



HOW TO THINK ABOUT PHILOSOPHY

Mortimer Adler

(Part 3 of 4)

UNSOLVED PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY

Lloyd Luckman: Isn't that nice?

Mortimer Adler: Yes, it is, Lloyd.

Lloyd Luckman: Ladies and gentlemen, Dr. Adler and I have been sitting here reviewing the citation which was awarded to him last evening by the Northern California Academy of Television. This award was for special achievement in honor of The Great Ideas program. And I would like to add my congratulations, Dr. Adler, to you for this achievement.

Mortimer Adler: Thank you very much, Lloyd.

This afternoon we go on with the discussion of the Great Idea of Philosophy. And I should like to make a thumbnail summary of the

three points that we covered last time. We saw, I think, that there were three great branches of human culture, each with its own method, each limited to certain questions which by that method it could answer; and in view of this limitation by method to certain questions we also saw that if each of the three great branches of culture did not become imperialistic, did not invade the territory of another, there would be no need for conflict among the three.

But, Lloyd, in the course of the week I think we discovered both from the letters that we received and from the conversations of you, me, and other people that some of the points that I thought were particularly clear were simply not so clear. And so I should like to begin this afternoon by going back to two or three of those points and see if I can make them just a little clearer than they were. And, Lloyd, if there are any others that I forget, would you mention them when I've taken care of these three?

First, I have a sense from the letters I received and conversations I had that you were not quite clear as to the definition of philosophy since the definition was given in a purely negative way. As to method it was said that philosophy does not investigate. The philosopher is an armchair thinker who does not go out and make new observations. Nor does philosophy, like theology or religion, rely upon revelation or the dogmas of a church.

Now positively then, what is the method of philosophy? My answer to that, very briefly at the beginning of this program, is that it consists in rational reflection, not in a vacuum but about the common experiences of mankind, the experience all of us, each of us has every day of our lives.

Then I gather that the point I wanted to make about the independence of philosophy both from science and religion was not too clearly understood. In fact, some of these letters that came in indicated that people supposed that the philosopher would be better off if he had a religious faith. Or on the other hand, some people supposed that the philosopher would be better off if he were an atheist and were completely free from religious faith. Let me just say one thing here, that the work the philosopher does, as a person using his reason to reflect about the basic problems of mankind in the light of man's common experience, is independent both of scientific method and religious faith, and that there are opposite views here. Some persons, I think, hold the view that the philosopher would do better if he were guided by religious faith and others hold

the view that he would do better if he were not trammled by religious faith.

And then the third point I would like to clear up in advance is a point about the hierarchy, the order of these three great branches of culture. In regard to religion there are opposite views. On the one hand some of these letters suggest that religion is not superior to science and philosophy, in fact, it is inferior to them, that science is the top element in our culture and that both philosophy and religion are inferior to science. On the other hand there are letters here which suggest exactly the opposite, that the hierarchy is a hierarchy in which science is at the base and that one mounts to more important and more ultimate questions when one goes from science to philosophy and from philosophy to religion.

These two points of view, putting science at the top with philosophy looked at as mere speculation and religion as superstition, or the opposite point of view, putting religion at the top with philosophy subordinate to it and science subordinate to both; these two points of view represent basic opposition in our culture as to the importance and value of these three great branches of our culture. The one thing that's clear is that no one on either side of this opposition says that they are equal, that these three things are to be regarded as of all having the same value.

There was a conference in New York some years ago, still going on as a matter of fact, dealing with science, philosophy, and religion, which I think has been failing, has failed, and is continuing to fail because it tries to treat these three branches of our culture as if they were coordinate or equal.

SCIENCE CAN'T EXPLAIN EVERYTHING

Lloyd Luckman: I have a few more points, Dr. Adler, which I think could stand some comment from you. The first one comes to us—well, the first two in letters, one by Dr. Edward Shafer, who is in San Francisco, and Mr. Rupert Kemp, in Sausalito. Dr. Shafer asks, “Why should not science be able in the distant future to explain everything?” Now I suppose here he means answer all questions including what now belongs to the area of philosophy and religion. And the second question by Mr. Kemp is, “Why cannot the methods of science be used to solve some of the controversial problems of philosophy?” And he gives in his letter some examples, like the problem of justice and the problem of happiness.

Mortimer Adler: Well, it seems to me, Dr. Shafer and Mr. Kemp, that if one understands what one means by the methods of science, methods of investigating, gaining knowledge by more and better observations of the world of physical or psychological phenomena, that these methods cannot be used to penetrate the ultimate realities or the ultimate causes of things. The scientific method not only now, but probably never, will be able to discover the ultimate causes, nor will it be able to answer ultimate questions of value.

