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OTHER VIEWS OF PHILOSOPHY

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Part 1 of 2

I HAVE ALREADY referred to the ancient, mediaeval, and even seventeenth-century view of philosophy, which conceives it as capable of achieving knowledge in the sense of *episteme.*[1] *I* mention it again only to point out that, though philosophy as thus conceived may satisfy the four other conditions, this conception of it, in attempting to satisfy the first condition, makes a demand upon philosophy which it cannot fulfill. By claiming too much for philosophy as an autonomous branch of knowledge, it had the effect of bringing philosophy into wide disrepute. Most of the views to which we now turn go the other way. In regard to the first condition, they tend to claim too little—denying that philosophy can achieve knowledge even in the sense of *doxa.* In addition, none of them subscribes to all of the other four conditions.

1 See Chapter 2, pp. 27-28. The contrary view, which this book adopts, is well expressed by C. I. Lewis's statement that "proof, in philosophy, can be nothing more at bottom than persuasion." The philosopher can offer proof "only in the sense of so connecting his theses as to exhibit their mutual support, and only through appeal to other minds to reflect upon their experience and their own attitudes and perceive that he correctly portrays them. If there be those minds which find no alternatives save certainty . . . or skepticism, then to skepticism they are self-condemned" *(Mind and the World-Order,* New York, 1929, p. 23) .

I shall now briefly examine five or six alternative conceptions of philosophy, each of which is at variance on one or more points with the view of it taken in this book. This survey is hardly intended to be exhaustive; it serves only to indicate the consequences for philosophy which result from either ignoring or repudiating conditions which it should be able to satisfy, as science and history do.

(I)

Let me begin with the view of philosophy which has its roots in the famous statement that David Hume makes at the end of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding.*

> If we take in our hand any volume of divinity or school metaphysics . . . let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity and number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

To translate this statement into more familiar terms: If we take in our hand any volume (which may be a book written by someone who regards himself as a philosopher), let us ask, *Is it a work of mathematics, as indicated by its subject matter and its method of analysis and reasoning?* No. *Is it a work of empirical science, or of historical scholarship?* No. Cast it aside, then, for it can contain nothing but worthless opinion, personal prejudice, superstition, or, worse, plain nonsense.

Twentieth-century positivism makes explicit the view of philosophy that is implicit in Hume's disjunction—his division of all the disciplines worthy of our consideration into (a) the formal disciplines of mathematics, to which the positivists would add the formal disciplines of logic and semantics, and (b) the empirical disciplines of the natural and social sciences, to which can be added historical research insofar as it employs observable data to determine what Hume calls "matters of fact and existence." Science and history exhaustively cover the modes of inquiry able to achieve first-order

knowledge about that which is and happens in the world. Hence, philosophy must be relegated to the plane of second-order questions. While its subject matter is not the same as that of mathematics, it is, like mathematics, a formal, rather than an empirical, discipline; it is logical or semantic analysis devoted to structuring and clarifying science and mathematics.[2]

In his last book, *Some Problems of Philosophy,* William James, in an opening chapter which attempts to defend philosophy against its critics, makes certain statements about it which run counter to the conditions here stipulated. Far from defending philosophy, the view of it toward which these statements tend would, it seems to me, damage philosophy in the eyes of anyone who was concerned about its intellectual respectability. Though his view is not shared by many professional philosophers today, I call attention to it because it is widely held by specialists in other fields and by many otherwise well-informed laymen.

2 This view clearly violates the fifth condition, which requires that philosophy should engage primarily in seeking first-order know-ledge, pursuing its inquiries on the same plane as science and history.

James takes his departure from a generally accepted historical fact—that what are now the special sciences were once a part of philosophy and that they have developed to their present state by breaking off from the parent stem.[3] It is not this fact but the interpretation which James places on it that is so significant. "As fast as questions got accurately answered," he declares, "the answers were called 'scientific,' and what men call 'philosophy' today is but the residuum of questions still unanswered."[4] That may very well be what men, or most men, or those who are uninformed, do call "philosophy," as a matter of fact; but, unfortunately, James seems to agree with them instead of pointing out wherein and why this view of philosophy is wrong.

The special sciences have methods for answering questions accurately and for reaching a high measure of agreement about the right answers; but, according to James, "philosophy, taken as distinct from science or practical affairs, follows no method peculiar to itself."[5] Nor, it would seem, does philosophy have any problems of its own. The problems that it tackles and fails to solve are simply those which science has not yet got around to working on; they are "philosophical" problems only *pro tent* and they are that only as long as they remain unsolved.

"It is obvious enough," James says, "that if every step forward which philosophy makes, every question to which an accurate answer is found, gets accredited to science, the residuum of unanswered problems will alone remain to constitute the domain of philosophy, and will alone bear

her name. In point of fact, this is just what is happening. Philosophy has become a collective name for questions that have not yet been answered to the satisfaction of all by whom they have been asked."

3 "At this very moment," he writes, "we are seeing two sciences, psychology and general biology, drop off from the parent trunk and take independent root as specialties" *(Some Problems of Philosophy,* New York, 393 s, p. 10).

