



HOW TO THINK ABOUT PHILOSOPHY

Mortimer Adler

(Part 1 of 4)

The difficulty about philosophy is that people take quite opposite attitudes toward it. Some honor it as the pursuit of wisdom or the love of wisdom and by others it is despised or even held in contempt as useless inquiry or idle speculation or merely their opinion.

Philosophy means different things to different persons so that perhaps if we look at the kinds of questions that people have sent in to us, we may get some guidance about the points we ought to consider first that may need most of all to be clarified. I am going to ask Mr. Luckman to read a sampling of the questions that we've received. This may get us started in the right way.

Lloyd Luckman: Well, Dr. Adler, it's a very interesting collection of questions, though I was surprised that one question which I thought would be asked just didn't appear in our letters.

We had four letters, for example, asking about the relation of philosophy and religion. And I selected two that I think are slightly

different. The first one is from Mrs. Frank England from Petaluma. She writes, "It seems to me that a man's religion is his philosophy, and that religion and philosophy are indistinguishable." And then some of those questions simply ask how closely philosophy and religion are related. But one of them from Mrs. Carol Terry in Santa Rosa tends somewhat in the opposite direction and she asks you to *distinguish* between philosophy and religion.

Mortimer Adler: There is no doubt, Lloyd, that the relation of philosophy and religion troubles a great many people, and it is certainly a problem that we shall have to deal with, but let's have the other question—but first, Lloyd, I'd like to know what the question was that you expected we would receive that we didn't get. What was that question?

Lloyd Luckman: Well, I thought there would be just as many questions, for example, on the relationship of philosophy and science, and the distinction between philosophy and science.

Mortimer Adler: Now that is very surprising, as a matter of fact, because living in an age of science such as this you would think the people would ask as much about how science and philosophy differ as about philosophy and religion.

Lloyd Luckman: That's how I felt.

Mortimer Adler: Let's consider that question asked and added to the rest of the list. Would you go on with the others now?

WHAT USE IS PHILOSOPHY?

Lloyd Luckman: Surely. Mr. Harley Crawford in Stockton wrote, "Does every person need a philosophy of life? Is an individual aimless if he lacks a philosophy of life?" And then closely connected with that question is one from a seminarian, Mr. Eugenio Fontana of Menlo Park. And he asks, "When you speak of a philosophy of life, are you speaking to a branch of philosophy or to philosophy as a whole?"

Mortimer Adler: My guess is that most people who use the word *philosophy*, use it in the sense of a philosophy of life. And that may be the very reason why they tend to confuse or identify so closely philosophy and religion. Because for a religious person it certainly is true that his religion is a way of life. Hence if philosophy is a way of life; it would appear to be very much like religion.

Lloyd Luckman: Well now, there is just one more question I think should be considered and that is the one from Mrs. Dunne in Napa. Mrs. Dunne says, “Most people think of philosophers as living in ivory towers, whereas, in my opinion, they are the most realistic individuals.”

Mortimer Adler: Thank you, Mrs. Dunne.

Lloyd Luckman: Ah but, Dr. Adler, Mrs. Dunne continues. She goes on to ask you how you would go about proving to the skeptical person that philosophy is practical or useful.

Mortimer Adler: Maybe I said thank you, Mrs. Dunne, too soon. Proving that philosophy is useful to the person who is skeptical about philosophy is a large order. But it is certainly one of the things that we must try to discuss in the course of these programs on the meaning of philosophy.

Now as I see it there are two main questions, two main points that we have to consider that I draw from all these questions. The first is the desire to have us distinguish and relate philosophy, science, and religion. And the second is that we must consider philosophy in relation to life and explain how it is useful; or more than that, prove that it is useful.

I think it is quite reasonable that people should be concerned with these two matters. In fact, I think I can give an historical reason why they should be and a contemporary reason why they are. The historical reason why they should be concerned with this is that in the history of Western culture, philosophy is the most primitive, the most basic of all the forms of inquiry and thought. I beg your pardon, I should have said religion as a matter of fact; our culture begins with religion and out of religion, philosophical inquiry develops. And then much later all of the special sciences that we know, that we call sciences in the world today, have broken off from the main front, the main branch of philosophy.

