



THE PHILOSOPHER

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I. INTRODUCTION

At the conclusion of these lectures on the works of the mind, it seems appropriate to begin by surveying the series and noting the principles by which the parts are ordered. This is also a fitting way to introduce the philosopher, for the part that philosophy always tries to play is never one part among others, but rather the ordering of all parts to provide a grasp of the whole. Here at once you see two characteristics of philosophical work: its apparent megalomania, or desire for universality; and its obsessive devotion to neatness, or desire for order.

What is common to all forms of intellectual work is their concern with truth. As if prompted by that fact, I must hasten to exemplify a third characteristic which, in the popular conception, is most typical of the philosopher—the tendency to disagree with other philosophers.

In the opening lecture, Yves Simon made a fundamental division of all intellectual work into two sorts: intellectual work directive of manual labor, and intellectual work which prepares for contemplation. Both sorts of intellectual activity are as truly work as the productive labor of the hands. They are useful rather than terminal, aiming at a result beyond themselves; and they engage the mind in change or motion, in time and transitivity. As manual work is work, but not of the mind, so contemplation, in Yves Simon's view, is of the mind, but not work. In contrast to all forms of intellectual work, contemplation is an immanent activity, terminal and useless, intrinsically enjoyable, in the mode of rest rather than of motion, and so detached from the process of time—an image in this life of eternity!

If Yves Simon were right, what would be most worthy of the philosopher: to do the work of inquiry, analysis, and demonstration which seeks to learn the truth, or to transcend work and enjoy the rest of contemplating truths already learned? This is, of course, a variant of Lessing's famous question: Which is better—the pursuit of the truth or its possession?

Not being an incurably romantic German, I would—and so would Yves Simon—give the obviously sensible answer. The possession of the truth, of course, is better. But here I must part company with Simon. I do not think that, in this life, any except the simplest truths can be enduringly possessed. Except for axioms which are almost a natural habit of the mind and simple truths like “two plus two equals four,” there is no truth which requires strenuous work to learn that we can hold on to for more than a moment without continuing to work at it. The same sort of work—the work of analyzing, arguing, proving—is needed to sustain the truth in our minds as was needed for its original acquisition.

Even if it were not confirmed by Christian dogma, the evidence is persuasive that, in this life, we are condemned to work and are not privileged to rest. I am speaking now as a philosopher on the natural plane. The theologian can have more to say. He can say that on the supernatural plane and with the help of grace the soul can achieve some measure of heavenly rest on earth—in a remote and inchoate participation of beatitude. But the philosophic life is cer-

tainly not to be identified with the life of grace. It is entirely an affair of labor, of keeping the truth alive in our minds by intellectual work, with no time out for resting to contemplate it. On the natural plane, man—body and soul together—is a temporal creature, completely immersed in time and embroiled in process. Not even in the most stable habits of the mind is there any transcendence of time, for even they fail and atrophy without the continual effort of exercise.

The object of contemplation is not truth in that logical or subjective sense of truth which signifies a quality inherent in our judgments when they conform to reality. Though “two plus two equals four” and the law of contradiction are relatively permanent truths which we can possess without perpetual reworking, they are not proper objects for contemplation. As for every other form of knowledge, so for contemplation, the proper object is not the content of the mind itself but an existent thing, a real being. But contemplation differs from all other forms of knowledge in two respects: first, it is an act of comprehensive vision rather than of discursive thought; second, it is never an act of the intellect alone but of the intellect united with the will in a synthesis of knowledge and love. Precisely because of this, the object of contemplation is always something beautiful, for beauty is that synthesis of truth and goodness which is the objective counterpart of the union of knowledge and love in our act of contemplation.

In the opinion of the theologian, the only adequate object of contemplation is the divine beauty. The beauty of the real and immutable existence of God is the object of the beatific vision, not the discursive or demonstrable truth that God exists or that God is immutable. But the vision of God belongs to the order of the supernatural and the eternal. Such contemplation is not possible in this life. What is possible, according to the theologian, is that remote and inchoate participation in beatitude which occurs in the contemplative acts of religious devotion and meditative absorption. Certainly the work of philosophy does not specifically prepare for contemplation of this sort. The least speculative person who is truly religious is more inclined to contemplation than the philosopher.

