



HOW TO THINK ABOUT PHILOSOPHY

Mortimer Adler

(Part 2 of 4)

HOW PHILOSOPHY DIFFERS FROM SCIENCE AND RELIGION

When we decided to discuss the Great Idea of Philosophy, I had some concerns that it might not be of as much general interest as the more concrete ideas, such as Love, Work, and Art. But I was just looking over the letters we received last week, and the volume of the questions that we received indicates, I'm glad to say, that I was wrong. Moreover, the content of these questions indicates, I think, a great interest in the particular problem we considered last week and are going to push a little further in our discussion this week: the relation of philosophy to religion and to science.

Reflecting about the problem we discussed last week, I recalled a debate that I had in Chicago, I think it was in the mid-1940s, with Bertrand Russell, the eminent British philosopher and a noble lord and earl of the realm. This debate had as its question the following problem—I have here a stenographic report of the debate as it took

place. The question that Lord Russell and I argued was this: Is science enough for the good life and the good society? The noble lord said it was. I, on the negative side of that debate, said it was not. And I took the negative side because I felt as I felt when I talked to you last week that science clearly is not enough to enable men to lead the good life or to construct and maintain the good society. If what I said last week was true, then my answer to Lord Russell was true, for science gives us at best the means and the power to use, but does not tell us how to use those means or that power well. It does not give us direction on the *end* of life.

Remembering this debate and looking at some of the things I said in it, I can recall to you also what we learned last time. You recall that we discussed the way in which engineering, medicine, and law do different things for men. And just as those three professions do different things for men practically, so the three great departments of human culture, science, religion, and philosophy, do different things for men.

Perhaps the easiest way in which I can summarize this is to tell you the practical questions, the practical problems that science cannot solve, similarly the questions, the practical problems that philosophy cannot solve. Let me do it negatively. What kind of questions can the scientist not answer? Practical, concrete questions. The scientist, I say to you, cannot tell us what happiness is and how happiness is to be attained, what men must do in order to be happy. The scientist cannot tell us how to constitute a society justly, how to make it a just political organization or a just economy. The scientist cannot tell us what man's duties are, what is right and what is wrong. The scientist cannot tell us why all forms of labor should have dignity or why there should be no slavery, why all men should be free. In short, science cannot solve a single basic moral or political problem. And these basic moral and political problems are precisely the problems which both the philosopher and the theologian, both philosophy and both religion claim to be able to solve.

What are the questions, what are the limitations of philosophy in this respect? What questions can it not answer? Here I think the questions it must give up and leave to religion are questions about what precepts God gives human beings, what Providence has in store for people, and above all how persons can get help from God in achieving their ends in leading a good life and conducting a good society.

One other thing that we saw last week I should like to repeat. We saw that engineering and medicine, for example, can do quite different things for human beings, build bridges, cure diseases, because the engineer and the physician know different things. And so that raises a question for us. If it is true, as I think it is true, that the philosopher and the scientist and the theologian, the man of religion, can do different things practically for human beings, is this because each of them knows something different, that each of these three great branches of culture is a different kind of knowledge? Now that is the question I hope we can address ourselves to today. And, Lloyd, as we proceed with this discussion I hope you will bring into the discussion the questions we have received where they are appropriate.

THE SCIENCES ARE INDEPENDENT

Now I propose to begin today's discussion by giving you an example that I want to use later on. I would like to give you an example of three distinct bodies of knowledge. I am going to choose for this purpose history, chemistry, and astronomy. For everyone knows that these are three quite distinct, separate bodies of knowledge. And everyone understands in some sense the difference between being an historian and the kind of research an historian does, as opposed to the kind of research a chemist does or the kind of research an astronomer does.

But let's look at that a little more closely. How precisely do these three bodies of knowledge: history, chemistry, and astronomy; differ? I think for our purposes, at least today I want to call your attention to two ways in which they differ. They differ in their objects, what they study; and in their methods, the way they inquire, the way they learn the truth about the objects of their inquiry.

