



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

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CHAPTER 2

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SECOND CONDITION. The second condition follows closely on the first. For philosophy to be respectable as a branch of knowledge, philosophical theories or conclusions must be capable of being judged by appropriate criteria of *goodness*; or, in other words, they must be capable of being judged by reference to an appropriately formulated standard of *truth*.

The two words that require comment are the italicized ones—”goodness” and “truth.” The criteria of goodness appropriate to anything that claims to be knowledge are criteria of truth. To say, in connection with historical scholarship, scientific research, or philosophical thought, that one conclusion is better than another is

to say that it is sounder or truer.

There are other criteria of goodness in human works or products— aesthetic and utilitarian criteria. One musical composition or piece of sculpture may be judged better than another by relevant aesthetic criteria; one implement or machine can be judged better than another by standards of utility. But while scientific theories may also be evaluated by reference to aesthetic or utilitarian criteria, they are, in addition, subject to the criteria of truth, which are not applicable to musical compositions or machines.

When I lay down the requirement that philosophical theories or conclusions must be capable of being judged for their relative truth—one truer or sounder than another—I am saying that if philosophy is a branch of knowledge, in the same sense that history or science is, then it can never suffice merely to find one philosophical theory more to our liking than another; or to regard one as better than another simply because it is more pleasing to consider, more harmonious to contemplate, or more useful for whatever purpose we have in mind. We must be able to say that it is truer than another, or at least to hope that we can find some theory which is truer than others. And when we say this, we must use the word “truer” in the same sense in which we apply it in making judgments about scientific theories or historical conclusions, relative to one another.

What is that sense? Since we are not here concerned with *episteme*, but only with knowledge in the sense of *doxa*, we can eliminate at once the standard of indubitable and incorrigible truth that is set by self-evident propositions and demonstrated conclusions. We can also eliminate, I think, the standard of truth which would be set by statements that are *completely verified* by empirical data, if complete verification were possible, as many now realize it is not.

Those who supposed that complete empirical verification was possible were, in effect, still looking for knowledge in the sense of *episteme*, even though they renounced self-evident principles and conclusions demonstrated therefrom; for if a statement could be *completely verified* by empirical data, it would have the certitude and the finality—the indubitability and the incorrigibility—that sets knowledge in the sense of *episteme* far above knowledge in the sense of *doxa*. The only standard of truth that is consistent with knowledge in the sense of *doxa* must eschew certitude and finality; it must allow for the judgment that one theory or conclusion is truer than another, or for the judgment that it is false, but never for the judgment that one theory or conclusion is *absolutely true*, ren-

dering all other theories of the same matter necessarily false.

Professor Popper, having asked us to renounce the illusory ideal of *episteme* and to regard scientific knowledge as knowledge only in the sense of *doxa*, quite consistently substitutes *falsifiability* for *verifiability* in the appraisal of scientific theories. In his view, a scientific theory can be falsified by empirical data, but its falsification does not make competing theories true. If they were put to the same test and escaped falsification, they would simply be truer than the falsified theory, but not true in any final or absolute sense; for the next time they were put to the test, they too might be falsified. The more times that a theory which is being tested in different ways escapes falsification, the more assured we are of its truth, or the more its being true is confirmed; but such successive steps of confirmation simply increase the degree of its approximation to truth in a gradation of degrees which never reaches the limiting point of final and incorrigible truth.

At any point in this series, the next test might result in the falsification of the theory. Hence, the truth that is attributed to a theory which has been tested a number of times and not yet falsified is not the grade of truth which makes all other competing theories false. It only makes the theory in question truer for the time being than other theories which have been less amply tested or, as tested, have been falsified. Therefore, when we speak of a theory as “true” or as “having truth,” we should always understand this in a relative, not in an absolute, sense; in other words, we should understand that it is only *truer* than some other theory, but not that it is *true* in and by itself.⁹

9 See Karl Popper’s *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, New York, 1959; and also *Conjectures and Refutations*, especially pp. 33-65, 97-119, 215-250. Cf. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Princeton, 1962, Addendum, pp. 369-381. It should be pointed out that whereas a theory may be judged *truer* when, put to the test, it escapes falsification, it must be judged false when it is empirically falsified—that is, simply false, not just *false* than some other theory. There are degrees of confirmation in the direction of truth, but no degrees of falsification. Of course, the formal contradictory of an empirically falsified proposition must also be judged true, not truer than some other proposition. But this does not require any amendment or qualification of Popper’s position. What has been learned from experience is exactly the same whether it is expressed by saying that a particular theory or conclusion is false or that its formal contradictory is true.

Professor Popper's standard of truth is as applicable to the conclusions of historical research as it is to scientific theories and conclusions. Since I hold that philosophy can be regarded as knowledge in the same sense that history and science are esteemed as knowledge (that is, doxa), I also maintain that the same standard of relative truth which is applicable to them is applicable to philosophical theories and conclusions.