There is, however, one sort of contemplation which does occur in this life and on the natural plane. It takes place whenever we give ourselves fully to the immediate apprehension of any individual whole, whether a natural thing or a work of art. Two conditions must be fulfilled. We must embrace the object cognitively; that is, we must apprehend it in an act of vision, rather than analytically or

discursively. And we must go beyond a mere knowing of it to the loving enjoyment of its real perfection. The mind being inadequate for the knowledge of individual, sensible things, such contemplation is primarily aesthetic—an act of the sensitive faculties, in which the mind cooperates. If there is in this life any cognitive activity which gives us a moment of rest, detachment from utility, and escape from the purposiveness of work, it occurs in the contemplation of sensible beauty. Certainly the work of philosophy does not prepare for contemplation of this sort.

It has seemed necessary to insist upon this point in order to identify the philosopher and the philosophic life. It is not, as Aristotle said, the godlike life of contemplation. It is, on the contrary, the quite human life of perpetual toil, winning nothing but each day's bread, and having to work again for the next, with no imperishable store of truth to lay up for feasting in days of leisure. Philosophy begins in wonder as Aristotle said, but, Aristotle to the contrary, it also ends in wonder with old questions unanswered and with familiar answers alive only in so far as they raise new questions.

Yet I would not completely depart from Yves Simon's attempt to make a basic distinction among the activities of the mind. Instead of doing it in terms of work and contemplation, I would do it in terms of the speculative and the practical—practical work preparing for or directing moral conduct and artistic production, manual or otherwise; and speculative work aiming at *knowledge about* reality, not *contemplation of* it. It seeks to form habits of knowledge and keep them alive by continual consideration of truths which we once thought we fully understood, but which in this life can never be perfectly comprehended.

In the light of these preliminary remarks, we are now prepared to consider the distinctive marks of philosophic work. We can do this by asking four questions—questions which apply to any intellectual work. By asking them, we can compare philosophy with all the other forms of intellectual work which have been described in this series of lectures. The four questions are:

1. What is its end or aim?
2. What is its subject matter?
3. By what method or process, by what motions of the mind, does it proceed?
4. Most important of all, is it individual or cooperative, solitary or social?

II. THE END OR AIM OF PHILOSOPHICAL WORK

We are all familiar with the distinction between the useful and the fine arts. Some arts, like shoemaking and shipbuilding, make things to be used; shoes and ships are not normally ends in themselves but means to the accomplishment of some purpose, such as locomotion or transportation. Other arts, like music and poetry, make things to be enjoyed rather than used; sonatas and sonnets can, of course, be made to serve some ulterior purpose, even as a shoe or a ship can be admired rather than used, but the intention of the poet or musician is normally to provide an object to be known and to delight the knowing mind. This distinction between the useful and the fine arts derives partly from the intention of the artist and partly from the manner in which the product of the artist's work is received. The recipient of the work can violate the artist's intention, using what he meant to be enjoyed, or enjoying what he meant to be used.

As we have already observed, an individual work of art can be an object of contemplation when its beauty pleases us on being seen. To the extent that the artist intended the product of his labors to be contemplatively enjoyed, his work can be described as preparing for contemplation. But, paradoxically, his work is not itself a speculative work of the mind. Artistic thinking is practical thinking, in one of the two major senses of practicality. It aims at production. Moral and political thinking are practical in the other major sense. They aim at human action, private or social. If, now, we add the fact that the speculative work of the scientist and the philosopher, unlike that of the artist producing a thing of beauty, does not prepare for contemplation, we see that the basic division of the works of the mind into speculative and practical cannot be made by reference to contemplation as the end of the one, and utility as the end of the other.

What, then, are the ends by which we can distinguish the speculative from the practical operations of the mind? The traditional answer is: knowledge and action. But this answer will be misleading unless we clarify both of its principal words.

By "knowledge" we must understand only those types of apprehension which can be expressed in a judgment, an affirmation or denial; we must exclude the kind of knowledge which cannot be so articulated, namely, the intuitive perception of individuals, the nonanalytic vision of wholes. This does not exclude contemplation from the realm of knowledge, natural or supernatural; it merely

denies that it is an end which can be served by the speculative work of the mind.