The things that are characteristic of the method of history are: the use of testimony, the use of documents, the use of archaeological remains or monuments from the past, and the kind of research the historian does. Using these materials enables him to know the object, which is the object of history, the past, the events which have taken place in the past.

The chemist uses experiments in his method, experiments that may involve very complicated apparatus, test tubes, and retorts and very elaborate instrumentation. And by experiment, using apparatus of this sort, the chemist is able to investigate the structure of matter, its elements and the compounds and fusions of these elements.

Then the turn of the astronomer. The astronomer doesn't perform experiments. The astronomer is an observer mainly, though an observer with very elaborate apparatus too, typically the great telescopes in our observatories. And observing by means of telescopes, the astronomer inquires into another kind of object, the great celestial bodies and their motions.

So we see how these three bodies of knowledge are distinct both in the methods they pursue or use and the objects they investigate. And there is a consequence of this. As a result of their being separate in this way, they are also to a large extent *independent* of one another.

Lloyd, it seems to me that I recall a question about the independence of one science from another. Is there a question on that subject?

Lloyd Luckman: Well, there is if you mean the one from Mr. Richard E. Hecht.

Mortimer Adler: Yes, that's the one.

Lloyd Luckman: He lives here in San Francisco on 39th Avenue. Mr. Hecht says, "I would like to know if one science can ever lawfully encroach upon the domain of another." Can one science encroach upon the domain of another?

Mortimer Adler: Well, there are really two answers to that question, Lloyd. To whatever extent two sciences are rightly independent of one another, Mr. Hecht, they should not properly encroach upon each other's domains. But, of course, Mr. Hecht, there are interdependent sciences. For example, biology and physics are at certain points interdependent to form the mixed science of biophysics. So are astronomy and physics to form the mixed science of astrophysics. But where two sciences are really independent or where two bodies of knowledge are really independent, as I think history and chemistry are or chemistry and astronomy, then they should not encroach upon one another.

If two independent sciences do their own work properly, mind their own business, answering the questions about the subjects they can ask about and criticize the answers of those subjects, then they will not come into any conflict. This is, I think, true of the chemist and the astronomer or the historian and the chemist. Those are in-

dependent bodies of knowledge and as a result they need not come into conflict.

DIFFERENT METHODS, DIFFERENT OBJECTS

Now let me apply what we have just learned about chemistry, astronomy, and history to the three great branches of our culture: science, philosophy, and religion. And here I would like to proceed in the following way: I would like first to consider their difference in method, I would like next to consider their difference in object, and third I would like to consider whether or not they are independent.

But again, Lloyd, it seems to me I recall a question I think from Mrs. Ryan this time, a question that was about at least the methods of philosophy and religion and science. Would you read us that question?

Lloyd Luckman: Yes, I have it here now. That is from Mrs. Peggy Ryan from San Francisco.

Mortimer Adler: Let's ask the question I mean.

Lloyd Luckman: "We accept many of our religious beliefs," she says, "as divine mysteries. But in the field of science we accept nothing without experimentation or investigation. In the field of philosophy then, what processes or devices are employed to establish the philosophical truths which we accept?"

Mortimer Adler: Lloyd, Mrs. Ryan gives us at least some of the answers as well as asks the questions. She points out something about the objects of religion, the divine mysteries. And she says something about the method of science which she says is experimentation.

Let's picture the chemist in the laboratory, performing an experiment with test tubes and retorts. That illustrates the kind of method of the chemist, that he is investigating by an experimental means. Then let's turn to another kind of scientist who also investigates. Let's picture an astronomer, inside a great observatory with a giant telescope. Consider the difference between the chemist and the astronomer. The astronomer is an investigator by means of sheer observation in an observatory; whereas the chemist is an investigator by means of experiment in a laboratory. So we oughtn't to say with Mrs. Ryan that the method of science is experimental. We ought to

say the method of science is investigative, either by experiment or observation.

