



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

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CHAPTER 2

1 of 3

The Five Conditions

Before stating the five conditions to be fulfilled by philosophy if it is to be worthy of respect, I would like to call attention to certain features of this undertaking. In the first place, I propose to state the conditions in minimal terms; that is, I propose to make demands which are within reach of fulfillment rather than hold up unattainable ideals. In the second place, the conditions stipulated will, in every case, be conditions applicable to other comparable intellectual enterprises, such as historical scholarship and scientific research, about the respectability of which there is little or no doubt. None of the conditions is peculiar to philosophy. In the third place, though they are common to science, historical scholarship, and philosophy, these conditions are, or can be, satisfied in quite different ways in each of these disciplines. Hence, to say that phi-

philosophy should be able to satisfy them is not to say that philosophy should be scientific, in either method or spirit. It is important to avoid that mistake. It has been made in other connections. We are so given to using the word “scientific” as if it were equivalent in meaning to “intellectually respectable” that we speak of “scientific history” when all we mean is that historical scholarship, without being scientific, satisfies the same general conditions of intellectual respectability that science satisfies. It may, therefore, be thought that I have looked for the characteristics which make science respectable in our culture and then turned them into conditions for philosophy to satisfy—that, in other words, I am asking philosophy to ape science in order to become as respectable. That is hardly the case. The conditions I am about to state are requirements which any mode of inquiry must satisfy to be respectable. They are generic conditions, applicable to all specific branches of knowledge, among which science is only one.

The fact that most of us believe that these conditions are satisfied by science does not alter the picture. Nor does it affect our effort to answer the following questions: Are these conditions now met by philosophical thought? If not, can they be met in the future? Can they be met in a way that is different from the way in which they are met by scientific research and historical scholarship?

With these preliminary remarks, I turn to the five conditions. The brief statement of each condition contains critical terms that need elucidation. I will call attention to these and try to explain the meanings that I attach to them.

(I)

FIRST CONDITION. To be intellectually respectable, as history and science are generally recognized to be, philosophy must be a branch of knowledge. It must be a mode of inquiry that aims at, and results in, the acquisition of knowledge which is characteristically different from the knowledge that is aimed at and achieved by historical scholarship and scientific research.

In this statement, the critical term which needs clarification is, of course, the word “knowledge.” But the reader will note that the phrase “a branch of knowledge” is also italicized. This is intended to call attention to two things which are spelled out in the remainder of the statement: that whatever meaning is attached to the word “knowledge” applies to each and every branch of knowledge; and that each distinguishable branch of knowledge differs from every other in certain characteristic ways, without such differences af-

fecting their common or generic character as knowledge.

What is involved in distinguishing branches of knowledge will be discussed later. The fourth condition, as we shall see, requires philosophy to be not only a distinct branch of knowledge, but also a relatively autonomous branch of knowledge. For the present, let our whole concern be with understanding what it means to say that philosophy must be a mode of inquiry that aims at and succeeds in acquiring knowledge in the same sense that one would say this of historical scholarship or of scientific research—or, one might add, of mathematics.

There is a sense of the word “knowledge” which sets too high a standard of achievement for it to be applicable to either historical scholarship or scientific research. At times in the past, it was thought that mathematics could measure up to this high standard. At times, philosophy also was thought to be knowledge in this high or strong sense. But in the centuries which have seen the greatest development of scientific research and historical scholarship, it has seldom, if ever, been thought that either scientific or historical knowledge was knowledge in this sense.

To impose this sense of “knowledge” upon philosophy not only makes an unreasonable demand upon it by asking it to pursue an unattainable ideal, but it also falsifies the statement of the first condition which philosophy must satisfy in order to be intellectually respectable in the same way that science and history are.¹ All that is required by the first condition is that philosophy should aim at and acquire knowledge *in the same sense* that science and history do, *not in a loftier sense of that term*.

Before I attempt to explain the moderate sense of the word “knowledge” (in which history, science, mathematics, and philosophy can or should all equally claim to be knowledge), let me explicate the too high or too strong sense of the term which I wish to exclude as inapplicable to all the disciplines just mentioned.

