



THE CONDITIONS OF PHILOSOPHY: ITS CHECKERED PAST, ITS PRESENT DISORDER AND ITS FUTURE PROMISE

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I n t r o d u c t i o n

THE PLAY ON WORDS in the title of this book calls attention to two related concerns. One looks to the condition of philosophy—its present state. The other asks about the conditions of philosophy—the requirements to be met if philosophy is to recover from its present state or to improve its condition.

I naturally hope that I can solicit a wide interest in both of these concerns, though I am well aware that many, acquainted with the literature of philosophy, may recoil from another—still another—exercise in self-examination. I can readily sympathize with such a reaction. This type of undertaking has been repeated so often in the recent history of philosophy that it has become tiresome. If there is any intellectual excitement left in philosophy, it certainly lies in the consideration of genuine philosophical problems, or even in the clarification of philosophical puzzles, rather than in questions about philosophy itself—what philosophy is, what philosophers

should be doing, how philosophy stands in relation to other disciplines.

Have I any apology for still another undertaking of this sort? I think so. In any statement of genuine philosophical problems or of the methods for solving them, a conception of philosophy is implicit; there is always some virtue in making that explicit. Doing so, however, may still be tiresome unless some things can be said which change the picture and put philosophy in a new light. If that could be done, the effort would be fruitful and, perhaps, exciting. I should not engage in this undertaking if I did not hope to achieve that result. I hope to do so by laying down a set of conditions—reasonable in themselves and not impossible to meet—which, if satisfied, would lead to the improvement of philosophy's condition.

(I)

Science, in our society and culture, is generally respected, and there is little doubt among us that it deserves the respect it is accorded. In earlier epochs of our Western civilization, philosophy enjoyed a similar standing. I will not raise for the moment the question of whether the respect that it then received was deserved; it may have been, under the cultural circumstances then prevalent and by standards then current.

What of philosophy today? Is it now accorded the respect that is given science, either by men in general or by the learned world in particular? And, if not, should it be? My answer to both questions is negative: negative to the first, in spite of some indications to the contrary; and negative to the second, because of the present state of philosophy as a profession and as an intellectual enterprise.

One explanation of this situation, which I do not share, is offered by those who are convinced that philosophy is now bankrupt—that it has reached the end of the road. In their view, philosophy is now barren because it has at last fully discharged its procreative function—its mothering of all the special sciences, both natural and social, which, one by one, have split off from the parent stem. At an earlier time, when philosophy represented the whole, or at least the major, effort to know the nature of things, to understand the human situation, and to solve the practical problems confronting men and societies, it deserved, and received, the respect now accorded science. Now that all the special sciences have come into existence and grown to maturity, that no longer is or should be the case.

If this view were correct, the present condition of philosophy would be irremediable. There would be no conditions which, if sat-

isfied, might justify regarding philosophy in the way we regard science. And the project with which this book is concerned would be in vain.

I do not deny the fact that there is a widely prevalent sense of philosophy's bankruptcy in the twentieth century. But I would offer a different explanation of it—not that philosophy is at the end of the road, but that it is on the wrong road, that it is not dealing with the right problems in the right way. The appearance philosophy gives of being bankrupt does not mean that it is really barren, but only that it is temporarily insolvent. That is a remediable condition.

What is the remedy? Under what conditions would philosophy be intellectually respectable, both in its own right and as compared with science? I shall try to answer that question in Chapter 2; and the subsequent chapters of Part One will, I hope, further elucidate the conditions there set forth.

There are, of course, further questions to answer. Can philosophy satisfy the stipulated conditions? Can it be shown that there are no insuperable obstacles to philosophy's satisfying them? I am going to try to show just that in Part Two of this book. Should I succeed, the reader will, I think, be interested in the details of my answers to the two questions with which Part Three is concerned: Have these conditions ever been fully satisfied in the whole of philosophy's historic past? If they have not been, as I shall try to show, what is the prospect of their being satisfied in the future?

(2)

The answers to all these questions should be of some moment to young men facing the choice of an intellectual career.

