



THE VOCATION OF PHILOSOPHY

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The English rendering of the Greek work "*philo-sophia*," translated literally, is "love of wisdom." There is precious little of the love of wisdom in philosophy as taught in our universities and colleges, whether they are dominated by the linguistic and analytical philosophy that is regnant at Oxford and Cambridge, or by the positivism, existentialism, phenomenology, structuralism, and semeiotics that are current on the continent of Europe.

For those of us who still think, as I do, that philosophy goes beyond common-sense knowledge to understanding and to wisdom, the latter comes at the end of the trail. Practical wisdom is to be found in the ultimate ends that are understood to be the first principles of moral and political philosophy; and theoretical or speculative wisdom lies in the principles of metaphysics and philosophical theology.

Wisdom may lie at the culmination of philosophical thought when it is properly conducted, but throughout it is driven by the love of truth. If, for any reason, truth were unattainable, philosophy would be a worthless enterprise. This would have to be said, of course, of scientific and historical research as well. They might still be pragmatically useful, but they, too, would be intellectually worthless.

The definition of truth as the conformity of what we think to the way things are in reality goes back to Plato and Aristotle. This common-sense conception of truth is employed in all business negotiations and in judicial tribunals, trying questions of fact, when juries are asked to bring in verdicts that are true judgments, either beyond a reasonable doubt or by a preponderance of the evidence.

I have always thought it important to bear the following points in mind. The meaning of “true” and “false” as applied to the judgments we make gives us our definition of what truth and falsity are, but that definition does not give us the criteria by which to tell whether or not a particular judgment is true or false. It is here that William James’s pragmatic theory of truth comes in, as well as other theories of how to verify or falsify the judgments we make.¹

In the pursuit of truth, Aristotle tells us, “it is necessary to call into council the views of our predecessors, in order that we may profit by whatever is sound in their thought and avoid their errors.”

And in another place, Aristotle tells us:

The investigation of the truth is in one way hard, in another easy. An indication of this is found in the fact that no one is able to attain the truth adequately, while, on the other hand, we do not collectively fail, but every one says something true about the nature of things, and while individually we contribute little or nothing to the truth, by the union of all a considerable amount is amassed.

¹ There are very few self-evident, necessary truths, which are undeniable because it is impossible to think the opposite. These are the only philosophical truths that are in the realm of certitude—beyond the shadow of a doubt. All the rest are in the realm of doubt—either beyond a reasonable doubt or probable by a preponderance of the evidence. None of these probable truths are incorrigible. Their probability is forever subject to change as new evidence or rational arguments correct earlier judgments about their degree of probability.

There have always been skeptical denials that truth is attainable. They existed in antiquity; they exist today. Complete skepticism of the kind proposed by the ancient Pyrrhonists is refutable as self-contradictory. More limited forms of skepticism (such as that which concedes some measure of truth attainable by empirical science and historical research, while still asserting that none can be found in philosophical thought) are more difficult to deal with. Those of us who regard philosophy as an intellectually respectable enterprise must deal with the positivism so prevalent in our day.

Until this century, anyone engaged in teaching and learning acknowledged an aspiration to get at the truth, whether in history, science, or philosophy. But today “truth” has become almost a dirty word in academic circles. In a recent book, *Truth in Religion*, I have pointed out how those who appear to deny truth in religion, also appear to lack any understanding of what truth is.²

Commitment to the pursuit of truth is unfashionable in academic circles. Making unabashed judgments about what is true and false is considered academically impolite. It tends to pit professors against one another in a public display of antagonism, which is to be avoided for the sake of peace and harmony in the professional fraternity.