Now let's think about the method of religion. The method of religion involves the receiving of revelation from God. Picture Moses receiving the Law, receiving the Ten Commandments with fire on the top of Mount Sinai, one of the great episodes in the religion of Judaism, the revelation of the Law by God to Moses. Then consider Jesus delivering to His disciples and followers the Sermon on the Mount, again revealing the Word of God to man. In these two episodes we see what is common to religion, the element of revelation; and the reception by man of divine revelation.

How do we picture the method of philosophy? The armchair is the principal piece of apparatus of a philosopher; for the philosopher is strictly an armchair thinker. Any philosopher worth his salt knows better than to ever get out of the armchair. Oh, he needs one other piece of apparatus perhaps. He needs a pad and a pencil; and that is about all the apparatus he needs. Of course, this does not quite distinguish the philosopher from the mathematician. The mathematician can work also in an armchair with a pad and pencil. But the mathematician is a solitary-armchair thinker. The philosopher needs conversation. He needs to carry on disputes with his fellow philosophers. He needs to discuss with them. And so the further apparatus the philosopher may need is a collection of armchairs around a table; for he is a social-armchair thinker.

Lloyd Luckman: I have a question just on that very point from Mr. Leiberman whose home is in Oakland, Mr. Jay Leiberman. And he wrote, "You said last week that philosophy was rational talk and stressed the fact that it is best exemplified by human beings thinking *together*." And with the accent on together.

Mortimer Adler: Yes.

Lloyd Luckman: "Now can a person be a philosopher alone?" is what Mr. Leiberman wants to know.

Mortimer Adler: Can a person be a philosopher alone? Yes, Mr. Leiberman, of course, he can be. The great geniuses in philosophy did a great deal or part of their work in solitary reflection. But it is still true that the philosopher profits much more by conversation with philosophers, by carrying on the great philosophical controversies with his colleagues, than the mathematician does. In fact, I would almost say that it is indispensable to the advancement of

philosophical truth that philosophers do not think alone, but think with one another.

Now let me then go to my second main point which is the objects of philosophy in contrast to the objects of science and religion as well as the methods of philosophy, science, and religion. How do the three great branches of our culture differ in method? Science we understand is investigative. It must investigate, it must observe, by experiment or otherwise, new phenomena, get new data. And here reason serves the senses by making rational constructions or formulations based upon the data of observation. Philosophy is reflective. It is the kind of thing a person does in sitting down and contemplating or thinking hard, analytically, reflectively about the common experiences of mankind. Here the senses in ordinary experience serve reason. And religion as compared to both of those is receptive. It is the attitude of receiving the revelation of God, and here reason is in the service of revelation.

As these three differ in method, so necessarily they differ in object, because the methods a body of knowledge uses to acquire what it knows will largely limit it to the kind of thing it is able to know. The objects of science, because science is investigative, are all phenomena, the world of appearances. The object of philosophy, because philosophy is reflective, is what lies behind the phenomena, what lies behind the appearances, the reality of things and their ultimate causes. And the object of religion, because religion is receptive of divine revelation, the object of religion is what Mrs. Ryan called the ultimate mysteries, the divine mysteries.

PHILOSOPHY IS INDEPENDENT OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION

Science is investigative. This means it is able to describe the facts. It gives us knowledge of the facts.

Philosophy is reflective and does more than describe. It goes to the underlying reality and to the causes. It tries to do more than describe; it tries to explain the facts and therefore beyond giving us a basic knowledge of the facts of nature and of life, it gives us some understanding of them.

Religion accepts and believes. And in accepting and believing, it often goes beyond what is simply knowable and understandable by men. Perhaps the best illustration of this is to give you three questions, one that the scientist can answer, one that the philosopher can answer, one that the theologian or religionist can answer.

Here is a typical scientific question: How is matter transformed into energy in atomic explosions? This is the question that Einstein answered in his extraordinary formula for the quantitative relation between matter and energy in atomic fission or explosion.

