Philosophy: What it is and What it is not

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PHILOSOPHERS are in general agreement that there is no perfect definition of philosophy. A genuine knowledge of the nature of philosophy is possible only for one who has philosophized—one who has actively worked within the discipline and who consequently sees why it is so difficult to define it. Nevertheless, it is not impossible, I think, to approach a definition. And, with the realization that I cannot do full justice to the problem, I should like to suggest what I take to be the essential features of philosophy.

I shall begin, however, not by saying what philosophy is, but by saying what it is not. Although these misconceptions distort the nature of philosophy, they do contain elements of truth that will serve as a basis for the definition to be proposed later.

The two misconceptions of philosophy which I shall consider are: philosophy is destructive skepticism and philosophy is idle speculation. The first misconception, I suspect, stems from the observation that philosophers are critical of the private beliefs held by the average person. It is thus inferred that philosophers are devoted to attacking the views of common sense. And this inference seems, by many who have a limited knowledge of philosophy, to be confirmed. For there is a school of philosophy, best known through the writings of Berkeley and Hume, that raises serious doubts about what the mind can know. Berkeley and Hume agree (with an exception to be mentioned later) that our knowledge does not extend to certainty regarding anything that exists independently of our sense-experience.

This notion of philosophy is correct in so far as it stresses the critical function of the philosopher. For it is true that philosophers are intent on avoiding any unquestioned acceptance of the beliefs of common sense. However, those who take men like Berkeley and Hume as representative of philosophy either forget or do not know that these men and the thought that has developed from them constitutes only one school of philosophy. Further, it should be noted that the skepticism in Berkeley and Hume is limited. Both men draw conclusions that temper if not contradict a total skepticism.

It must also be observed that if professional philosophers are critical of many of the unquestioned beliefs of common sense, it does not follow that their criticism is necessarily destructive. The philosopher's criticism is directed toward provoking an alertness to inconsistencies and to underlying issues, within our beliefs and, finally, to the discovery of the fundamental assumptions upon which all thought and action is based.

The second misconception of philosophy, that philosophy is idle speculation, may seem to follow from recognizing that philosophy serves neither the justification nor the destruction of common sense convictions. From this recognition, it is inferred that philosophy is not concerned with what is vital to human beings and is thus vain speculation, interesting as a game, but about nothing that matters.

It is true that philosophy is speculation not directly aimed at managing practical affairs. And it is true that the professional philosopher does not—indeed, should not—as a philosopher, make any claim to setting forth theories or ideas within the natural sciences, the arts, theology, or any particular field of knowledge. Moreover, the professional philosopher cannot declare that he has the final word as to which moral code or

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set of political principles any individual ought to adopt.

It is wrong, however, to conceive of philosophy as speculation which is irrelevant to what is vital to man. Indeed, philosophy, concerns what most vital to man. It is concerned with goals that are distinctive to human beings; it is the pursuit of an activity of which only man is capable.[1]

It is significant that one example of the serious import of philosophy for life can be found in the thinking of Berkeley, the philosopher who appears to some as an eccentric skeptic denying the basic beliefs of common sense. Berkeley's purpose in trying to show that things cannot be known to exist independently of sense-experience was, after all, to prove that God exists. And on the conclusion that God exists, Berkeley thought he could account for all that men hold most vital for life.

Philosophy, then, is not a game. It treats principles which cannot, like the rules of a game, be changed arbitrarily—which cannot be controverted for the sake of the pleasure of the players.

The greatest obstacle to recongizing the function of philosophy is the belief that philosophers have not come to a consensus. There has been no obvious cumulation of knowledge, no advance toward a growing body of highly systematized conclusions, all of which are tied to the "facts."

In this connection, it should be pointed out that there is a great deal more agreement among philosophers than is often recognized. There are basic concepts regarding procedures in the evaluation of ideas that are common to most philosophers. And in the field of modern logic, there has been a development leading to a growing body of knowledge concerning the extent and methods of logic.

However, what is more important is that to claim that philosophers do not draw conclusions about which there is general agreement is to contrast philosophy with characteristics of modern science. And if philosophy is measured by the standards of scientific progress, it does, of course, fail. By these standards it ought to fail. Philosophy does not attempt to build knowledge that is tied to the "facts" in the way that science is. It is not determined to discover theories that lead to the prediction and control of nature. Nor are professional philosophers bent upon reaching common agreement. They are rather concerned with examining various aspects of the foundation of an overwhelmingly complex world. They are concerned with examining the assumptions upon which scientists, theologians, and humanists, as well as non-professional people, base their pursuit of any particular field of endeavor. And they are anxious to discover various ways of unifying the presuppositions and conclusions of all fields of knowledge.

Each field of knowledge, for example, assumes that truth is valuable. The philosopher is interested in whether the conditions of truth in one field are the same as or different than those in other fields. He is also concerned with the relation of truth as a value to other kinds of value. It truth good? Is it always good? Is there an aesthetic standard that is crucial for the decision to accept or reject a theory as "true"? Some scientists have suggested that there is. If they are correct, a question arises about the comparison of this standard to standards of beauty in the arts.