You will recall that I mentioned the debate I had in Chicago in the middle 1940s with Lord Bertrand Russell. And though he took the opposite side to me in this debate, he conceded very early in the debate that by the methods of science—not only as they are now constituted, but as they will always be constituted so long as science remains science—by the methods of science we cannot solve a single, basic, moral question, or as he said, a question of value.

Interestingly enough, Lloyd, one of our correspondents, Mr. S.M. Wilson, sent me a clipping from the *Reader's Digest* which makes this point. It tells the story of an argument that was going on in an officers' club during the war. And a major who said that he was raised on the scientific method turned to the chaplain and said, "How can anyone scientifically prove the existence of God?" And the chaplain turned back to the scientific major and said, "That is a difficult question. In fact, it is a question I would like to put back to you in another way, 'How can anyone theologically prove the existence of an atom?'" And the major replied, "But whoever heard of trying to prove an atom theologically?" The chaplain said, "That is exactly what I meant, whoever heard of trying to prove God scientifically?" And that does indicate the sharpness and the separation of methods and the kinds of questions they can answer.

ACCUSATIONS AGAINST PHILOSOPHY

Lloyd Luckman: Well, my second point was raised by Mrs. M.H. Laucer, who lives in Oakland. She said, "You used chemistry and astronomy last week as examples of independent sciences." And then she sent us a very interesting newspaper clipping on astronomy. And if you read it, you will note it says, "U.C. Astronomer Scans Stars for Chemical Element Clue." And she obviously wants to know whether in view of this you were right in regarding astronomy and chemistry as independent.

Mortimer Adler: Well, Mrs. Laucer, until very recently astronomy consisted almost entirely of celestial mechanics. And celestial

mechanics is concerned with the motion and position of the heavenly bodies. But in our own time a new branch of astronomy has come into existence, a branch we call astrophysics, concerned with the physical constitution of the heavenly bodies. Now the old part of astronomy, celestial mechanics is quite independent of chemistry. But this new branch of astronomy, astrophysics, is clearly concerned with the physical or chemical constitution of the celestial bodies and is not independent of chemistry.

Mortimer Adler: Is that all, Lloyd?

Lloyd Luckman: I have some new business here, another question. And you may remember this question as the one which poses the problem for this week's discussion.

Mortimer Adler: Let's have that.

Lloyd Luckman: It comes from Mr. James J. Telorico, Jr., who lives in San Jose. He says, "Since you consider science, religion, and philosophy as the three great branches of our culture, attacks on philosophy must have been made by men in these other fields. If you could give a few of the major objections to philosophy by these other fields and then refute them, philosophy's right to existence as well as the worth of it might be on more solid ground in the eyes of the viewer of your program."

Mortimer Adler: That certainly is the task for today. And I hope I can fulfill your request in a satisfactory manner, Mr. Telorico. You are right, you are quite right that what I have so far stated presents only one side of the matter. I presented only the view held by the exponents of philosophy which can be summarized in these three propositions: First, that philosophy is a kind of knowledge; second, that philosophy as knowledge is independent of science; and third, that as knowledge solving more ultimate problems, philosophy is superior to science both theoretically and practically.

Now the opponents of philosophy, mainly from the side of science, seldom if ever from the side of religion, take a diametrically opposite view which can be stated in these three propositions: they hold that philosophy is mere opinion or guesswork; or that if it is not that, philosophy is a commentary and nothing more than a commentary on the sciences and so cannot be independent of the sciences; in either case it is clearly inferior to science in every way. Now this being so, because of this opposition, I shall try to proceed as you suggest, Mr. Telorico. First, to state the charges against phi-

philosophy on which the opponents rest their case, then to try to defend philosophy by answering these charges.

Now let me go at once to the charges against philosophy. They are two. The first charge is based upon the fact that there is such tremendous disagreement among philosophy. There are so many schools of thought, so many isms that are in conflict with one another, such a great diversity of philosophical points of view or such a great plurality of philosophies. The force of this charge comes from a comparison of philosophy with science. The scientist says that we don't disagree as the philosophers disagree. There is a great deal of agreement among scientists. There are no schools of thought in science. Science looks like one common enterprise of inquiry and research.