The attributes of knowledge in the high or strong sense are: (1) certitude beyond the challenge of skeptical doubts, (2) finality beyond the possibility of revision in the course of time.² Such knowledge consists entirely of (3) necessary truths, which have either the status of (4) self-evident principles, that is, axioms, or of (5) conclusions rigorously demonstrated therefrom.

¹ For brevity of reference, I shall from time to time use the word “history” as short for “historical scholarship,” “historical research,” or “historical inquiry.” Unless otherwise explicitly indicated, I shall never use the word “his-

tory” for historical narratives of the kind exemplified in the works of Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, Tacitus, Gibbon, Mommsen, Froude, Beard, and the like; or for speculations about the pattern or meaning of the historical development of human life and society, of the kind to be found in the writings of Vico, Spengler, Toynbee, and others. Hence, when I speak of history as a branch of knowledge, the knowledge I am referring to is the type of knowledge acquired by historical inquiry or research. The distinguishing characteristics of this type of knowledge will be discussed later.

2 We sometimes say that we are certain of something when all that we mean is that we have at the time no reason to doubt it. But when the attribute of finality is added to certitude, our meaning when we say that we are certain must be that we cannot doubt, that reason makes it impossible to doubt. This is the unchallengeable certainty of necessary truths.

The Greeks used two words as names for such knowledge. They used *nous* for our knowledge of self-evident principles—expressed in axioms which are not merely undemonstrated but intrinsically undemonstrable, and which are the ultimate premises employed in the demonstration of any conclusion that is strictly demonstrable. They used *epistème* for the knowledge that is comprised in all conclusions which can be rigorously demonstrated, having their ultimate grounds in self-evident principles. The Latin equivalents of the Greek words, especially as used in mediaeval commentaries on Greek thought, were *intellectus* and *scientia*.

For the purpose of this book, I propose to use the Greek word *epistème* for knowledge in the sense specified by the five points mentioned above.³ I am aware that, in doing so, I am extending the meaning of *epistème* to cover self-evident principles as well as demonstrated conclusions; but this seems to me justified by the fact that if there were any demonstrated conclusions of the sort which the Greeks called *epistème*, their truth could not be known apart from knowledge of the self-evident principles which the Greeks called *nous*. This whole set of propositions would then constitute an organized body of knowledge.

3 My choice of the word *epistème* rather than *scientia* is dictated by the fact that the latter, by reason of its look and sound, might get confused with the English word “science.” No one will be troubled by the statement that science is not *epistème*. They might be by the statement that science is not *scientia*.

I propose, therefore, to use the word *epistème* for, *and only for*, an organized body of knowledge which involves a number of indubitable and incorrigible propositions that serve as premises for other propositions that have the status of conclusions. An organized body of knowledge is always a set of compendent propositions—propositions that hang together through one or another type of relationship—but it is not always one in which the type of relationship

is deductive; it does not always consist of propositions some of which are self-evident premises from which the rest are derived as demonstrated conclusions. That would be the case *only if* the body of knowledge had the characteristics of *epistème*. But, I submit, no existent body of knowledge meets those exacting requirements; neither history, nor science, nor mathematics, nor philosophy are bodies of knowledge that have the properties of *epistème* in the sense indicated.

To say that no recognized body of knowledge has the characteristics of *epistème* does not require us to deny that there may be any number of propositions which have the two properties of indubitability and incorrigibility. (These characteristics, it will be remembered, are but two of the five points mentioned above, all of which would characterize a body of knowledge if it conformed to the requirements of *epistème*.) A single proposition may be indubitable and incorrigible, but standing by itself it does not constitute a body of knowledge, nor does a whole collection of such propositions constitute a body of knowledge if the members of the collection lack the compendency or logical relationship required.