PHILOSOPHY, SCIENCE, AND RELIGION

The contemporary reason why we are concerned with the relation of philosophy, science, and religion is, I think, a very striking one. All of us are aware of the ways in which both science and religion make themselves visibly manifest in the world about us in their institutions, in their practices, and their uses. We know what a scientific laboratory looks like. We know what a house of God looks like, a church. We know what goes on in a house of God or a

church. We know that people go there to pray and worship and that on the solemn occasions of life, weddings and funerals, they seek God's help. We know that in a scientific laboratory there is apparatus, instrumentation, and that research is going on. And we know the uses of the things that are produced in scientific laboratories. But I feel quite sure that the many persons who walk by the Hanson building at 2090 Jackson Street in San Francisco and see the sign on it, "Institute of Philosophical Research," wonder what is going on there. Because philosophy is not institutionalized and

people do not have any visible manifestation of what philosophers do or what use philosophy is. This, I think, is one of the reasons why everybody wants to know what philosophy is, what philosophers do, and the use of philosophy to human beings in the course of their living.

Now there are several ways of meeting this demand. I think each of them that I am going to propose at first is somewhat unsatisfactory. But let me try them one after another until I build up what may be a satisfactory answer to this primary and, I think, quite right question.

The first thing that one is told is that philosophy is everybody's business. Everyone should have a philosophy of life in order not to be aimless, in order to guide and direct the conduct of his affairs. This is extremely well said by Gilbert Chesterton. I am going to read you a passage. from the opening chapter of William James's *Pragmatism*. This happens to be, by the way, the first philosophical book I ever bought. I bought it before I entered Columbia College at a fairly young age. In the opening chapter, William James quotes Chesterton as saying the following: "There are some people," Chesterton says, "and I am one of them, who think that the most practical and important thing about a man is 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 an enemy's numbers, but still more important to know the enemy's philosophy. We think the question is not whether the theory of the cosmos affects matters, but whether in the long run anything else affects them." William James goes on to say, "I agree with Mr. Chesterton. I know that all human beings have a philosophy and that the most interesting thing about you and about me is the way in which that philosophy determines the perspectives in our several worlds."

What is unsatisfactory about that answer is that while it distinguishes philosophy from science, it doesn't distinguish it from religion. Philosophy is a way of life and philosophy is something that guides a man's life, and science in that sense does not. The trouble with this answer is that religion also can be looked upon as something that directs a man in the conduct of his life.

The second answer is one that in a sense is given, first of all, by Socrates. And Socrates is, for all of us I think, almost the perfect image of a philosopher. In the *Apology*, in which Socrates is on trial for his life, he says, "God orders me to fulfill the philosopher's mission of searching into himself and other men. While I have life and strength," he says, "I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy, which is cross-examining the pretenders to wisdom, exhorting them to care first and chiefly about the improvement of their soul. Therefore," he says to his judges who ask him to give it up, "I can't hold my tongue daily to discourse about virtues. And to those other things about which you hear me examining myself and others is the greatest good of man." And then that magnificent sentence of Socrates, "For the unexamined life is not worth living." And he might have added, "The unexamined thought is not worth thinking."

There is another exemplification of this in another group of philosophers in the ancient world, the Roman Stoics. For them philosophy also was a way of life. Marcus Aurelius, who was a Roman emperor, says this to himself: "What is that which is able to direct a man's life?" And he answers, "One thing and only one: philosophy, for it enables him to accept all that has happened and to wait for death with a cheerful mind." And then he says to himself, thinking of the cares of state and the duties of the court, "Return to philosophy frequently and repose in her."

And at the other end of the social scale there is Epictetus, the slave, who says, "Philosophy does not promise to procure the man anything outside himself. It provides only peace of mind. You must busy yourself with your inner man or with things outside. That is, you must choose between being a philosopher and an ordinary man."

That also is an answer about philosophy which distinguishes it from science, but I think fails to distinguish it from religion. Because certainly any religious person would also say that he lives his religion. And in this sense there is very little distinction yet that we've seen between philosophy and religion.