As things stand now, I would not urge a young man to go into philosophy, to adopt it as a special vocation, as an intellectual profession—an enterprise which has professors, and students who aspire to become professors. Assuming that he is interested in something other than worldly success—something other than money, fame, and power—I do not think that philosophy in its present state offers him intrinsic rewards as an intellectual pursuit comparable to those offered by other professions—science, mathematics, engineering, historical research, law, or medicine. I do not think that it is a career he should adopt if he wishes to use his mind to the fullest and most fruitfully. I do not think that it is an enterprise he can look forward to engaging in without misgivings, without apologies, and with complete self-respect and satisfaction.

If, however, this book succeeds in persuading young men concerned with their intellectual careers that philosophy can become as respectable an enterprise as science and as rewarding a profession as any other (perhaps more so), then they may be challenged by the opportunity of contributing to philosophy's future, making it better than its past. The number of young men for whom this may be an option worth considering is, of course, small—too small to justify the effort of this book. However, I do not conceive of this book as being addressed exclusively to them. I address it to everyone who is interested in thinking about the world in which he lives, the direction of his own life, and the problems of the society in which he lives.

When I was a very young man, barely fifteen, the first philosophical book that I read was *Pragmatism*, based on the lectures William James delivered to popular audiences at the Lowell Institute in Boston in 1906 and at Columbia University in New York in 1907. The opening pages of that book made a lasting impression on me; they did more than that, I should add, for together with my reading of a dialogue by Plato at about the same time, they determined my choice of a career. That, however, is not my reason for referring to them here; it is rather that they eloquently state the striking fact that philosophy is the business of every man, as other intellectual callings are not—at least not in a comparable sense.

William James begins by quoting from an essay by Chesterton, who had written: "There are some people— and I am one of them—who think that the most practical and important thing about a man is still his view of the universe. We think that for a landlady considering a lodger it is important to know his income, but still more important to know his philosophy. We think that for a general about to fight an enemy it is important to know the enemy's numbers, but still more important to know the enemy's philosophy." Saying that he agreed with Mr. Chesterton in this matter, James then addressed his lecture audience as follows:

I know that you, ladies and gentlemen, have a philosophy, each and all of you, and that the most interesting and important thing about you is the way in which it determines the perspective in your several worlds. You know the same of me. And yet I confess to a certain tremor at the audacity of the enterprise which I am about *to* begin. For the philosophy which is so important in each of us is not a technical matter; it is our more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means. It is only partly got from books; it is our individual

way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos. I have no right to assume that many of you are students of the cosmos in the classroom sense, yet here I stand desirous of interesting you in a philosophy which to no small extent has to be technically treated. I wish to fill you with sympathy with a contemporaneous tendency in which I profoundly believe, and yet I have to talk like a professor to you who are not students. . . .

Believing in philosophy myself devoutly, and believing also that a kind of new dawn is breaking upon us philosophers, I feel impelled, *per fas aut nefas*, to try to impart to you some news of the situation.

Philosophy is at once the most sublime and the most trivial of human pursuits. It works in the minutest crannies and it opens out the widest vistas. It "bakes no bread," as has been said, but it can inspire our souls with courage; and repugnant as its manners, its doubting and challenging, its quibbling and dialectics, often are to common people, no one of us can get along without the far-flashing beams of light it sends over the world's perspectives. These illuminations at least, and the contrast-effects of darkness and mystery that accompany them, give to what it says an interest that is much more than professional.

But for one point that needs elucidation, I would gladly let the foregoing statement stand without comment, passing it on to the nonprofessional philosophers who have read thus far as their motivation for reading further. The point which I think needs comment is the distinction, adverted to by William James, between the philosophizing done by the man in the street and the philosophizing that is done in classrooms or in books by men who regard themselves and are regarded as engaged in a special professional task for which they have a special technical competence. Since it is my feeling, as it was William James's when he introduced his lectures on pragmatism, that what follows should be of concern to the layman as well as to the professional, I think it may be useful to say how I see the interests of the one in relation to the interests of the other.