One school of thought adopts the Greek view of such propositions and calls them “self-evident principles,” “indemonstrable axioms,” “*propositiones per se nota*” or “propositions known through themselves.” It regards such propositions as necessary truths and also as informative or instructive. Another school of thought takes a contrary view; it calls such propositions “analytic” or “tautological.” It regards them as nothing more than explications of our conceptual or linguistic conventions or habits. They do not give us any information about the world, nor do they state necessary truths about the nature of things.⁴

For present purposes, it is unnecessary to dwell further on the disputes which have arisen over the precise character of these isolated propositions that have the twin properties of certitude and finality or—what is the same—of indubitability and incorrigibility. It makes no difference in what follows whether such propositions are self-evident, indemonstrable, necessary truths about reality or merely analytic and tautological statements about our own meanings. In the one case, they would be the kind of knowledge which the Greeks called *nous*; in the other case, they would not be. But in either case, what I want to say remains unaffected; namely, that there are no demonstrated conclusions of the kind which the Greeks called *epistème*, and hence there is no body of knowledge of the kind for which I am appropriating that Greek word.

4 There is another class of statements which are indubitable and incorrigi-

ble: the statements each of us makes from time to time about his own subjective experience, such as “I feel pain” or “My vision is blurred.” If the speaker is not prevaricating, such biographical statements have certitude and finality for those who make them, but they can hardly claim to be communicable knowledge.

Even if there are axioms—self-evident and indemonstrable necessary truths—it is my contention that they are always isolated propositions, never the principles from which compendent conclusions are demonstrated to constitute a body of knowledge. If what are thought to be axioms turn out to be nothing but analytic statements or tautologies, my contention remains unchanged. One might devise a set of tautologies that would serve as premises from which compendent conclusions could be demonstrated. Such a set would look like an *organized body* of propositions, but it would not be an organized body of *knowledge* in the sense of *epistème*. Therefore, the existence of isolated propositions which are indubitable and incorrigible—no matter how their being indubitable and incorrigible is interpreted—does not require us to modify or qualify the statement that *epistème*, as defined, sets before us an unrealized and, I think, unrealizable ideal.

Was this ideal ever taken seriously and regarded as attainable—more than that, as actually attained? Mathematics, and more particularly Euclidean geometry, was for centuries thought to be *epistème*—by Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, and Kant. It is now generally acknowledged, since the work of Kurt Godel, that neither Euclidean geometry nor any other department of mathematics realizes the ideal of *epistème* or ever can.⁵

⁵ See B. Meltzer’s translation of Godel’s monograph, *On Formally Undecidable Propositions of Principia Mathematica and Related Systems*, New York, 1962. The book contains a readable Introduction by R. B. Braithwaite.

In addition, both Plato and Aristotle, together with their mediaeval followers, appeared to demand of philosophy that it be knowledge in this high sense. In the seventeenth century, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, idealizing mathematics as *epistème*, tried to force philosophy to conform to or approximate the model it afforded by constructing their own philosophical thought in the mathematical manner, *in ordine geometrico*. In the next century, Kant invented his extraordinary apparatus of synthetic propositions *a priori* in order to defend physics (that is, pure, not empirical, physics) as well as mathematics from skeptical doubts; but the result, on the positive side of the picture, was represented by his claim to have shown how there can be *epistème* in several, though not all, fields of inquiry. This includes his showing that certain departments of philosophical thought, though not metaphysics as Kant understood it, can be bodies of knowledge having the character of *epistème*. In

our own day, there still persists, in the tradition of scholastic philosophy, the mediaeval use of the word *scientia* (equivalent in meaning to *epistème*); and the conception of a body of knowledge which this word expresses is applied by the scholastics to metaphysics as well as to other departments of philosophy, such as the philosophy of nature or even ethics.⁶

6 This brief historical review is by no means exhaustive. It is offered merely as a citation of exemplary and eminent instances, to show the vitality of *epistème* as an ideal.

In what sense of knowledge, then, are history, science, mathematics, and philosophy branches of knowledge? If *epistème* sets too high a standard, what is the moderate or weaker sense of the word “knowledge” in which it is applicable—and equally applicable—to the disciplines just mentioned?