So far as philosophy is concerned, let us consider the case of Isaiah Berlin. He is often mistakenly regarded as an eminent contributor to twentieth-century philosophical thought. But he tells us explicitly in a recent book, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, that he gave philosophy up for history because he could not embrace Plato’s and Aristotle’s “assumption”—he should have said “conviction”—that philosophers can succeed in the pursuit of truth. Though he was trained in philosophy, Berlin decided on being instead an historian of ideas rather than a philosopher. He is quoted as saying “Philosophy is a wonderful subject, but it is necessarily unfinished and unfinishable. You can’t really solve anything. At the end of my life, I wanted to know more than I did at the beginning. And I couldn’t get that from philosophy.”³

The history of ideas, to which Isaiah Berlin has devoted his life, is not a philosophical clarification of them. Only that is a contribution to the understanding of our mind’s intelligible objects. I

² See Adler, *Truth in Religion: The Plurality of Religions and the Unity of Truth*, 1990.

³ Suzanne Cassidy, “I Think I Hear Them Talk,” in *The New York Review of Books*, March 24, 1991, p. 30.

think I have made that kind of philosophical contribution in *The Idea of Freedom*, which explained in its opening pages why it was not a history of that idea but rather a dialectical propaedeutic to getting at the philosophical truth about human freedom.⁴

The many forms of characteristically modern idealism—the central tenet of which is that there is no knowable reality independent of the human mind—are another departure from the pursuit of truth in philosophy. Unless there is a reality independent of the human mind—that is what it is, whether we think about it or not, and also regardless of how we think about it—there can be no pursuit of objective truth in philosophy, or for that matter, in science. In another recent book,⁵ I have severely criticized the current form of philosophical idealism in this country, called “constructivism” by its leading exponents, such as Jerome Bruner, Nelson Goodman, and Richard Rorty.

I am and always have been a philosophical realist since the days of my youth when, as a college student at Columbia University, I read a book entitled *The New Realism*, written at that time by six American professors of philosophy. Times have changed since then.⁶ All philosophers in antiquity and the Middle Ages were realists; none was an idealist in epistemology or metaphysics.

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In 1990, Clifton Fadiman, one of my oldest friends, with whom I first became acquainted when he was a student of Mark Van Doren’s and mine in a great books seminar at Columbia in 1923–1925, told me that he had been asked by Doubleday to edit a book of essays entitled *Living Philosophies: The Reflections of Some Eminent Men and Women of Our Time*. He invited me to contribute a short essay of about 2,500 words to that volume. The required brevity made the task difficult, but I did it within the space limits specified.

Since that essay is autobiographical and since the first part of it is highly relevant to the considerations of this chapter, I think it is useful to reproduce it here.⁷

⁴ Adler, *The Idea of Freedom*, Vol. I, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1958.

⁵ See Adler, *Intellect: Mind Over Matter*, 1990, Chapters 7 and 8.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ With the permission of the publishers, of course. Mr. Fadiman tells me that, for one reason or another, the book as published was not widely circulated. That is all the more reason for reproducing an excerpt from my essay here.

I dream of a postmodern era maturing in the next century, one in which the viability of the planet is ensured, in which world peace is established and becomes perpetual, and in which a better culture emerges, fostering an intellectual climate that is more congenial to philosophical thought than the philosophically deprived and recessive culture against which I have struggled during my lifetime. . . .

The vocation of a philosopher is the pursuit of truth about God, the physical cosmos, and the human world—man’s nature and culture. With respect to human life and society, philosophy seeks not only descriptive truths, but also truths that are prescriptive and normative. The latter are statements about how we *ought* to conduct our lives, privately and socially, and what we *should* do to constitute a just political and economic order.

I regret that I have been compelled to say that the twentieth century has not been a felicitous time for philosophy. In my judgment, philosophy has reached its lowest level in a steady decline since the seventeenth century. My most fundamental conviction is that the manifold mistakes in modern philosophical thought began in the seventeenth century with little errors in the beginning that have led to disastrous consequences in the end. Instead of correcting these errors, modern philosophers in successive centuries have tried to solve the puzzles and paradoxes to which they gave rise.

Since the days of Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, and Hume, these initial errors have gone uncorrected, and their consequences have been multiplied in the centuries that followed, especially in German thought—in Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche—at the end of the eighteenth, and in the nineteenth century.