There is a continuum, as I see it, between the novice in any sport and the champion player of the game. They are both engaged in playing tennis, golf, or baseball, though the one does it with little and the other with consummate skill. The vast difference in degree of competence which separates them does not prevent us from ac-

knowledging that both are playing the same game. On the contrary, precisely because it is the same game, we also recognize that the inexpert at it can learn from the more expert, acquiring through imitation and practice higher degrees of skill and satisfaction. The same holds true of every art. The child who begins to draw pictures or the man who begins to paint stands at one end of a continuum which has Leonardo or Michelangelo at the other. The woman who plans and cooks meals may never become Escoffier, but she improves by acquiring in some degree the understanding and techniques of culinary matters which lesser cooks, who are her preceptors, pass on to her.

Thus it is with the philosophizing done by the layman and the professional. Both are engaged in the same intellectual activity. The difference between Socrates and the ordinary man, each thinking about the nature of things, the choices that life presents, and the values which bear on them, is one of degree, not of kind, as is the difference between the champion at a particular sport and the tyro, or the difference between Leonardo or Escoffier in their particular arts and the novice. But there is one very important distinction to be made between these others and Socrates (here taken as the symbol of a high degree of skill in philosophical inquiry).

To realize their humanity, all men need not—and, in fact, they do not—engage in every particular sport, nor try to acquire skill in every art, just as they need not try to acquire the techniques of law, medicine, or engineering, or the technical knowledge of a physicist or a biologist. Hence, while Leonardo may represent the acme for those who want to draw or paint, and Escoffier for those who want to cook, they do not represent a competence or expertness which all men should try to approach to whatever degree their native capacities make possible. Not so Socrates: as the symbol of consummate skill in philosophizing, he does represent an ideal which every man should try to approximate in the highest degree possible; precisely because philosophizing, as William James declared, is everybody's business, or because, as Socrates before him said, "the unexamined life is not worth living" (and, might one add, the unexamined world and the unquestioned society or culture are not worth living in).

It may, nevertheless, be the case that most men, as regards philosophizing, are like children in kindergarten drawing their first pictures rather than like those who take up tennis or golf with the serious intention of learning how to play the game as well as possible. The latter are inclined to read books about the game, take coaching lessons, go to exhibition matches, and study, as well as

admire, the technique of the champions at their particular game. The champion for them is the master from whom they can learn—not directly, of course, but through intermediary lesser lights. They usually know his name and regard themselves as starting at the bottom of a ladder to the top of which he has risen. This is not true of kindergarten children beginning to draw; they are not conscious that they are engaged in the practice of an art which has superior practitioners or, for that matter, that they have anything to learn. They draw almost in the same way that their elders doodle—without premeditation, plan, or purpose. In the same sense in which it can be said that they draw without knowing that they are doing it or what is involved in doing it, so it can be said that most men philosophize.

Since philosophizing is everybody's business, as drawing is not, this common defect should be remedied by schooling. Everyone should receive training in philosophy in the course of his education. Everyone should be made conscious of the fact that he, if he is going to be fully human, cannot avoid thinking about certain types of problems; he should come to understand the special character of these problems, which have traditionally been called "philosophical"; he should recognize that he is a novice at thinking about them and that other men have displayed great skill or expertness in doing so; he should try to improve his own skill within the limits of his capacity, getting what help he can from books or teachers more proximate to his station than the very great; yet he should be inspired by those sources of his tutelage to study and to imitate the masters; in short, he should see himself at the bottom of a ladder which has Socrates at the top.

To say that some training in philosophy and some study of philosophy should be an essential part of everyone's liberal education can be defended only if what I am now going to call academic or technical philosophy—the philosophy that is taught and studied in courses or read in books which bear the official label—has a certain character. The essential requirement here is that it should be, both in its problems and in its techniques, continuous with the philosophizing of the man in the street or the child, as was and is the philosophizing of Socrates (and a relatively small number of others). With few exceptions, academic philosophy, as it is now taught and studied or written in books, does not meet this requirement. Since the seventeenth century, it has progressively lost the character it should have in order to justify its playing an essential part in everyone's liberal education. It has more and more lost touch with the thinking of the ordinary man.