Professor Popper denies this. He thinks that the property of being falsifiable by reference to experience draws a sharp line of demarcation between scientific and philosophical theories. If that were so, philosophy and science could not be knowledge in the same sense, and one philosophical theory could not be judged truer than another in the same sense that one scientific theory can be judged truer than another.¹⁰

10 See *Conjectures and Refutations*, pp. 66-96; cf. pp. 184-200.

When I say that philosophical theories are, like scientific theories, falsifiable by reference to experience, I do not mean that they are falsifiable in the same way or by the same kind of experience; this will become clearer later.¹¹ Furthermore, to say that philosophical theories are subject to an empirical test which may result in their falsification is not to say that this is the only way in which they can be tested; there are at least three other tests or criteria, as we shall see.¹² Of these four criteria, two—the empirical and the logical tests—are applicable to scientific as well as philosophical theories; but two, which shall go unnamed for the moment, are peculiar to philosophy.

11 See Chapters 7 and 8.

12 See Chapters 9, 11, and 12.

These four tests provide us with a basis for regarding one philosophical theory as truer than another—or even, perhaps, for rejecting a theory as untenable—but never for maintaining that a particular theory is finally established as true, the one and only right theory of the matter. In addition, the application of these tests may enable us to discover various ways to rectify or otherwise improve a particular theory, thus making it truer, more nearly true, but never absolutely true. Nothing more than this need be, and nothing less than this should be, claimed for philosophy if it is to be intellectually respectable as a branch of knowledge.

THIRD CONDITION. The first two conditions stipulated that philosophical work should achieve a certain kind of result—that is, knowledge that has relative truth. The third condition stipulates that philosophical work should be carried on in a certain way. It is procedural rather than substantive; like the first two conditions, it is one that history and science are generally thought to satisfy. As modes of inquiry, they are conducted as public enterprises, not as private affairs. To be worthy of respect as a mode of inquiry aiming at knowledge and developing theories capable of being tested for their relative truth and capable of being falsified, rectified, or improved, philosophy too should be conducted as a *public* enterprise.¹³

The operative word here is “public.” We have come to see that any human work is personal in some sense and to some degree—a scientific theory, a historical interpretation, as well as a poem or a painting.¹⁴ But the inescapable personal character of any human work does not necessarily make it exclusively personal in the sense of being wholly private. It can have a public as well as a private aspect. There may be some things which are exclusively private, such as certain emotional experiences, the mystic’s vision, the voice of conscience, and the like. The exclusively private is, of course, also incommunicable. Hence, insofar as knowledge in general, and any branch of knowledge in particular, is communicable, it cannot be exclusively private.

13 Implicit in this is the assumption that work which aims at knowledge and which is capable of being judged by standards of truth should have the character of a public enterprise.

14 See Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, Chicago, 1958.

The distinction between public and private is a matter of degree. What we are concerned with here is the degree to which a type of human work—scientific research, historical scholarship, or philosophical thought—assumes a public character. I am, therefore, going to try to specify the conditions under which human work takes on the character of a public enterprise.

A mode of inquiry aiming at knowledge has a public character

- (i) if the participants in the enterprise are willing and able to answer the same questions;¹⁵
- (ii) if the questions or problems to be faced by the participants in the enterprise can be attacked piecemeal, one by one, so

that it is not necessary to answer all the questions involved in order to answer any one or some of them;

(iii) if it is possible for the participants to disagree as well as to agree about the answers to be given to the questions that direct the inquiry;

(iv) if disagreements among the participants, when they arise, are adjudicable by reference to standards commonly accepted by participants in the enterprise;¹⁶

(v) and if cooperation is possible among the participants; that is, if it is possible for a number of men working on the same problem or question to make partial contributions which are cumulative and which add up to a better solution than any one of them proposes.

15 It is not necessary that all participants do in fact answer the same questions, but there should be evidence that some do, and it should be possible for all to do so. Philosophy is a private affair, not a public enterprise, if each philosopher answers his own questions—questions whose significance is determined by his own “system of thought,” so that they are not genuine questions for anyone standing outside his system.

16 This is another way of saying that philosophical work has the character of a public enterprise only if it is somehow policeable.

The possibility of progress is not itself one of the requirements of a public enterprise, but rather a consequence of conducting an enterprise in a public manner. If a cognitive enterprise—whether it is history, science, or philosophy—has a public character, according to the requirements stated above, then it will also be an enterprise in which the state of the discipline can be more advanced at a later time because of the cumulative effect of the work done by contributors who add to or correct the work of others. In the temporal picture of the enterprise as a whole, there can, in short, be an increase in knowledge, in the approximation to truth, in the degree or extent of understanding achieved.

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FOURTH CONDITION. The fourth condition makes explicit what was implied by the earlier statement that philosophy must be a branch of knowledge. To be such, it must be clearly distinct from other

branches of knowledge. In addition, it must have *relative autonomy*—that is, some degree of independence of other branches of knowledge.

