



---

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

**Mortimer Adler**

### CHAPTER 2

3 of 3

( 5 )

FIFTH CONDITION. This last condition concerns the subject matter of those questions which are purely philosophical—that is, which belong to philosophy, and to philosophy alone, as a special field of learning or mode of inquiry. Such questions, the fifth condition stipulates, must be primarily questions about that which is and happens in the world or about what men should do and seek, and only secondarily questions about how we know, think, or speak about that which is and happens or about what men do and seek.

Philosophical questions about that which is and happens in the world deal, for example, with such matters as: the nature of being and existence; the properties of anything which is; the modes of

being and the types of existence; change and permanence in being or mutability and immutability; the existence of that which changes; change itself and the types of change; causation and the types of causes; necessity and contingency; the material and the immaterial; the physical and the non-physical; freedom and indeterminacy; the powers of the human mind; the nature and extent of human knowledge; the freedom of the will. (In addition to such purely philosophical questions, there is a host of mixed questions—questions about the nature of man, about society, and about history—the answers to which depend in part upon scientific and historical knowledge.)

Questions about what men should do and seek are concerned with human conduct and the organization of society. They deal, for example, with such matters as: good and evil; right and wrong; the order of goods; duties and obligations; virtues and vices; happiness, life's purpose or goal; justice and rights in the sphere of human relations and social interaction; the state and its relation to the individual; the good society, the just polity, and the just economy; war and peace.

For brevity of reference in all that follows, I propose to call questions about that which is and happens or about what men should do and seek “first-order questions” and the knowledge that is contained in tenable answers to such questions, “first-order philosophical knowledge.” In contrast, “second-order questions” are questions about our first-order knowledge, questions about the content of our thinking when we try to answer first-order questions, or questions about the ways in which we express such thought in language. The tenable answers to such questions constitute “second-order philosophical knowledge.”

As second-order knowledge, philosophy may be reflexive; that is, it may be analytical and critical of its own concepts or of its own language; it may examine its own knowledge and try to give an account of it. But it may also deal with other branches of knowledge or other modes of inquiry; and, by doing so, provide us with an account of scientific knowledge, historical knowledge, mathematical knowledge, or the kind of knowledge that is to be found in the deposit of common-sense beliefs. Furthermore, on the plane of its second-order questions, philosophy may achieve clarification of concepts and language, not only in its own field of discourse, but in that of any other special discipline; and it may also perform what has come to be called the therapeutic function of curing the intellectual defects that arise from conceptual unclarity or the misuse of language, on the part of philosophers or any other special-

ists.

If we use the words “critical” or “analytic” for all these aspects of philosophy as second-order knowledge or as a mode of inquiry on the plane of second-order questions, then what the fifth condition stipulates is that philosophy *must be more than critical or analytic*. And if we use the words “constructive” or “synthetic” for philosophy as first-order knowledge or as a mode of inquiry on the plane of first-order questions, then the other face of this same stipulation is that philosophy *must be constructive or synthetic*.<sup>18</sup>

I said earlier, in connection with the fourth condition, that philosophy’s contribution to the solution of mixed questions depends on the answers it gives to questions that are purely philosophical. Hence the latter have an obvious priority. Now I want to add that, while second-order questions in philosophy may all be purely philosophical, not mixed, whereas only some first-order questions are of this sort, it is nevertheless the case that the answers philosophers give to second-order questions are determined or affected by their answers to first-order questions, either as explicitly given or as assumed and unacknowledged, as is too often the case. This means that first-order questions, pure or mixed, have primacy in philosophical inquiry; and that, of these, the pure questions take priority over the mixed.<sup>19</sup>

18 For a contemporary discussion of the distinction between philosophy as critical or analytic and philosophy as constructive or synthetic, see C. D. Broad, “Two Lectures on the Nature of Philosophy,” in *Clarity Is Not Enough*, ed. by H. D. Lewis, London, 1963, especially pp. 56-75. Philosophy as first-order knowledge or as dealing with first-order questions is also sometimes called “speculative”; and sometimes it is identified with “metaphysics” as that word is currently used. Cf. Manley Thompson, in *Philosophy*, Englewood Cliffs, 1965, pp. i33ff.

19 If I allow myself to misuse once more that much misused word “metaphysics,” in order to refer to that part of the philosophical inquiry which is concerned with first-order questions, then I can rephrase what is said above by saying that metaphysics, as constructive philosophy, is prior to epistemology and to conceptual or linguistic clarification, all of which constitutes critical philosophy.

This fifth condition imposes a demand upon philosophy which in certain circles of contemporary thought would be deemed excessive or even impossible to meet.<sup>20</sup> The uninstructed layman who

has done some thinking about philosophy might never suspect that an influential, professionally esteemed, and highly skilled group of philosophers have restricted their own inquiries to second-order questions and have seriously questioned the possibility of dealing with first-order questions by any method at philosophy's disposal which would result in the achievement of knowledge, even when that is cut down from *episteme* to *doxa*. Those who are acquainted with the literature of British and American thought in the last forty or fifty years will recognize at once what I hasten explicitly to acknowledge: that, in laying down this fifth condition for philosophy to meet, I am taking sharp issue with positions taken by the positivists, the analysts, and the linguistic philosophers.