This charge against philosophy, by the way, is not just made by the experts or the scholars; it is made by ordinary men and women. In fact, Lloyd, all the questions we've received in the last few weeks indicate that laymen, people in general, are greatly disturbed by the diversity of philosophical points of view, by the conflict of philosophical doctrines. They say, "Which shall we choose? Which is true? Why should the philosophers always disagree this way?"

The factual charge is true. There is no question about it. There is a diversity of philosophy. There is a great conflict among schools of thought in philosophy. Moreover, I have to confess that there always will be a plurality of philosophies; not merely do they have to have existed in the past and do they exist now, but it is in the very nature of philosophy itself for there to be many philosophies in conflict or in argument, in controversy with one another.

The second charge is that philosophy doesn't make any progress, that it keeps on going around in a circle, as it were, chasing itself. But it is dealing with the same old issues century after century. And this charge, like the first charge, gets its force again by contrast and comparison with science. The history of science is always an inspiration to the scientist. But the history of philosophy, I am sorry to say, is often an embarrassment to philosophers. At least it has been an embarrassment to me for a great part of my life.

This charge, like the first charge, is also one shared by ordinary people. It is not only confined to experts or scholars. And I must admit that the factual charge here is also true. It cannot be denied. These are two important charges that can be brought against phi-

losophy and that are brought against philosophy in the contemporary world with great force.

Now what shall our answer be to these charges? How shall we reply? For Mr. Telorico not only asks us to state the attack on philosophy, but to see if we can also represent the opposite side of the opinion of the issue so that all of you are acquainted with what the issue is.

Before I state my reply to each of these two charges, let me make one very important preliminary remark. I said the facts upon which the charges rest are true. But the facts are not new. The facts I just admitted have always been the case. Yet the charges which are made on the basis of these facts are new. They are characteristically modern charges: though the facts existed in the medieval world, the facts I'm talking about existed in the ancient world, the charges against philosophy are only made in the modern world.

SCIENCE IS NOT THE MODEL FOR PHILOSOPHY

Now why have these charges been made in the modern world for the first time if the facts are not new? I think the answer to that question is because science as the dominant feature of our culture is peculiarly modern. It is only as we come to modern times that science dominates our imagination as the great cultural enterprise. This being so, science becomes the model. And if science is the model, certainly philosophy looks bad by comparison. Philosophers should be ashamed of themselves for failing to imitate science.

But how about the opposite hypothesis, a contrary hypothesis? Suppose it was wrong to regard science as the model. Suppose science is not the model which philosophy should imitate and that philosophy should not be judged by comparison with science but in its own terms. Then how would philosophy look to us? It is on that contrary hypothesis, it is by asking you to think for a moment of philosophy in its own terms and not by contrast with science that I want to answer these two charges that I've just made.

Let me go to the first charge. The charge was that philosophers disagree, whereas the scientists tend to agree. This charge, if one looks at it now, can be answered in the following way: There is agreement and disagreement in both science and philosophy, probably as much disagreement in science as in philosophy, but the difference is in the way in which the agreement or the disagreement

occurs. The pattern of the agreement and of the disagreement does not occur in the same way in science and philosophy.

If one considers science, one sees that for the most part contemporary scientists working at the same time, competent men in the field of science at one and the same time, tend to agree, but that scientists of a later generation or century tend to disagree with scientists of an earlier century or generation. Whereas if you look at philosophy, you see that there is a great deal of agreement among philosophers across the centuries; later philosophers agreeing with earlier ones, but that for the most part contemporary philosophers tend to disagree with one another.

Let me illustrate this with a few simple examples. Let's consider first, two great scientists, Isaac Newton living in the seventeenth century and in our own day the great Albert Einstein. Now in his own day, the work of Newton, the great formulations of Newton were generally accepted by other scientists alive at the same time. And in our day, the great formulations of Einstein, the general and special relativity theories, are for the most part accepted by competent scientists in our day. But Newton and Einstein do not agree. Einstein disagrees with Newton. Einstein is correct and I think has gone beyond Newton. This is a typical example of disagreement among scientists, a later one disagreeing with an earlier one.

Now then, let's consider two philosophers. Let's consider David Hume, living at the end of the eighteenth century. After we consider David Hume, let's turn to a contemporary philosopher whom I've mentioned several times, Lord Bertrand Russell. Bertrand Russell, coming two centuries after Hume, for the most part agrees with most of Hume's principal points. There is agreement among philosophers from one century to another, a later philosopher agreeing with an earlier one. But if one were to take a contemporary of Bertrand Russell, the great French Catholic philosopher, Jacques Maritain, one would find in the contemporary world a deep and important disagreement going on between Maritain and Bertrand Russell.