By “action” we must understand both making and doing, the production of ships and poems as well as the performance of moral and political deeds. Otherwise, identifying action too narrowly with moral and political activity, we would exclude artistic work from the sphere of the practical, where it properly belongs even when its product happens to be an object of contemplation.

We are now ready to note one of the distinguishing characteristics of philosophical work. It is *both* speculative and practical, whereas—with the exception of theology—all other works of the mind are *either* speculative *or* practical, *but not both*. Let us consider the works of the mind which have been discussed in this series of lectures. They are exemplary of all types, even if not exhaustive.

On the one hand, we have the painter, the sculptor, the architect, the musician. The work of these, and typically of all the other arts, is essentially practical in end, aiming at production, not knowledge. So, too, is the work of the legislator, the statesman, and the administrator, for they are men of prudence, aiming not at knowledge, but at moral and political action.

On the other hand, we have the historian, the scientist, and the mathematician. We can ignore, as incidental, the fact that these men are usually writers who produce works of liberal art. We can similarly ignore the fact that historical knowledge may have implications for political action, or that scientific knowledge may have technical applications in the sphere of the useful arts. The primary aim of the historian, the scientist, the mathematician, is to learn the truth about some phase of existence or reality. His end being knowledge, rather than action, his work is essentially speculative. And even when the knowledge he has gained has practical significance, the consideration of that knowledge as directive of action or production does not fall within the scope of historical or scientific research. Such practical consideration, and ultimately the use of knowledge, belongs to the man of action or to the engineer.

Though the philosopher is neither a man of action nor an engineer, though he is neither a man of prudence nor a productive artist, he does not, like the historian, the scientist, and the mathematician, limit himself to learning what is the case, but is equally concerned with what *should be*. Judgments about what is the case are theoretic. Judgments about what should be done are practical. The phi-

philosopher is concerned with both sorts of truth, theoretic and practical. Those who fail to understand the twofold aim of philosophy usually make the mistake of identifying philosophy with logic or metaphysics, on the one hand; or with ethics and politics, on the other.

I shall presently deal with the character of speculative philosophy, in considering the difference in subject-matter and method between philosophy and history, science, and mathematics. Here I wish to add a few remarks about the nature of practical philosophy.

Philosophy is practical in only one of the two basic divisions of the practical order. As we observed, thought and knowledge can be practical or useful in two ways: either in the sphere of doing as a guide to right conduct, or in the sphere of making as directing good productions. Philosophy is practical only in the sphere of prudence, not in the sphere of art.* Moral and political philosophy tell us how to act well, privately or socially; they do not tell us how to make anything. Even the philosophy of art does not tell us how to produce fine or useful objects; it is not the sort of technical knowledge which underlies the techniques of the particular arts but rather a speculative inquiry into the nature and kinds of art. This fact is of importance in the contemporary world because of the prevalent tendency to think that knowledge is useless or impractical unless it is ultimately productive. By that false criterion, philosophy is utterly impractical or useless. Even mathematics is more useful, and certainly science is the most useful form of knowledge, because the truths these disciplines discover have such wide technical applications in the invention of machines or in the production of the comforts of life we call "utilities." Mathematics and physics produce an atomic bomb, not directly of course, but through the engineering application of their knowledge. If the question were, however, not how to make an atomic bomb or even how to harness atomic energy industrially, but how such instruments can be employed for human welfare, then mathematics and physics would be utterly useless knowledge. Only moral and political philosophy can answer a question of this sort. This is the utility of philosophy, without which we use scientific knowledge at our peril.

As the very words "moral and political theory" indicate, philosophy is practical in a theoretic manner. The philosopher is not a man of action. Unlike the legislator, the statesman, or the administrator, he does not determine policies or devise means for contingent cir-

* Aristotle's *Poetics* appears to be the solitary exception to this statement, but anyone who will examine why it is *solitary* will discover why it only appears to be, and is not really, an *exception*.

cumstances; he does not formulate rules; above all, he does not make decisions, and so he does not actually solve any practical problems, for practical problems cannot be solved by thinking which stops short of deciding and executing. The practical philosopher is concerned only with the ends of human conduct, and with a consideration of the universal means thereto—universal in the sense that they are not restricted to the contingent circumstances of any concrete historic situation. Rules and decisions made for the here and now are the practical work of the statesman, the legislator, the administrator. The universal principles of conduct, underlying all rules and decisions which have a rational basis, are the practical work of the philosopher. Though he cannot apply his principles to his own life or his own society without the exercise of prudence, the practical competence of the philosopher is not measured by his own prudence, for it is a competence to direct human conduct by defining its ends and by ascertaining universally the conditions prerequisite to their achievement.