Now let me try to give you the third answer to the question. This third answer is an answer that might be called the academic answer, the professorial answer; professors of philosophy have been giving it, from the Greeks right down to the end of the nineteenth century, in fact, even later than that. It was the answer I first learned when I went to college in around 1920. Philosophy, this answer says, consists of a whole series of sciences, very special, highly technical sciences, what we might call the philosophical sciences.

This is not exhaustive but these are the main philosophical sciences. There is, first of all, *logic*, which is the science of thought; then a science called *metaphysics*, which is the science of being or existence; and the science of *physics*, sometimes called the philosophy of nature, which is the science of becoming or change; the science of *epistemology*, sometimes called the theory of knowledge, which is the science of how we know and what knowledge is, or the science of the true; and *ethics*, which is the science of conduct or of the good; *aesthetics*, which is the science of art or of the beautiful; and *politics* which is the science of society and of government.

Now this answer clearly separates philosophy from religion on one hand, but it doesn't now successfully separate philosophy from science; for anyone who should ask the question, "How do these philosophical sciences differ from the scientific sciences we all know in the alphabetical order from astronomy to zoology?" The trouble with philosophy is that it seems to be like religion on the one hand and like science on the other.

THE SPECIAL FUNCTION OF PHILOSOPHY

In the ancient world, philosophy was considered to be science. It was science. The sciences had not separated from philosophy yet. And philosophy as science was opposed to both religion and poetry, which were not scientific. In the modern world when all the special sciences have arisen and we regard the experimental sciences, the natural sciences, and the social sciences as knowledge, we tend to put philosophy along with poetry and religion as not scientific.

As I say, the trouble is that philosophy resembles both science and religion. How shall we distinguish it from them both? I think there is an answer to this question. And I think the answer finally most clearly turns on the special function of philosophy, its special use.

Let me see if I can explain this. There may not be time enough for me to complete the explanation today, but let me at least make a beginning. And I have some help in making a beginning, in doing this, from the fact that we have an exemplification of philosophy doing its work right before us, in these programs on The Great Ideas. The discussions on this program exemplify philosophy doing its work. And what is that work? That work is the rational discussion of basic ideas.

You all know, I think, that it is philosophy, not science or religion, that is taking place on this program. How do you know it? You know it because you do not see the marks of either science or religion. There is no evidence in this program of any need for experimental research, of apparatus, of laboratory work; that is the mark of science. And in the course of our discussions there was certainly no appeal to faith or the dogmas of religion. That is the mark of the religionist. What is the mark then, the distinguishing mark of the philosopher at work? I say it is nothing but the evidence of rational talk, of men thinking together.

In all the years that I taught young men philosophy in the university there was seldom a time when after a course in philosophy had begun some student or more than one student didn't come to me and say, "Professor, this is all very interesting but tell me, 'What use is it?'" And I learned as I grew older always to answer that question by looking the students straight in the eye and saying, "No use at all." Because I knew that what the student meant by use was a meaning he derived from the utility of science, and that in a sense in which science is useful, philosophy is of no use.

Now what is the use of science? Science gives us power over nature. It gives us a mastery of all the external conditions, the external aspects of human life. But does science tell us how we should control the power we have, how we should use all the machinery and the utilities that science with its technological applications gives us? Clearly not. In fact, we live in a world in which, made dangerous by this fact, science has given us the untold power of atomic energy. But does science tell us how to use atomic energy, either in peacetime or in war, how to use it for the benefit of mankind instead of the destruction of mankind? In fact, the same scientific skills in medicine or engineering that help us to cure and benefit can also help us or enable men to kill and destroy.

It is this fact, I think, which enables anyone to understand the special function or use of philosophy. If the use of science through

technology is to give us power over nature, is to give us the means to our end or goal, then the use of philosophy consists in giving us

not the means, but the direction to the end, pointing out the goal, the things we should see, the things we ought to do, giving us the standards by which we can control our use of the means. And for this very reason in a world which has more and more science and more and more of the applications of science through technology, it becomes more and more important to have philosophy and the use of philosophy properly respected. For power without wisdom, the possession of instrumentalities without the understanding of how to apply them and direct them, is, of course, extremely dangerous. But you may say quite properly at this point, this may distinguish the use of philosophy from the use of science, the use of science being a technical use, the use of philosophy a moral or directive use, but how does this still distinguish philosophy from religion, because does not religion direct us too to the goal of our life and tell us how to live?