The cause of these errors and their consequences was the ignorance, misunderstanding, or neglect of the philosophical wisdom to be found in antiquity and in the Middle Ages. Only two of the mistakes that have plagued modern thought have come down to us from antiquity and have been perpetuated in modern times—the atomistic materialism that we find in Hobbes and the Platonic dualism (mind *and* body) that we find in Descartes.

To the baleful influence on twentieth-century philosophy of Hobbesian materialism, Cartesian dualism, and German idealism and transcendentalism must be added the mistake made by Russell and Wittgenstein in our own century. This was the mistake of supposing that symbolic and mathematical logic, together with a psychological theory of knowledge, lies at the basis of all philosophical thought.

I must confess to having made the same mistake in my early twenties, but fortunately I grew out of it. By the time I was thirty, I began to grow up philosophically and corrected the error of my immaturity by looking to metaphysics for the foundations of philosophy—a metaphysics that has its roots in common sense and is in no way affected by the findings of modern mathematics and science.

With this controlling conviction about the history of philosophy, I have devoted my intellectual energies to restoring the neglected and misunderstood truths that have been lost in modern times and trying to add some things to the foundations they provide. With few exceptions, mainly William James, George Santayana, Jacques Maritain, and Etienne Gilson, I have learned little or nothing of value from those who have come to prominence in the last fifty years, especially not from those whom the contemporary world has honored as the philosophical eminences of this century—Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger.⁸

Another characteristic of the twentieth century that makes it inhospitable to the philosophical enterprise as I conceive it is the uncritical and unfounded assumption that, for solid truth about anything, one must go to science. The truths attained by the exact sciences in the study of the cosmos, physical nature, and man are seriously limited to what can be known by measurements yielding numbers that can be fed into mathematical equations. The many important aspects of reality that are immeasurable lie beyond the reach of exact science.⁹

In four successive generations, great scientists such as Einstein, Bohr, Heisenberg, and Hawking have allowed themselves to slip from saying “what is not measurable *by* physicists has no reality *for* physicists” to saying “what is unmeasurable has no reality.” Immeasurable simultaneity, the immeasurable reaches of infinite time, the determinate but indeterminable velocity *and* position of electrons do not exist in the physical world.

Not only do the immeasurable aspects of reality lie beyond the world of the physicist, but also, if there are truths to be learned about God, they are to be learned by philosophy, not by science. In addition, science cannot establish a single prescriptive truth about how we *ought* to conduct our affairs.

⁸ My further reflections about Wittgenstein can be found in the next section of this chapter.

⁹ Since Descartes, it would be difficult to name a first-rate scientist who is also a first-rate philosopher. Most of them are exponents or adherents of positivism, the intellectual error most of them are addicted to.

The moral problems we face in the twentieth century are in all essential respects the same as those faced by our ancestors in antiquity. The many technological and institutional changes we have experienced in this century do not make the problem of leading a morally good life more or less difficult to solve. The best philosophical guidance we can get is to be found in Aristotle's *Ethics*, written in the fourth century B.C. The last three centuries have contributed little or nothing of value in ethics.

With respect to political theory, the situation is different. Here contributions have been made by modern thinkers—by Locke's *Second Treatise on Civil Government* and by J. S. Mill's *Representative Government* and his essay *On Liberty*.¹⁰

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I read Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* (1922) when I was a graduate student at Columbia University immediately after it was published in this country in the same series in which my first book *Dialectic* was published in 1927. This series was edited by C. K. Ogden under the title *International Library of Psychology, Philosophy and Scientific Method*.

I can still remember and will never forget the stunning last sentence, numbered 7, of the *Tractatus*, which read "That whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." In his later career as a philosopher, Wittgenstein practiced what he preached. He substituted *showing* for *telling* with regard to matters about which silence should be maintained, because no attempt should be made to make statements in propositional form that are not susceptible to logical proof or disproof.

I also remember I was so impressed by that stunning last sentence of the *Tractatus* that I was inspired to give a series of ten lectures on the philosophy of silence. Looking over my notes for those lectures still in my files, my present judgment is that they were an immature effort on my part. I am glad that I did not try to turn them into a book for publication.