Moreover, the philosopher's concern is indirectly related to practical affairs. Philosophy may aid the man seeking

[1] I cannot discuss here the issue raised in connection with the social sciences concerning the difference between man and other animal species. Suffice it to say that man is the kind of animal that not only learns and solves problems (as perhaps other animal species do) but who also can, as psychologist, raise problems about problem solving, and in turn, who, as philosopher, can raise problems about problems about problem solving. If it is someday found that other animals can raise problems about his problems, then perhaps we can confer on them the labels, "psychologist" and "philosopher."

practical benefits by alerting him to the various assumptions made by different fields of practical endeavor. For example, there is a case in which an engineer interested in city planning realized that the understanding and communication of knowledge concerning the complex needs of urban living required training in a critical examination of the assumptions behind social and economic interests. He thus decided it imperative that he devote a year to the study of philosophy in order that he might more efficiently solve the problems of his profession.[2]

Philosophy may also aid the professional working within a particular field of science by stimulating him to be more open to imaginative leaps into new ways of thinking that might otherwise go unrecognized by a less critical and questioning mind.

Finally, philosophical speculation is, I think, a duty for anyone who takes seriously the importance for life of the presuppositions of political and social ideologies. Indeed, at the root of the practical features of today's "cold war" is a conflict between two philosophies of man and the universe: the communist conception of men as valuable in relation to a total potitical system and the Western European view of political systems as valuable in relation to individual men. These two opposed views are derived from theories proposed by philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Today our lives are governed by the political and social applications of these theories. For instance, our conception of the freedom of citizens to oppose their government, if that government suppresses the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, is derived directly from the writings of John Locke. What is now needed is a serious critical comparison of Locke's presuppositions with those of communist ideology.

But most important is that philosophy is unavoidable for any thinking person. For anyone who is intellectually honest cannot help pursuing to their limits the presuppositions of his thought and behavior. Philosophy is a necessary part of the life of all thoughtful people. We cannot help philosophizing. The question is whether we do it well or badly.

On the basis of the foregoing discussion, I should like now to suggest the definition of philosophy promised earlier. The definition I should like to suggest is that philosophy is the love of reflection. The relation of this definition to the discussion of the two misconceptions of philosophy will be indicated by focusing on the two key terms in the definition: "love" and "reflection."

That philosophy is concerned with reflection was implied by the observation that philosophy is speculative, that its immediate purpose is to treat issues that are not directly related to practical affairs. Thus, the philosopher is reflective rather than engaged. In philosophizing, he steps back, away from engagement or involvement in practical action. At the same time, philosophy is critical. It resists any blind acceptance of beliefs or convictions. Thus, philosophical activity is reflective in the sense that it is not committed in an unquestioned affirmation of faith.

That philosophy is a kind of love follows from the fact that philosophy is persistent in its reflection. It not only advocates but it desires and depends upon deliberation, the suspension of immediate belief. As such, philosophical activity is a form of love. It is desire for a union of thought with continued speculation. It seeks a fulfillment of its desire in a realization of perpetual reflection.

One final point needs to be mentioned. The definition I have proposed is incomplete. For it does not tell us the object of the philosopher's reflection. The definition does not tell us what the

[2] This example is a simplification of a case described by Gregory Vlastos in "Uses of Excellence, the Case for the Usefulness of the Useless," *Forum*, III, No. 2 (December, 1961), 46.

philosopher's reflection is about. And it is proper to ask for a specification of this object.

Although I cannot here do justice to this question, I can give a partial answer. Philosophical reflection is like two-headed Janus. It looks in two directions, toward two objects. Philosophy is reflection **from** "pre-reflected objects," that is, unquestioned beliefs and assumptions. It is also reflection toward "reflected objects," that is, the presuppositions of all thought and action.

Yet in its reflection in two directions, philosophy is involved in a paradox. On the one hand, philosophy must avoid commitment. It cannot rest with "pre-reflected objects"; otherwise it would not be reflective. On the other hand, in seeking "reflected objects," philosophy seeks commitment. It is directed toward conclusions that are final: universal, necessary truths which make all other principles intelligible. But these conclusions, by their very nature, cannot be questioned. They cannot be reflected about. To reflect about them would be to treat them not as First Principles but as in need of further justification. If philosophy affirmed them, it would cease to be reflection; it would cease to be a rational activity. It would reach its own limit and would, like all commitments, lose itself for the sake of the object it affirms. Philosophy would then transcend itself in a super-rational Vision. Thus in order to maintain its existence it must sacrifice the highest object for the sake of which its reflecting activity exists. For unless philosophy treats its final conclusions as "pre-reflected objects," as objects to be questioned, it cannot avoid its own self destruction.

Philosophy, then, must be a love of reflection rather than a love of the objects reflected about. To love either of the two objects of reflection would be either to deny its birth or to decree its death.