I said earlier that it was the central purpose of this book to set forth and discuss the conditions which academic or technical philosophy must satisfy if it is to deserve the respect that is accorded science as an intellectual enterprise. Let me now add that it must satisfy the very same conditions if it is to perform the educational service it should perform in the cultivation of the human mind generally, not just exercise and perfect the talents of those who have special gifts or propensities for what goes on at present in our colleges and universities under the name of philosophy. And I would add one thing more: only if these conditions can be satisfied, and only if they are satisfied at some future date, will philosophy discharge the special function that no other academic discipline is able to discharge.

In our universities and in our culture, oriented as they are toward science and technology, philosophy is more and more needed, not just to bolster up the humanities, but to shed a light on science and technology that would enable them to be viewed in their proper perspective as parts of the whole human enterprise. Understanding the human enterprise as a whole—in which science and technology, as well as history, religion, the various arts, and the institutions of the state and of the church are component parts—is a task that calls for philosophizing of a high order, yet philosophizing of a kind that everyone engages in to some degree. It is a task that no other discipline, no other part of our culture, is able to discharge. It is a task that academic philosophy, as currently constituted and practiced, either turns away from or fails to measure up to.

The importance of reconstituting philosophy for the performance of this task, as well as the importance of making academic philosophy serve, as it should, to guide and perfect everyone's natural human tendency to philosophize, may overshadow the importance of philosophy's becoming as respectable as science or other intellectual disciplines that are now accorded more respect than philosophy, certainly in learned or academic circles and by the public generally, or at least by the well-informed public. Nevertheless, it is the third of these three points of importance which seems to me basic; for, in my judgment, unless philosophy as an intellectual enterprise can and does become as worthy of respect as science and other disciplines, it cannot discharge the cultural and educational functions for which it, and it alone, is specially suited.

(3)

Ancient and mediaeval philosophers never asked themselves whether philosophy was worthy of respect. I do not mean that they never had to defend philosophy against detractors. Plato did,

against the sophists and businessmen of his day. Scholastic philosophers did, against contempt for the vanity of all worldly learning and against a certain type of dogmatic theologian who treated philosophy as theology's handmaiden in a wholly servile sense of that term. But prior to the seventeenth century, philosophers themselves never doubted the respectability of their calling and its role or value in education and in society. There is not the slightest evidence of such concern to be found in their writings.

That concern begins in the seventeenth century. Starting with Descartes, most of the eminent figures in modern philosophy manifest worry about the state of philosophy, its achievements, its progress, its relation to other disciplines. The evidence of this concern is their intense preoccupation with new methods, new organons, new points of departure for philosophy; or their therapeutic recommendations, reforms, reconstructions to cure whatever it is they think is ailing philosophy and to improve its condition.

We find such manifestations in Leibniz and Spinoza as well as in Descartes, in Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes, and most poignantly in that extraordinary triumvirate—Locke, Berkeley, and Hume—who are responsible with Descartes for most of what has happened and is still happening in philosophy. In consequence, we have the Kantian attempt to lay down a new ground plan with safe and secure foundations for all valid knowledge; and this is followed in the nineteenth century by the various post-Kantian constructions that override Kant's cautions and transgress his critical restrictions on the philosophical enterprise. Finally, in reaction to these excesses, the pendulum swings back in the twentieth century, and we have all the varieties of philosophical reformation, reconstruction, new departures, and therapeutic programs that are associated with American pragmatism, logical positivism (both Viennese and British), analytic and linguistic philosophy (both British and American), and phenomenology and existentialism (mainly European).