20 The reader may not see why this fifth condition need be added to the other four. If philosophy were to satisfy the other four, and yet restricted itself to being critical or analytic, would it not deserve, as a special discipline having a technical competence of its own, the kind of respect that is accorded to historical scholarship and scientific research? It would; but conceding this must not lead us to overlook two things: that the solution of second-order problems in philosophy presupposes the solution of first-order problems; and that, to perform its function as an essential ingredient in everyone's liberal education, academic philosophy must stay in touch with and be instructive to the philosophizing of the layman, which is almost exclusively concerned with first-order questions about that which is and happens in the world or about what men should do and seek.

They have said, or they have appeared to think, that, if not all, then at least the main problems of philosophy are epistemological.

They have argued, and even tried to prove, the impossibility of metaphysics, by which they mean any attempt to answer first-order questions in philosophy.

They have said that philosophy does not and cannot add to our information about the world. They have said that philosophy gives us no new knowledge; it serves only to clarify what we already know. It cannot give us knowledge of new facts, but only a better understanding of the facts already known by other disciplines.

They have said that since mathematics answers all formal questions, and since science together with history answers all questions of fact, all that is left for philosophy is to clarify the answers and the language of science and mathematics.

They have said that the philosopher does not add to the sum-total of human knowledge in the way in which the scientist and the historian do.<sup>21</sup>

21 See, for example, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, New York, 1953, also *The Blue and Brown Books*, New York, 1958; A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, London, 1946, also *The Problem of Knowledge*, London, 1956; John Wisdom, *Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*, New York, 1953, esp. pp. 16-101, 229-282. In the collection edited by A. J. Ayer entitled *Logical Positivism*, Glencoe, 1959, see the essays by Moritz Schlick (pp. 53-59 and pp. 209-277), Rudolf Carnap (pp. 60-81), A. J. Ayer (pp. 228-243), F. P. Ramsey (pp. 321-326), Gilbert Ryle (pp. 327-344), and Friedrich Waismann (pp. 345-380). In another collection, edited by Edwards and Pap, entitled *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy*, Glencoe, 1957, see A. J. Ayer's "Demonstration of the Impossibility of Metaphysics" (pp. 555-564) and the debate about logical positivism between Ayer and F. C. Copleston (pp. 586-618).

This last statement contains, in my judgment, a kernel of truth; for if philosophy is first-order knowledge, it is not first-order knowledge of the same sort as science and history: it is not knowledge of the same subject matter nor is it achieved by the same method. The point at issue here is, therefore, not whether philosophy is first-order knowledge of exactly the same sort as science and history, but whether philosophy is or can be first-order knowledge of a type that is as different from science and history as each of these in turn is different from the other.


As I have already said, I hope in subsequent chapters to make these differences clear. I hope also to be able to defend the position I am taking as against the one taken by the positivists, the analysts, and the linguistic philosophers, by showing that philosophy is able to answer first-order questions of its own and need not be restricted exclusively to inquiry on the plane of second-order questions. At this point I am simply positing, among the conditions of philosophy's respectability and especially of its educational value and its contribution to culture, that it should consist primarily of first-order knowledge.

( 6 )

All that I have done so far is to stipulate a number of conditions to be satisfied by philosophy in order for it to deserve the kind of respect now generally accorded science and history and in order for

it to play the role in liberal education, in the organization of a university, and in the framework of our culture that is appropriate to it. I have not yet attempted to show that philosophy does satisfy these conditions; or if it does not, that it can do so or how it might do so. Nor have I answered questions about the conditions themselves, questions which the reader would be justified in asking. Are the five stipulations the right ones? Are all of them necessary, or can some be eliminated? Should others be added? Has the meaning or import of these conditions been correctly stated? Do these conditions raise difficulties or involve matters that need further clarification? The next two chapters should provide answers to some of these questions and background for answering the rest.

A conception of philosophy is obviously implicit in this set of five conditions. Other conceptions of philosophy, it might be expected, would reject some of the conditions posited. Considering alternative views of philosophy in relation to them should give us a better understanding of the conditions here laid down. That will be done in Chapter 3.

Any conception of philosophy, or any statement of the conditions it should satisfy, involves a number of presuppositions in the form of definite philosophical commitments. This holds true not only of the view of philosophy here being advanced; it holds true of alternative views as well. An explicit avowal of the philosophical presuppositions to which we are committed if we accept the conditions here laid down, but which can be avoided if we reject these conditions, cannot but help to throw light on their meaning or import. Chapter 4 will attempt to do this. 

***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***

***Post Here:*** <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/tgioid/>

---

## 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

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzigan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

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

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.