A branch of knowledge, as the words indicate, is a distinguishable substantive part of the totality of human knowledge. Similarly, a mode of inquiry is a distinguishable procedural part of the whole human effort to know. A discipline which is, substantively or procedurally, only a part of the whole picture cannot be completely autonomous—that is, in every way independent of all the rest. Yet it must have some measure of autonomy if it is to claim the status of a separate and distinct branch of knowledge, or to claim the possession of a separate and distinct mode of inquiry.

I am saying that philosophy should be able to make these claims. What is the basis of making them—for philosophy or for any other discipline? On the substantive side, a discipline has the requisite measure of autonomy if it has some questions of its own to answer—questions which can be answered by it and by no other discipline, and questions which it can answer without reference to results obtained by any other discipline. And on the procedural side, it must have a method of its own for answering whatever questions are proper to it.

This does not preclude the possibility of questions which the particular discipline shares with other disciplines; that is, questions two or more disciplines must cooperate to answer, or questions which can be answered by one discipline only by taking into account the results obtained in some other discipline or by some other mode of inquiry.

Let us now apply these considerations to philosophy. To have the requisite autonomy, it must have certain questions of its own. I propose to call these “philosophical questions,” purely and simply. These are the questions which it and it alone can answer; these it can answer without reference to what is known in other disciplines; and these it can answer by a mode of inquiry distinctively its own. There may also be what I propose to call “mixed questions,” questions the answers to which involve both philosophy and science, or both philosophy and history. Whatever contribution philosophers can make to the solution of mixed questions depends on the answers they give to questions that belong to philosophy alone.¹⁷

17 Philosophical progress is independent of progress in other fields of inquiry so far as the pure questions are concerned, but that is obviously not the case with regard to the mixed questions. On

the distinction between pure and mixed questions in philosophy, see C. I. Lewis, *Mind and the World-Order*, New York, 1929, pp. 4-8.

The existence of mixed questions is widely acknowledged. Scientists and historians recognize that they frequently consider questions that go beyond science and history—questions which cannot be answered solely by means of the knowledge that has been acquired by scientific or historical research. Similarly, lawyers, physicians, engineers, poets, novelists, musicians, painters, architects, or educators often face questions that call for thinking on their part which requires them to go beyond or outside the sphere of their special professional competence. To answer such questions they need knowledge of a kind that is not to be found in their own special field of learning.

Not all such mixed questions involve philosophy as the additional kind of knowledge or special competence that is required for their solution; there may be mixed questions which call for a combination of scientific and legal knowledge, of medical and historical knowledge, of architectural and engineering knowledge, and so forth. But some of them—and by far the most important ones, in the view of the professional in one or another special field of learning—are questions that require him to philosophize—that is, to have recourse to philosophical knowledge or philosophical thought, in addition to the knowledge supplied by his own branch of learning or field of technical competence.

Unfortunately, the specialist seldom recognizes that philosophy is also a special branch of learning, having questions of its own (just as his own special field has questions of its own), questions that require a special technical competence (just as do the questions in his special field). As a consequence, when he deals with mixed questions involving philosophy, he too often is content to philosophize without the requisite knowledge or competence. His philosophizing is on about the same level as that of the uninstructed but intelligent layman who thinks about problems which are purely philosophical.

The critical point here is that the mixed questions which require the addition of philosophy to some other special field of learning are exactly like the mixed questions which require the combination of any two distinguishable branches of knowledge—for example, science and law, medicine and history, architecture and engineering. In all instances of the latter sort, the specialist in one field usually recognizes that he must call upon the specialist in some other

field to help him deal with the mixed question; or he must himself acquire the requisite special knowledge which belongs to that other field. He must proceed in the same way, I am contending, when the mixed question involves science and philosophy, history and philosophy, law and philosophy, medicine and philosophy, education and philosophy, and the like.

The procedure recommended is right only if philosophy is itself a special field of learning, a distinct branch of knowledge, with questions of its own (that is, questions which are purely philosophical) and with a special technical competence of its own for answering them. Were that not so, it would be perfectly all right for the specialist to philosophize with no more competence than the intelligent layman exhibits when he does so. But then it would also be the case that philosophy could not possibly satisfy the first condition of its being a respectable academic discipline; namely, that it be a distinguishable branch of learning or knowledge.

The fourth condition, with which we are here concerned, adds an important corollary to the first: that, as a distinct branch of knowledge, philosophy must have a measure of autonomy, or independence of all other special fields of learning. It must have questions of its own— questions which are purely philosophical and involve no other field of learning and no other special competence than that possessed by the philosopher.

This entails a further corollary: when a philosopher, or anyone else, faces a mixed question that involves philosophy and some other special field of learning, a competent solution of the problem must draw upon philosophical knowledge as well as upon the knowledge to be found in the other special field of learning, whatever it may be. This confirms a point that was made earlier: the character of the philosopher's contribution to answering mixed questions which involve philosophy and some other branch of knowledge is determined by the philosopher's answers to questions which are purely philosophical—questions which can be answered competently only by those who have the special competence of philosophy as a distinct and relatively autonomous branch of knowledge or mode of inquiry.

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