesting claims that they in fact do make, that is, into the grounds—explicit or implicit—that they do or could offer in support of those claims. How can the observable gross behavior of substances, objects, and instruments in the laboratory legitimize physicists’ claims about unobservable particles or forces? Can judgments of aesthetic worth somehow be intersubjectively validated, or are they necessarily nothing more than expressions of personal taste? Does it ultimately require an appeal to a special mode of religious experience to secure particular theological claims, and is there—indeed, can there be—such a mode of experience?

What people most frequently think of as *philosophical* questions, matters properly falling within the traditional province of philosophical inquiry, are radical generalizations of such questions. Thus philosophers will typically not ask after the grounds of this or that particular aesthetic judgment, but rather whether judgments of aesthetic worth in general—or, even more broadly, whether *any* judgments of value, aesthetic or moral—admit of objective justification. Nor are they inclined to take for granted the implied contrast between judgments of value and judgments of fact. Whether that distinction can be sensibly drawn, and, if so, in what it consists, is also up for investigation. Again, philosophers will inquire into the legitimacy of *any* inference from the observed to the unobserved, whether what is inferred are the forces and particles of the physicist, the private thoughts and desires of ordinary people, or tomorrow’s sunrise. And, of course, the very distinction between what can and cannot be observed itself becomes a theme of philosophical exploration. And yet again, practicing philosophers will want to explore the limitations of perceptual experience in general, not simply as one possible mode of justification for theological beliefs, but as a faculty yielding any knowledge of a world independent of our experiencing it. Or, conversely, they may inquire whether theological claims can be warranted at all, by experience or by reasoning. The practicing philosopher is thus a generalist *par excellence*. As one great twentieth-century practitioner² once put it:

The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.

Whatever the details of its methodology, then, the practice of philosophy—unlike the activities characteristic of the “first-order” disciplines or, for that matter, our daily business in the practical world—is carried on at one remove from the “first-order” facts. In consequence, it is a particularly rarefied and abstract practice. It is not an inquiry into the facts in this sense at all, but into the methods by which we can search for such facts, the legitimate grounds or reasons on the basis of which we can come to assert them, and the concepts we use in formulating and expressing them. My late colleague W.D. Falk once said it this way: Ordinary folk ask “What time is it?” but a philosopher asks “What is time?”

² Wilfrid Sellars, in “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” originally published in *Frontiers of Science and Philosophy*, ed. by Robert Colodny (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962).

Recognizing this allows us to explain much of what is peculiar and problematic about the practice of philosophy—the seeming elusiveness and arbitrariness of its methods, its often-lamented lack of a firm direction and of generally accepted concrete results which could be counted as progress, and, more generally, the aura of unreality and detachment which non-philosophers find so strikingly characteristic of the discipline. The root of all these appearances lies in the fact that philosophers are not in any straightforward way thinking about the world. What they are thinking about is *thinking about the world*. Such results as there are, then, do not take the form of new facts but rather, at best, consist in a new clarity about what are and what aren't the old facts, and about their modes of legitimization.

Practicing philosophers are thus the very model of theoreticians and, since the objects of their theorizing are at one remove from the facts, the very opposite of practical folk. The sort of understanding at which a philosopher aims is not a practical understanding, which is a condition of effective action. It is an understanding of the deep presuppositions and preconditions of those “first-order” forms of understanding which can shape our actions. Philosophical inquiry is not instrumental. It is not a tool. Philosophy bakes no bread and builds no bridges. It aims at clarity, not as a means to facilitate action or to advance other independent, life-goals, but simply for the sake of clarity—to understand “how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term,” and to understand the limits of such understanding. So, although there may be philosophical technique, there is no philosophical technology. That is surely what is meant by the etymological characterization of the philosopher as a lover, not of knowledge (*episteme*) but of wisdom (*sophia*).

I have been speaking of philosophy as a practice which comes after the “first-order” special sciences, an activity which probes the foundations and superstructures of edifices already built. But it is no less correct to think of philosophy as something *prior* to science, as the mother of sciences. “Philosophy begins in wonder,” Aristotle said, but this root wonder at the complex world in which we find ourselves, this fundamental philosophical impulse, is ultimately the wellspring from which all human inquiry flows. Speculation and theorizing about change and motion and the stuff of the world long preceded the organized experimental disciplines which we today think of as the physical sciences. Before there were physics and chemistry there was “natural philosophy” (by which name physical science is still sometimes called in England), and our sharper-edged disciplines grew from these speculative philosophical origins as smoothly as an oak from an acorn. People theorized about justice long before there existed any formal discipline of jurisprudence. People explored possible forms of human society and its governance long before sociology and political science became autonomous pursuits. Centuries of speculation about our human capacities to think and know and feel preceded the various empirical studies we now call psychology. And all this theorizing, exploration, and speculation was and is fairly called ‘philosophy’. Newton and Einstein, Jefferson and Lenin, Freud and Skinner all dealt no less with problems and puzzles properly thought of as philosophical than did Aristotle and Leibniz, Locke and Hegel, Kant and Hume.

Philosophy still preserves this historical role—at the cutting edge. Philosophy and the special sciences grade off into one another at the speculative margins.