Precisely because it is both practical and speculative, philosophy establishes the connection between these two orders of thought and knowledge. It is the philosophy of history and the philosophy of science which explains in general the moral significance of history and the technical utility of science. It is the philosophy of law and the philosophy of art which explains the derivation of the precepts of conduct and the rules of art from our knowledge of the nature of man and the laws of nature. Most important of all, it is a profound maxim of sound philosophical work never to divorce the practical and the speculative, but rather always to draw from the most abstract of metaphysical truths its practical consequences, and to find for every moral or political principle its theoretic foundation.

III. THE SUBJECT MATTER OF PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT

In the practical order, the matters or problems with which the philosopher deals do not differ from those of the statesman, the legislator, or administrator. Here the only difference is one of level of consideration, the philosopher being concerned with universal principles, the others with particular rules and decisions. But in the order of speculative thought, philosophy has a distinctive subject matter, a set of problems exclusively its own, though it is also true that philosophical thought can be characterized by the relation in which it stands to all other types of speculative inquiry. Let us first note the speculative aim of the philosopher by defining the object of philosophical knowledge, and then examine the relation of philosophical to other types of knowledge.

I think that it is fair to take history, science, mathematics, and philosophy as the four major types of speculative inquiry, thus dividing the realm of natural knowledge. I have omitted theology or religious knowledge because if it is based on supernatural faith it stands apart from all natural knowledge; and if it is not based on faith, but is entirely a work of reason, theological speculation or religious thought becomes a part of philosophy.

The distinction between history and philosophy is easiest to make. The object of historical knowledge is the past and its particulars. Though the philosopher is like the historian in being concerned with real existences, and though he may consider the past in trying to understand the tenses of time, he does not seek knowledge of its individuals or events. In this respect, however, the philosopher remains undistinguished from the scientist and the mathematician. They, too, have no concern with past particulars.

The distinction in subject matter between science and philosophy is most difficult to make briefly, for it depends upon the distinction between appearance and reality which is itself a philosophical distinction. Unlike the historian, both the scientist and the philosopher strive to know the general aspect of things; they try to formulate what is true universally, apart from the distinctions of past, present, and future. But here the similarity ends. The so-called “laws of nature” which exemplify scientific knowledge at its best are generalizations about the way in which things behave, statements about the invariant relationships or correlations of phenomena. The atomic scientist can tell us the quantitative proportions which obtain when matter is converted into energy, but, unless he turns philosopher, he cannot tell us what matter is, or energy, or what it means for the one to be convertible into the other. He cannot because, as a scientist, his inquiry does not extend to the nature of things, or to their causes, but only to their apparent behavior. The philosopher always goes behind the phenomena to the underlying realities—to what things are, and why. The scientist can be satisfied with nominal definitions, to identify the phenomena with which he is dealing; but it is only by establishing real definitions that the philosopher can grasp the natures of things as they are. A number of consequences follow from this central point of distinction.

One can inquire into how things behave without asking what they are or why, but the what question is not separable from the why: the real definition of natures involves an analysis of causes. Hence whereas scientific formulations are merely descriptive, philosophical knowledge is explanatory. Furthermore, in seeking knowledge of causes, the philosopher must press his inquiry to the ultimate—

to the first principles of being and becoming. In the realm of phenomena, the scientist not only can, but must, specialize. He cannot do his work well by taking *all* phenomena as his object. He must study stars or atoms, colloids or chlorophyll, the brain or the heart. But the philosopher cannot do his work at all if he specializes. Underlying all phenomena, phenomena of every sort, are the same principles of existence and change. Seeking to know what kinds of things there are, their order and connection, and what it means for anything to be or to become, the philosopher cannot even limit himself to the reality of the physical world. He must ask whether there are immaterial modes of being, and spiritual forms of action.