4 *Ibid.* 5 *Ibid.,* p. 35.

". . . because some of these questions have waited two thousand years for an answer," it does not follow, James adds, "that no answer will be forthcoming."[6] But by his own conception of philosophy in relation to science, it does follow that when definite and agreed-upon answers are found, they will belong to science, and we will realize that the long-unanswered questions were regarded as "philosophical" only because science had not yet succeeded in answering them. The only questions that will always be philosophical are strictly unanswerable questions—that is, questions which science will never be able to answer by its methods and which philosophy cannot answer either, because, apart from the sciences, it has no adequate method for solving problems or reaching agreed-upon solutions.

On the face of it, this view of philosophy hardly recommends itself to anyone who is concerned with philosophy's being worthy of the respect that is accorded science. It is difficult to see why a young man would choose to become a philosopher rather than a scientist. It is also difficult to see, in this view, why philosophy should be an essential part of liberal education or play a pivotal role in the organization of a university. For, in this view, philosophy is not a branch of first-order knowledge, nor does it even have autonomy as a mode of inquiry: it has no first-order problems that are genuinely and exclusively its own, at least none which it can solve as science does. It may have had an honorable historic career as the mother of all the sciences- as that omnibus from which all the special sciences took their departure—but it now looks as if that career were almost, if not completely, finished; in which case, philosophy (as a first-order discipline) should be given a burial befitting the services it has performed. Its history may be worth studying, but—except as a second-order discipline—it no longer has any contributions to make, at least none which can be described as contributions to knowledge.[7]

6 *Ibid.,* pp. 2 2-2 3.

Then there is the view that lurks behind many introductions to philosophy, surveys of the schools of philosophical thought, or courses in the history of philosophy. In various ways such books or courses present the

succession and rivalry of conflicting "systems of philosophy" or "schools of thought," giving to each its due need of praise and censure. Each system or school is pictured not only as conceiving the task of philosophy in its own special way, but also as setting itself problems that are fully intelligible only in terms of its own basic presuppositions. Since there are no common questions on which philosophers of diverse schools do or can agree, only thinkers of the same school can really disagree. As between diverse schools of thought, there are no genuine disputes (issues constituted by contrary answers to the same questions); and it is often not even clear whether disputes within a particular school are capable of being adjudicated. The conflict of the "isms" is persistent because it is intrinsically irremediable.

7 Philosophy thus conceived does not satisfy any of the conditions stipulated except, perhaps, the fifth; but while philosophy, in this view, does address itself to first-order questions primarily, these questions are really scientific questions if they are eventually answerable and only philosophical if they can never be answered.

In this view, philosophy hardly deserves anyone's respect as a branch of knowledge. It does not produce theories capable of being judged for their relative truth. It cannot possibly have the character of a public enterprise in which the participants engage in common tasks, deal with the same problems, cooperate, and make advances.[8]

A closely related view is that held by some historians of ideas. I have in mind here the type of historical relativism which tends to deny that two philosophers writing in different epochs and under different cultural circumstances can possibly be addressing themselves to the same problems. Like the immediately preceding view, this would make it impossible for philosophy to satisfy the third condition, requiring it to be conducted as a public enterprise in which the participants should be able to answer the same questions, able to agree or disagree, able to adjudicate their disagreements, and able to cooperate. In addition, philosophy seen through the eyes of historical relativism falls far short of what is required by the first and second conditions—that it be a branch of knowledge and that, among the theories or conclusions proposed by philosophers, some can be dismissed as false and some can be judged truer than others.

8 Philosophy thus conceived does not satisfy the first, second, and third conditions. The problems which the diverse "isms" try to solve may consist of first-order questions, as is required by the fifth condition; but the fourth condition, which requires that philosophy as a mode of inquiry have certain questions of its own, is satisfied only by lumping together the irreducibly different formulations that set different systems of philosophy or schools of thought apart from one another—almost in separate worlds or in logic-tight compartments.

Historical relativism applies to scientific as well as to philosophical theories—and with the same effect. But, as I shall subsequently try to show, there is a reason for holding that philosophy is better able than science to transcend the limitations imposed on human thinking by historical circumstances. Philosophers widely separated in time and space are contemporaries whom we can treat as dealing with the same problems and whom we can regard as talking to one another about them. This is not true, or much less true, of scientists working at different stages in the history of science.

We come next to a number of views which are somewhat akin in their conception of philosophy's relation to the special sciences and other disciplines. These views tend to deny that philosophy has first-order questions of its own, problems which it can deal with independently of the changing content of all the special sciences. While they do not restrict philosophy to second-order tasks of linguistic and conceptual clarification, they do focus its attention on problems arising from apparent conflicts, or at least lack of coordination, among the findings or conclusions of other disciplines, particularly the sciences.