I have read in the last year, Ray Monk's biography of Ludwig Wittgenstein. I noted the many similarities between Wittgenstein's youthful career in philosophy and my own—his dissatisfaction with twentieth-century culture, so dominated by science

¹⁰ Adler: "A Philosopher Looks Back and Forward," *Living Philosophies: The Reflections of Some Eminent Men and Women of Our Time*, edited by Clifton Fadiman, New York, Doubleday, 1990, pp. 272-277. Reprinted by permission. I have placed the rest of my essay in the Notes to this chapter, Item C.

and technology; his criticism of modern philosophy for taking science and mathematics as models to imitate; his contempt for most of his professorial contemporaries, whom he called “philosophical journalists”; his youthful addiction to logic and grammar as the indispensable foundation for philosophical thought; and his concern with the meaning of meaning.¹¹

The similarities noted above do not necessitate any retraction on my part of the statement made in the preceding section about my not having learned anything from Wittgenstein. We were both wrong in our youthful addiction to logic as the foundation for philosophical thought. If I were to add any exception to my statement that I learned nothing from Wittgenstein, it would be with respect to his distinction between what he called “family resemblances” and what in Aristotelian philosophy are treated as generic and specific samenesses and differences.

Ray Monk’s biography of Wittgenstein contains a number of statements that confirm the parallelism that I have noted between Wittgenstein’s attitude toward academic life and toward professors of philosophy and my own.

Monk writes that, for Wittgenstein, “academic life was detestable.” I think I would use the word “intolerable” instead. Monk tells us that Wittgenstein congratulated his friend Maurice Drury for being “saved from becoming a professional philosopher.” Monk quotes a passage from a letter that Wittgenstein wrote to Moritz Schlick in which he said “. . . from the bottom of my heart it is all the same to me what the professional philosophers of today think of me; for it is not for them that I am writing.”¹² To that I say “Amen.”

How divergent my mature work in philosophy is from that of Wittgenstein—and why it should be obvious to anyone that I have not learned anything from him, for better or worse—can be

¹¹ *The Meaning of Meaning* was the title of a book written by I. A. Richards and C. K. Ogden, which influenced me to write a juvenile essay on the philosophical and psychological problems of meaning, which I delivered before the Graduate Philosophy Club at Columbia University while I was still an undergraduate student in the college there (see *Philosopher at Large*, pp. 39-40). The problems I had not solved in that early essay remained unsolved for me until, in 1976, I wrote *Some Questions About Language: A Theory of Human Discourse and Its Objects*. In that book, I criticized the grave deficiencies and errors in the theories advanced by Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein (see the Epilogue to that book in the new paperback edition, 1991).

¹² Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, New York, The Free Press, 1990, pp. 323-324.

seen by reading *Some Questions About Language*, *How to Think About God*, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*, *Intellect: Mind Over Matter*, *Truth in Religion*, and *Desires, Right & Wrong*, all books written since 1976.¹³

Let me sum up the difference between being a professional philosopher and the few of us who strive to make philosophy their life's vocation by writing philosophical books while not teaching philosophy in academic institutions. We are generalists in philosophy, thinking in all four of its dimensions and pursuing the truth in all four. The professors of philosophy in our academic institutions tend to be specialists, as college and university catalogues reveal, teaching courses in this or that branch of philosophy but seldom in all, and usually about the history of ideas and not about the ideas themselves as intelligible objects of philosophical thought. This is a dimension of philosophy that is neglected by most academic specialists. I think the list of my philosophical books show that my thinking covers—perhaps not adequately—all four dimensions of philosophical discourse. 📖

Excerpted from his autobiography, *A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror: Further Autobiographical Reflections of a Philosopher At Large* (1992)

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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.

¹³ In a conversation with M. O'C. Drury, Wittgenstein confesses: "Here I am, a one-time professor of philosophy who has never read a word of Aristotle!" That confession may also explain the divergence between my mature philosophical work and that of Wittgenstein (see *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, edited by Rush Rhees, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 158).