Theoretical physicists and philosophers of physics, political theorists and political philosophers, linguistic theorizers and philosophers of language, theoretical psychologists and philosophers of mind—all of these practitioners share their problems. Given what has already been said about philosophy's "second-order" character, this should not be surprising. For it is precisely on the frontiers of any discipline that the characteristically philosophical concerns of making sense (What does it mean?) and establishing entitlements (How could we tell?) arise with special force and immediacy. The two roles of philosophy—as both a critical study of extant conceptual structures and a speculative source of new ones—complement rather than compete with one another, rounding out the picture of philosophy as our most general intellectual encounter with the nature and limits of human reason in all its manifestations.

The history of philosophy—the great work of past philosophers—has a special role to play in this encounter. One thing you will discover is that a good bit of the ongoing business of a practicing philosopher consists in discussion and evaluation of the views of other philosophers and of the arguments that have been advanced in support of them. This fact has led some critics to speak sarcastically of academic philosophical activity as the treatment of conceptual diseases that philosophers catch only from one another. But it turns out that the special role of philosophy's own history in its proper practice is also a reflection of the "second-order" character of philosophy that I have been describing. Indeed, it will prove worthwhile to take a closer look at the sources of this sort of philosophical "inbreeding."

Two natural scientists may disagree at the level of their theorizing about the proper explanation of a body of observed phenomena, but they share the phenomena themselves as common ground. They may disagree about what a cluster of experimental results *shows*, but they typically do not disagree about what the experimental results *are*. Similarly, two historians may disagree about the interpretation to place on a set of documents, but they share the documents themselves as common ground. They may disagree about what the documents *imply* (e.g., about why something happened when and how it did), but they typically do not disagree about what the documents *say* (about what in fact happened and when it did). And even two disputing theologians, at least those of the same religious persuasion, can find a common ground in their shared faith and, often, in their common commitment to particular sacred texts. So, in the "first-order" disciplines, when disagreement breaks out, there is usually a built-in way for all the parties to a dispute to return to an area of agreement and proceed systematically and afresh from there.

Philosophers, in contrast, share neither phenomena nor experiments, neither documentary data nor faith. They characteristically operate at one remove from the "first-order" facts. What philosophers do share, however, is a *history*, the common conceptual ancestry of their great predecessors. Suppose, for instance, that two contemporary philosophers disagree about the limits of perceptual knowledge, that is, about what it is possible to come to know about the world through sensory experience. It is clear that one thing they cannot do is simply retreat to a shared agreement about what is scientifically known about the physiological and psychological processes of perception. For if physiologists and psychologists know anything about perceptual processes, that

knowledge must ultimately rest on observations, on perceptual experiences; whereas what is in dispute between the two philosophers is precisely what *can* be known through perceptual experiences, not just about perceptual processes but about anything at all. Thus, although the two philosophers may agree, for example, about what practicing neurophysiologists *say* about human perceptual processes, their philosophical disagreement infects both the sense of those neurophysiological claims (what to make of them) and their legitimacy. The “second-order” nature of the philosophers’ disagreement precisely precludes their finding a shared “neutral ground” in the claims advanced within some “first-order” discipline.

Where the disputing philosophers can find some common ground, however, is in their shared conceptual heritage. For the great philosophers of the past—Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, among others—have all taken stands on the limits of perceptual knowledge and have offered arguments in support of their stands. The two disputing philosophers can thus productively relocate their disagreement in their differing attitudes toward and assessments of one or several of these historical stances. In commenting on and critically evaluating the substantive views and supporting arguments offered by their mutually acknowledged predecessors, they can find the beginnings of a process which allows the development of convergent understandings and thereby carries with it, as well, at least the possibility of an ultimate resolution of their initial dispute.

The history of philosophy thus plays a crucial methodological role in the practice of philosophy. It does not enter as a primary *object* of philosophical inquiry, but rather as an indispensable *medium* of that inquiry. It provides philosophers with a common expository idiom, a shared vocabulary of concepts and a collection of paradigms of philosophical reasoning, which can serve as mutual starting points for contemporary re-explorations of central philosophical concerns. This history is a fertile stock of views and supporting considerations, to be sifted and resifted, assessed and reassessed, and—by the best of practicing philosophers—supplemented and enriched.

The historical concerns of practicing philosophers, then, do not end with an understanding of what their predecessors believed. Practicing philosophers always press through to the crucial question of why their predecessors believed what they did, or, better put, the question of why one (why *anyone*) ought to believe it. For the “why” at issue here is not the “why” of, say, psychoanalysis or sociology; it is the “why” of *reasons*. It is with the reasonings of their predecessors, and not with their motivations or the social and historical forces that shaped their views, that practicing philosophers concern themselves. At least in its critical dimension, then, philosophical progress is neither a matter of new facts and forecasts nor one of bread or bombs or bridges. It rather consists in such subtle business as refining one’s understanding of a problem, attaining greater argumentative rigor, grasping connections, noticing tacit presuppositions, and even finally seeing the point of a remark.

And just occasionally, if one is sufficiently persistent and especially fortunate, these minute elements can momentarily fall together and interlock into a larger visionary whole. And it is then that you find the sense of liberation and satisfaction and joy of which I earlier spoke.