If there is any one thing that all these philosophical movements have in common, it is their anxiety about the blind alleys into which philosophy has stumbled, their concern with its validity and its significance, and their effort to remedy its condition and set it off on a new path toward prosperity and progress. There is, perhaps, one other thing that these modern considerations of philosophy's condition

have in common. The modern thinkers who ask themselves, in effect, whether philosophy is quite respectable or how to make it so do not

themselves hold philosophy prior to the seventeenth century in high esteem. We are thus confronted with the fact that the earlier philosophers, who never doubted the intellectual respectability of what they were engaged in, do not have the respect of modern and contemporary thinkers, least of all from those who are most concerned about the respectability of philosophy itself.

(4)

Among my readers there may be those who would be willing to stop right here. The problem of philosophy's intellectual respectability does not interest them. I have not yet persuaded them that it makes a great deal of difference whether philosophy is as worthy an intellectual profession as science, law, medicine, or engineering; or that, since everyone philosophizes and should, everyone should also try to philosophize better and should be helped to do so, in school and by books, by those who are technically more expert; or that academic philosophy has an important function to perform in relation to all the other disciplines that constitute a university and all the other elements that constitute our culture. I want to ask such readers to perform an intellectual experiment, which may open their minds to the importance of the problems dealt with in the remaining chapters of this book.

Some years ago I gave a lecture on love in which I was concerned with the difference between love and desire. I asked my audience to perform the experiment of imagining a world without sex—a world in which everything else was exactly the same, but from which sex was totally absent. Some of them, I must confess, found this difficult to do. Some were even reluctant to try. Those who tried, however, learned something about love, or at least understood the full import of the question about the relation of love to sexual desire.

The experiment I am now going to propose is no less difficult but, I hope, just as illuminating. Try to imagine a world in which everything else is exactly the same, but from which philosophy is totally absent. I do not mean just academic philosophy; I mean philosophizing in every degree—that done almost unconsciously by ordinary men or inexpertly by scientists, historians, poets, and novelists, as well as that done with technical competence by professional philosophers.

Since philosophizing is an ingrained and inveterate human tendency, I know that it is hard to imagine a world without philosophy in which everything else is the same, including human nature; yet it is certainly no harder than imagining a world without sex as one

in which everything else is the same. In each case, of course, we are required to excise one element from human nature and leave the rest unaffected by the surgery. That can be done. It has been done before, for example, when we imagine men, who are by nature social, living anarchically in a state of nature, totally bereft of civil society and government—a useful hypothesis, as Rousseau pointed out, even though it involves a supposition contrary to fact.


In the world I have asked you to imagine, all the other arts and sciences remain continuing enterprises; history and science are taught in colleges and universities; and it is assumed without question that everyone's education should include some acquaintance with them. But philosophy is completely expunged. No one asks any philosophical questions; no one philosophizes; no one has any philosophical knowledge, insight, or understanding; philosophy is not taught or learned; and no philosophical books exist.

Would this make any difference to you? Would you be completely satisfied to live in such a world? Or would you come to the conclusion that it lacked something of importance?

You would realize—would you not?—that even though education involved acquiring historical and scientific knowledge, it could not include any understanding of either science or history, since questions about history and science (other than questions of fact) are not historical or scientific but philosophical questions. You would also realize that a great many of your opinions or beliefs, shared with most of your fellow men, would have to go unquestioned, because to question them would be to philosophize; they would remain unenlightened opinions or beliefs, because any enlightenment on these matters would have to come from philosophizing about them. You would be debarred from asking questions about yourself and your life, questions about the shape of the world and your place in it, questions about what you should be doing and what you should be seeking—all questions which, in one form or another, you do in fact often ask and would find it difficult to desist from asking.

There may be some whose only response to all this is a shrug of indifference. To them I have nothing more to say. The rest, I am sure, would find a world devoid of philosophy and philosophizing sorely lacking an important ingredient, one they would feel deprived of if they did not have it as part of their education and their intellectual life.

This experiment does not solve the problems with which this book

is concerned. It merely justifies the effort, by writer and reader, of considering the conditions that academic or technical philosophy must satisfy in order to provide the guidance it should give to everyone in his efforts to philosophize; and in order to supply the enlightenment which we know, or should know, to be unobtainable from history and science and which, therefore, would be lacking in a world bereft of philosophy. 

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