According to John Herman Randall, Jr., for example, philosophy is "a clarification and criticism of the fundamental beliefs involved in all the great enterprises of human culture, science, art, religion, the moral life, social and political activity. It is especially the clarification and criticism of those beliefs that have come into conflict. . . ." This is philosophy's critical function; but it also has, Randall adds, an imaginative and poetic function—"the imaginative discernment and elaboration of new ideas, drawn from some special area; in modern times, usually from one of the sciences, but often from practical life or from religion as well." [9] If this were what philosophy is, then it would *not* be a relatively autonomous branch of knowledge, having first-order questions purely its own; all or certainly the primary problems of philosophy would consist of mixed questions involving the special sciences or other disciplines such as history, religion, art, law.

The effort to coordinate and see together what specialists in particular fields fail to relate C. D. Broad refers to as the synoptic function of philosophy; but he does not think that this is its exclusive function on the level of first-order problems.[10] *W.* F. Sellars seems to go further than Broad; he appears to make the synoptic task the sole function of philosophy. Philosophy, he writes, "has no subject-matter which stands to it as other subject-matters stand to other special disciplines. If philosophers did have such a special subject-matter, they could turn it over to a new group of specialists as they have turned other special subject-matters to non-philosophers over the past 250o years, first with mathematics, more recently psychology and, currently, certain aspects of theoretical linguis-

tics. What is characteristic of philosophy is not a special subject-matter, but the aim of knowing one's way around with respect to the subject-matters of all the special disciplines." [11]

9 *How Philosophy Uses Its Past,* New York, 1963, p. 100. Randall offers this statement of what philosophy *is* in the context of saying what philosophy *is not:* "not a narrow technical speciality, appealing only to a select few, with no relevance outside their limited circle . . . *not* the concern with a small group of inherited puzzles and dilemmas, insoluble because of the contradictory character of the assumptions that create them . . . *not* a collection of mistakes due to the confused misuse of language, to be cleared up by a proper analysis once and for all and then happily forgotten" *(ibid).*

10 See "Two Lectures on the Nature of Philosophy," in *Clarity Is Not Enough,* edited by H. D. Lewis, London, 1963, pp. 6o ff.

The result of this conception of philosophy is the same as that which follows from Randall's view of it. If philosophy consisted entirely of such "know-how" in the performance of the synoptic function, and involved no "know-that" about a first-order subject matter of its own, it would not have the relative autonomy that is stipulated by the fourth condition. Nor would it be a branch of knowledge comparable to science and history. "The aim of the philosopher," as Sellars says, would not be "to discover new truths, but to 'analyze' what we already know."[12]

Philosophy would lack the autonomy it should have, in any view of it which emphasizes mixed questions, involving scientific or other special knowledge, to the exclusion of questions that are purely philosophical. There are passages in the writings of John Dewey and Alfred North Whitehead which appear to give adherence to this view. Each confesses that the shape which his philosophical thinking takes is determined by the current state of scientific knowledge—that, in short, his philosophical doctrines would have been different had he been writing in the seventeenth or in the fifteenth century, and that the positions he takes will have to be revised in the light of scientific knowledge a century or two hence. That could be the case only if all the problems with which they deal were to some extent dependent for their solution upon scientific knowledge; that is, only if they were all mixed questions.[13]

11 *Science, Perception, and Reality,* New York, 1963, p. 2. Cf. Gilbert Ryle, *Dilemmas,* Cambridge, 1954.

12 *Op. cit.,* p. 3. Judging from other essays in this volume (for example, "Being and Being Known"), Sellars does not restrict himself to the tasks of either analytic or synoptic philosophy.

Actually, such is not the case, so far as Dewey and Whitehead are concerned. Their constructive philosophical writings deal with purely philo-

sophical questions, which are in no way affected by the current state of scientific knowledge. If one were to name twentieth-century philosophers whose contributions to first-order philosophy not only were of the first magnitude, but also proceeded from a sound conception of what philosophers should be doing and how they should be doing it, the names of John Dewey, Alfred North Whitehead, and (I must add) George Santayana would lead the list.[14]

Their doctrinal or substantive differences do not obscure, nor should they cause us to overlook, their similarity of approach to the philosophical task and the extent to which their procedures converge. I am not saying that, from my point of view, they are procedurally sound in all respects, or that their philosophical work perfectly satisfies all the conditions which I think philosophy should meet.[15] But it moves in that direction, not away from it, as do the major movements in philosophical thought that now dominate the scene. I shall consider these in the pages to follow.

13 The view (if anyone were to take it) that all philosophical questions are mixed, involving the dependence of philosophy upon science, would not only run counter to the requirement that philosophy have a measure of autonomy derived from having certain questions of its own and a method of its own for answering them, but it would also raise a question about the other factor upon which the solution of the mixed question depends. Is it knowledge in the sense of *doxa* or mere opinion? If the latter, then philosophy is reduced to mere opinion and can have no intellectual respectability at all. If the former, then philosophy must be a branch of knowledge which has some autonomy, and then the very existence of mixed questions would entail the existence of purely philosophical questions which the philosopher must have a method of dealing with in a way that results in philosophical knowledge *(doxa),* not mere opinion.

14 Unlike Whitehead and Dewey, Santayana nowhere acknowledges a debt to science for the direction of his philosophical thinking; on the contrary, he denies that it would have been different in any other age or culture. See *Skepticism and Animal Faith,* New York, 1923, pp. ix—x.

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