The very questions which the scientist who understands his business must avoid are the very questions the philosopher must try to answer. Let me illustrate this by one example which should succeed in clearly differentiating the philosopher from the scientist. Because he seeks to know the what of everything, the nature of knowledge itself is a problem for the philosopher, not for the scientist. Though his whole professional life is engaged in seeking knowledge, the chemist or botanist cannot tell us what knowledge is, or, for that matter, even what scientific knowledge is. The problem with which we are at this very moment concerned—the distinction between science and philosophy as forms of knowledge—is typically a problem of the philosopher.

Finally, what about mathematics and philosophy? A part of what has already been said about the difference between science and philosophy applies here. The mathematician is a specialist, concerned not with all things, but with quantity, relations, and types of order. Even so, unless he becomes a philosopher of mathematics, he does not consider such questions as what numbers are, the nature of unity and infinity, or the being of quantity, in itself and in relation to other modes of being. But there is still a further point of distinction. Unlike the historian and the scientist, the mathematician does not deal with real existences, but rather with ideal objects, abstracted from matter and from change or action of any sort. In this respect, the philosopher resembles the historian and scientist, and differs from the mathematician, with one qualification, of course, namely, that the philosopher is concerned with the distinction between the real and the ideal, the material and the immaterial, the changing and the immutable, as diverse modes of being, and so the ultimate character of the objects of mathematics within his inquiry.

I do not mean to suggest that the philosopher knows all the answers or even that he should try to answer all questions. On the

contrary, he is as incompetent to solve the specialized problems which delimit the scope of historical and scientific work, as in turn the scientist and the historian are incompetent to answer the more general questions of philosophy. To each fundamental discipline of the mind belongs a proper task, which must not be usurped or infringed upon by other disciplines. None—not even philosophy, for all its universality—is justified in being intellectually omnivorous. Nevertheless, to philosophy falls a task which it must perform not only for its own sake but for the other disciplines as well, and for the good order of the human mind itself.

We have already observed that it is not history or science, but philosophy, which defines history and science, distinguishing them from each other and from philosophy. Philosophy thus introduces order into the whole intellectual enterprise, setting limits to each type of inquiry and establishing a division of labor. Of all the disciplines, being the only one which is reflexive, philosophy must define and regulate itself. But it must do one thing more. It must determine what questions cannot be answered by the natural faculties of man, what problems cannot be solved by the light of reason and with all the evidence that experience can ever make available. It is the special task of philosophy to determine the boundaries of natural knowledge and to qualify man's insatiable desire to know with due humility.

The positivist who tries to perform this task usually lacks humility and arrogantly claims that the questions science cannot answer are unanswerable, even unintelligible. But the true philosopher acknowledges and sometimes is able to demonstrate that questions no human inquiry can answer are quite intelligible. He is, therefore, prepared to listen to the man of religious faith who claims that God has revealed truths which man's unaided faculties cannot acquire. Without the integrity and humility which comes from the philosophical discipline of reason, there can be no harmony between science and religion, but only the disorder of their sterile antagonism or of their being isolated from each other in logic-tight compartments.

The simplest way to summarize the central point I have been trying to make about the scope of philosophical work is to say that the philosopher deals with problems which are common to all the other intellectual disciplines and so establishes their order and connection. The truth of this is evidenced by the fact that, whenever a historian, a scientist, a mathematician, a musician, a legislator, an administrator, or any other specialist, talks outside his narrow field, he acknowledges sometimes blatantly, sometimes apologetically,

that he is talking philosophically.

The acknowledgment is correct. Whenever any of these specialists consider the general human significance of their work, try to connect it with the work of others, or give it intelligibility for the common man, they are on the verge of becoming philosophers. Philosophy is everybody's business; it is the only intellectual vocation to which all men are called. Since philosophy is everybody's business, everybody must make it his business to talk well philosophically. Too often the specialist, who has a proper respect for the technique of his own professional work, thinks that, since everyone on occasion must become philosophical, no special competence or technical proficiency is required.

The specialist, or anyone else, who philosophizes in this way should be apologetic. Philosophical discourse is the common conversation of mankind raised to the highest degree of elegance and precision. It is not loose talk in which the specialist can indulge when he wants to relax from the exacting labors of his own professional field.

To explain this point, I wish to turn now to the two remaining considerations—the technical requirements of philosophical work and its social character.

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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 Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

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