Let me now go to the second charge which has to do with philosophy and science. As in the first case, the thing I want you to see is that the way in which progress is made in science is different from the way in which it is made in philosophy; and that philosophy is misjudged if it must measure up to the kind of progress science makes, whereas it should be judged in terms of the kind of progress it can make in its own terms.

One of our correspondents, Mrs. J. Burnley, reminded me of a passage I had written in a book some time ago now in which I described the difference between progress in science and in philosophy. I would like to read you this brief statement of what kind of progress is made in science in order to have you look at the difference from that of progress in philosophy. I am quoting from my book written about 1935. This book is called *What Man Has Made of Man*. "The line of progress in science," I wrote, "is undeviating in each successive period. The state of scientific knowledge is an improvement on what went before. There is both more and better knowledge. The history of science can be reported as a correction of errors and inadequacies. But once the correction is made, the advance is consolidated. There is no backsliding. A scientific error always occurs at an earlier time than the scientific knowledge which corrects it. This is not true of the history of philosophy which moves forward in a spiral path rather than in a straight line. The same errors often recur again and again, and are corrected again and again. There is not on the whole more error in philosophy than in science, but the way in which it occurs and the way in which it recurs is different."

PROGRESS IN PHILOSOPHY

How does progress occur in philosophy and what is the difference between the pattern of progress in philosophy and in science?

First, consider the characteristics of progress in science and in philosophy. In science, progress is made by experimental corrections which produce new data or better observations. And these combined with theoretical advances in terms of new or more comprehensive hypotheses gives you the onward motion of science from generation to generation. If one goes to philosophy, there is nothing like that. We have something quite different. In philosophy the first and basic point of progress comes about through dialectical clarification which give us an improved understanding of old issues. And combined with this improved understanding of all issues there are theoretical advances which come with new insights involving restatement of old insights.

Now as a result of these differences in the character of progress in science and philosophy, one gets a difference in the direction and rate of progress in science and philosophy. In science, you get more knowledge from generation to generation. And the motion forward is a straight-line motion with uniform acceleration. More

and more and more, and the progress is more rapid in each generation. Whereas in philosophy it is not more knowledge you get, but more understanding, and not from generation to generation but from epoch to epoch, as you go from the ancient world to the medieval world, from the medieval world to the modern world. Those great epochs see more understanding in philosophy. And the motion forward is not a straight-line motion but a spiral motion, a slow, forward motion with intermittent retardation, slipping back before it takes another step forward.

In view of this comparison between progress in science and in philosophy, I would like to read you two maxims written many centuries ago by Aristotle. They are almost, so I say, directions to the philosopher as to how to make progress in the difficult field of philosophical learning. The first of his maxims comes from his *Metaphysics*, and it reads as follows: “The investigation of the truth is in one way hard, in another easy. An indication of this is found in the fact that no one is able to attain the truth adequately, while on the other hand we do not collectively fail. Everyone says something true about the nature of things, while individually we contribute little or nothing to the truth. So by the union of all, a considerable amount is amassed.” And then a little later in his book on *The Soul*, he says, “Therefore it is necessary to call into council the views of our predecessors in order that we may profit by whatever is sound in their thought and avoid their errors.”

Now all this being true, all this being so, it must be admitted, I think, that in recent centuries and even more so today, philosophy has not made the progress it can and should make in its own terms. I am very sympathetic to the question raised by Mr. Burnley in the letter he wrote us last week. He asks, “How can anyone be optimistic about the possibility of philosophical progress in the world today? Why has philosophy failed in the recent past? Why is it failing so much today?”

I think there is a two-fold answer here. One part of the answer is given by Mr. Burnley in the letter that I mentioned before. He points out the opponents of philosophy. “Antiphilosophy always exists and exists with special intensity in the contemporary world because this is a world in which we have a cultural predominance of science.” But I think there is a much deeper reason. In the modern world and especially today, philosophers have failed in regard to the first condition of progress. The first condition of progress is that dialectic clarification that gives us a deeper understanding of the basic issues. As a result of that failure we have more and more

confusion, less and less communication among philosophers. They understand one another less and the issues less. And in consequence, the contributions of the philosophical genius making an advance with a new insight cannot be achieved.

Can this failure be remedied? Those of us who are at work at the Institute for Philosophical Research think that it can be. That is precisely what we are trying to do. We think the first step toward philosophical progress in the next century can be made in this one by a better understanding of the basic issues.

I will try to explain this more fully next week.

We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.

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