Well, as I think about this question I am reminded of the story that is told of Cardinal Barbarini, at a time when Galileo was fighting the church or was in trouble with the church. Cardinal Barbarini said to Galileo, "There should be no conflict in this case between science and the church because you, the scientist, the astronomer, teaches men how the heavens go; but we, the church, teach men how to go to heaven." That is not the whole answer because the church does more than teach men how to go to heaven; the church claims to give men, through God's revelation, God's direction to mankind. And beyond that, through the offices of religion, the church enables people to avail themselves of God's grace or help in the direction of their lives. Here is how religion differs from philosophy. Philosophy offers people some guidance and direction in the conduct of their lives by reason alone; whereas the church offers people God's direction of their lives and God's help in following that direction.

HUMAN BEINGS THINKING TOGETHER

Now if these three different uses are clear, then one thing should not be surprising; that this difference in use sharply distinguishes philosophy from science and religion. Let me give you one example of this point. Everyone recognizes how different are the three professions of medicine, engineering, and let's say, law. No man would go to a physician to build a bridge or to build machinery. No man would go to an engineer and ask him to sit at the bedside of an ill person to cure him. No man would go to a lawyer and ask him

to do what a physician or an engineer might be expected to do. We regard each of these three professions as having a special skill, able to do one thing for us, and not the other things that other professions can do. And we understand this in the following manner: We suppose that the reason why the engineer and the physician and the lawyer are able to help us in different ways, do different things for us, is because each of them knows something different, has a special kind of knowledge.

Well, let's apply this example of the engineer, the lawyer, and the physician to the three other, greater, larger divisions of human effort: science, philosophy, and religion. Each of them, I suggest to you, does something different for us. And if it is true that each of them does something different for us, must we not ask ourselves, Is this because each of them; the scientist, the philosopher, and the religionist, knows something different, has a different sort or kind of knowledge or because of some other reason?

Lloyd Luckman: That is the question indeed, Dr. Adler. And I think we were asked just about that question. It came from Mrs. Edward B. McGuinness whose home is in Walnut Creek. She would like to know if philosophy can be considered to contain the truth in the same way as the natural sciences contain the truth?

Mortimer Adler: That certainly is the question that we have to consider because the whole problem seems to me to turn on the point of how there are, or whether there are, different kinds of knowledge that we can describe as scientific knowledge, philosophical knowledge, and religious knowledge; and if there are different kinds of knowledge, where the truth and the conditions of truth, not only the kind of truth but the way in which men judge truth, the way in which men decide something is true in the whole scientific enterprise, the philosophical enterprise, and the enterprise of religion are the same or different.

This, I think, is the problem we shall spend most of our discussion next time on. But today I would like to summarize what we have learned. I may go back to this last question by calling your attention to what I think is the principal point. It consists in seeing that just as we don't expect a man who is an engineer to solve the kind of problems we go to a lawyer or a physician to solve, just as we don't expect the lawyer to solve the kind of problems we would go to an engineer or a physician to solve, or the physician to solve those of the engineer or the lawyer, so we ought to look to the philosopher for certain kinds of solutions, for certain kinds of help in the conduct of life and in general the handling of human affairs.

We ought to look to the scientist for a different kind of help and to the theologian or to the religionist for a third. And the thing we are most concerned to understand is if these three great professions of science, philosophy, and religion can give us different kinds of help, is the fact that they can do so based upon their having different methods of inquiry and different kinds of knowledge? Are science, philosophy, and religion three different kinds of knowledge? And if so, what is the mark of each of them?

We know one thing, that philosophy has one distinctive mark. It is not signified by the use of apparatus, research, or investigation. Nor like religion is it signified by the appeals to faith. We at least tentatively today have begun our understanding of philosophy by thinking of it as rational talk about the basic problems of mankind. It consists in human beings thinking together.

We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.

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