A typical religious or theological question is the question whether God created the universe in the beginning of time. This is the question which the divine revelation in the first sentence of Genesis answers. God created heaven and earth, it says, in the beginning.

And what is the kind of question the philosopher answers? A question like, Why does all the world of change involve some permanent thing? Why must change be based upon permanence? Or this very question we've been discussing, the very question, How does philosophy differ from science and religion, is itself a question for the philosopher, not for the scientist or for the religionist or theologian.

Now we've got these three questions clear. Perhaps then I can talk, quickly, about the independence of science, philosophy, and religion. I recall, Lloyd, there were many questions we received about the conflict of science and religion. Did we receive any about the conflict of science and philosophy or of philosophy and religion?

Lloyd Luckman: Not any question that asked about all three possible conflicts, Dr. Adler. But I have one here that somewhat tends in that direction. It is from Mrs. John Ward Babcock in Berkeley, California. And she asks, "Would you agree with the definition that between theology and science there is a no man's land, exposed to attack from both sides? This no man's land is philosophy."

Mortimer Adler: I think I would in great measure agree, Mrs. Babcock. Certainly it is historically the case that philosophy has come between science and religion. But I would like to make two points in clarification of what you just said.

The first is that when conflicts occur among the three great branches of our culture, science, philosophy, or religion, it's usually due to the fact that one of them has become imperialistic, has exceeded its own domains and become an aggressor, invaded the territory of another. And philosophy, you are quite right, Mrs. Babcock, is like a buffer state, a buffer state needed to keep science and religion apart, in fact, to keep them in good order.

AN ASCENDING HIERARCHY

Now let me see if I can carry that one step further and explain what I mean by good order as between the three great departments of our culture: science, philosophy, and religion. What is a good order of these three? There are two answers to this. Either they should be equal and coordinate with one another or they should be a hierarchy from lower to higher.

On this question of what the right order is of science, philosophy, and religion, there are a number of opinions, quite a great diversity of opinions, as a matter of fact. One answer, for example, is that all three; science, philosophy, and religion; are equal and coordinate. Another answer is that science is primary and religion and philosophy are subordinate. A French philosopher, Auguste Comte, who called himself a positivist held that science was the primary form of human knowledge and that religion was superstition and philosophy mere speculation. Both of these answers, I think, lead to conflicts among science, philosophy, and religion.

I would like to give an alternative answer, that there is a hierarchy, an ascending hierarchy from science to philosophy to religion. And I would like to explain that hierarchy in practical terms by saying that the kind of help that philosophy gives men is a more important help than what science gives, and the kind of help that religion gives is more important than philosophy. And in the theoretical order as you ascend from science to philosophy to religion, you get the answers to more and more ultimate questions.

Lloyd Luckman: Now, Dr. Adler, I wonder if what you have just said isn't the answer then to a question we received from Mrs. Patricia Dell who lives in San Francisco. She asks, "If you were forced to choose between religion and philosophy, would you choose philosophy? Why?"

Mortimer Adler: That, Mrs. Dell, is a very hard question. You've put me on the spot. It is the kind of choice no one would like to make, yet I must answer it honestly. It is a hard and unhappy choice but if I were forced, you say forced, to choose between religion and philosophy, what I have just said a moment ago indicates how I would have to make that choice. If I am right that religion answers more ultimate questions and gives man a more important kind of help, then religion is more important than philosophy and if one had to make the choice, one would choose religion rather than philosophy.

Now, on the other hand, I hope one doesn't have to make this choice. I hope you see from what I have said that there need be no conflict between religion, science, and philosophy. This does not mean there is no conflict within philosophy itself. This does not mean there is not conflict about philosophy. On the contrary, philosophy is a hotbed of controversy, it is full of dispute, full of schools of thought. What does one make of the fact that there are no conclusions on which philosophers agree? Why are there so many schools of philosophy?

This is our problem for next time: Why are there perennial, unsolved problems of philosophy? Can these perennial problems be resolved? Is there a way of achieving progress in philosophy?

We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.

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