The properties of knowledge in this moderate sense are that it consists of propositions which are (1) testable by reference to evidence, (2) subject to rational criticism, and either (3) corrigible and rectifiable or (4) falsifiable. The Greeks had another word which I propose to use for “knowledge” in this sense. That word is *doxa*, and it is usually rendered in English by the word “opinion.” As the properties enumerated above indicate, what is being referred to is responsible, reliable, well-founded, reasonable opinion. When the English word “opinion” is used to signify the opposite of knowledge, what is being referred to usually lacks these very properties. It is irresponsible, unreliable, unfounded, unreasonable; it is mere opinion, sheer opinion, irrational prejudice.

We have here, then, the following threefold distinction: (1) knowledge in the sense of *epistème*, (2) knowledge in the sense of *doxa*, and (3) sheer or mere opinion. I propose to use the English word “opinion” whenever I wish to refer to something which is not knowledge in either of its two senses. This, I believe, conforms to ordinary usage. No one, I think, would call the conclusions of scientific or historical research “opinion” rather than “knowledge.” But when they are called “knowledge”—at least in learned circles today—that word is used in the sense of *doxa*, not *epistème*.⁷ On the other hand, when certain critics of philosophy—or, more specifically, of the type of philosophy which they call “metaphysics”—wish to exclude it from the group of disciplines that are entitled to be regarded as knowledge (in the sense of *doxa*), they dismiss metaphysics as mere opinion. They deny that it can satisfy the first condition of being as worthy of respect as history or science—namely, that it deserves to be regarded as a branch of knowledge in the sense of *doxa*, not *epistème*.⁸

7 Consider the following statement by Professor Karl Popper: “The realization that natural science is not indubitable *epistème* (*scientia*) has led to the view that it is *techne* (technique, art, technology); but the proper view, I believe, is that it consists of *doxai* (opinions, conjectures), controlled by critical discussion as well as by experimental *techne*” (*Conjectures and Refutations*, New York, 1962, p. 103, fn. 12).

8 Just as I shall try consistently to use the word “opinion” to name the opposite of knowledge in either of its two senses, so I shall try to make the following consistent use of the word “knowledge.” I shall never use it in the sense of *epistème* without explicitly indicating that that is the sense in which I am using it. If I use the word without any qualifiers, its meaning will always be that of *doxa*, as defined by the properties enumerated in the text above. If I wish to make sure that the reader does not forget that this is the sense in which the word is being used, I shall say “knowledge in the sense of *doxa*.” And I shall never use the word *doxa* to signify mere or sheer opinion.

Before turning to the second of the five conditions, I should like to comment briefly on the significance of relinquishing—for philosophy in particular—the claim that it can achieve knowledge in the sense of *epistème*.

Epistème represents an illusory ideal that has bemused man’s understanding of his efforts and his achievements in the pursuit of knowledge. It has led philosophers to misconceive philosophy and to make unsupportable claims for their theories or conclusions. In that branch of philosophy which is called epistemology (especially in the form that it takes in contemporary Anglo-American thought), the abandonment of *epistème* would eliminate three problems with which it is obsessed—the problem of our knowledge of material objects, of other minds, and of the past. These are baffling, perhaps insoluble, problems only when the claim is made that we can have knowledge of material objects, other minds, and the past—knowledge which has the certitude and finality of *epistème*. Retract that false claim, substitute the sense of *doxa* for *epistème*, and the problems cease to be problems, or at least to be baffling. A large portion of epistemology—at least that part of it which has contemporary prominence—would simply wither away if “know” and “knowledge” were never used in the sense of *epistème*.

Abandoning *epistème* as an illusory ideal would not only shrink epistemology to its proper size, but it would also starve, if not silence, the skeptic who feeds on the claim to achieve *epistème* in any department of human inquiry. Claim no more for philosophy, or science, or history, than the achievement of knowledge in the sense of testable, corrigible, falsifiable *doxa*, and the skeptic will either be out of work or find the task he sets himself less to his liking.

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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

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