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## PHILOSOPHY AS A PUBLIC ENTERPRISE: AGREEMENT AND PROGRESS

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Part 1 of 2

**W**E HAVE DEALT with five of the six conditions and have seen that they do not pose insuperable obstacles for philosophy. One condition remains for consideration: can philosophy be conducted as a public enterprise? While the work of scientific investigation and of historical scholarship was not always thus conducted, it would be generally admitted that it now is, and has been for some time past. The participants in these intellectual enterprises address themselves to common questions, are able to disagree as well as to agree about the solutions of their problems, willingly submit to the policing of their work by standards commonly accepted, and make contributions which are both cumulative and corrective, so that their cooperation advances the state of the discipline.

The same cannot be said for philosophy as it is now carried on. The analytical and linguistic philosophers have conducted their own program of work in a public manner, but they represent an exception to the prevailing pattern of philosophical work, both in the past and in contemporary thought. Two charges repeatedly brought against philosophy bespeak the widespread opinion that philosophy differs from science and history in its character as an intellectual enterprise. Philosophers, it is claimed, never agree. Little or no progress is made in philosophical thought; it is not a cumulative discipline. Those who make such charges could go further and point out that philosophers, while appearing to differ, seldom really disagree, in the sense of joining issue (that is, giving mutually exclusive answers to questions of which they have a common understanding). They do not cooperate with one another in attacking common problems or in submitting their solutions to appraisal by standards commonly accepted by all participants in the enterprise.

To say that philosophy is inferior to science with respect to agreement (let us add, and disagreement) and with respect to progress (let us add, and cooperation) presupposes that they are comparable enterprises (that both are modes of inquiry attempting to solve problems and to advance knowledge); for if they are not comparable, then the charges are unjustly brought. One would not say that poetry or music is inferior to science because poets or musicians fail to agree, fail to cooperate, or make progress. No one expects poets or musicians to regard themselves as engaging in the kind of enterprise that has, or should have, these characteristics. If philosophy as a work of the mind is much more like poetry or music than it is like science, philosophers should be expected to behave like poets and musicians rather than like scientists; and when they behave in that way, they should not be criticized for it. Only if philosophy and science are comparable intellectual enterprises are we justified in comparing them and finding philosophy inferior in the respects mentioned—respects which are appropriate to that kind of enterprise.

Philosophy is frequently judged to be inferior to science in other respects. The prevalent opinion today (not only in learned circles but also among the general public) seems to be that philosophy is inferior to science not only with respect to agreement and progress, but also with respect to usefulness and understanding. Considering the degree to which each has practical value for or confers benefits on man and society, it is generally thought that philosophy has not been, and can never be, as useful to man as science has been, and is, through all its technological applications. Considering the de-

gree to which each renders the world intelligible, it is generally thought that philosophy has never given, and can never give, an understanding of the world as penetrating as that which we obtain from science. Considering the degree to which each is able to resolve disputes or settle differences among the participants in its enterprise, it is generally thought that philosophers have not achieved, and cannot achieve, agreement to the same extent as scientists do reach agreement by the resolution of their differences. Considering the degree to which each augments and accumulates the kind of knowledge it seeks, it is generally thought that philosophy has not made, and cannot make, progress to the same extent that science has and does.

I have enumerated four respects in which philosophy is often judged by many to be inferior to science. This opinion, shared by some of the leading figures in modern and contemporary philosophy, probably does not take into account the fact that philosophy may not yet have satisfied the conditions in terms of which it would be as respectable an intellectual enterprise as science. However, even if that were taken into account, it is my impression that the opinion would persist. It would still be thought that philosophy *at its best*—a state not yet achieved—could never equal the achievements of science in the four respects specified.

In this chapter, I shall examine the judgment that philosophy is inferior to science with respect to agreement and the judgment that it is inferior with respect to progress, because these two aspects, as we have seen, are intimately connected with philosophy's being—or with its capacity for being—conducted as a public enterprise.

### (I)

As forms of inquiry aimed at acquiring knowledge of that which is and happens in the world, scientific research and philosophical thought are comparable intellectual enterprises. We should, therefore, rightly expect that they can be conducted in a comparable manner. But is it right to expect that agreement can be achieved in philosophy in the same way or to the same extent that it is in science? Is it right to expect that progress can be made in philosophy in the same way or at the same rate as in science?

If philosophy and science were as much alike as two subdivisions of science are alike (for example, physics and chemistry or zoology and botany), the expectation of similar performance would be justified. That, however, is not the case. All the subdivisions of science involve essentially the same type of method: they are all

investigative as well as empirical disciplines. Philosophy is an empirical discipline, but essentially distinct in type of method: it is non-investigative. Hence, the comparability of science and philosophy as modes of inquiry that seek knowledge in the form of *doxa* must be qualified by the essential difference between an investigative and a non-investigative procedure in acquiring knowledge and in testing theories or conclusions.

Three consequences follow from this essential difference. I call attention to them, not only because they help us to understand the divergent characteristics of science and philosophy as comparable disciplines, but also because they enable us to modify the prevailing judgments about philosophy's inferiority to science with respect to agreement and progress. The comparison—and evaluation—of science and philosophy in these respects must be made with an eye on the difference between them and with due account taken of the implications of that difference.

*Because science is investigative and philosophy is not, specialization and division of labor are possible in science as they are not in philosophy—at least not to the same extent.*

The multiplicity of the major subdivisions of science, and the further subsectioning of the major subdivisions, is closely related to the multiplicity of specific techniques for carrying on the investigation of nature or society, each a technique for exploring a special field of phenomena. Men become specialists in science through mastering one or more of these techniques. No one can master all. The ideal of the generalist in science may, in the remote past, have had the appearance of attainability, but it does so no longer. To be a scientist now is to be a specialist in science. The total work of science is thus accomplished by the specialization of its workers and by an intensive division of labor, not only on the side of investigation, but also on the side of theoretical developments or constructions relevant to the data of investigation in a particular field.

Turning to philosophy, we find an opposite state of affairs. The core of common experience to which the empirical philosopher appeals is the same for all men; and common or ordinary experience involves no specialized techniques. Hence, there is and can be no basis for specialization or for division of labor in philosophy on the empirical side. These things which naturally pertain to the work of men when they investigate just as naturally play no part in the work of men when they do not.

On the theoretical side, there is some possibility of a division of labor in philosophy—as between logic and metaphysics, or between metaphysics and ethics. In fact, specialization has occurred both in the university teaching of philosophy and also in the concentration of this or that professor of philosophy upon this or that sector of philosophical inquiry. Nevertheless, it remains *possible* for one man to make contributions in all the major sectors of philosophical thought. The great philosophers of the past have certainly been generalists in philosophy; and in our own century the writings of Dewey, Russell, Whitehead, Bergson, Santayana, Maritain touch on all the major questions of philosophy. This sufficiently makes the point of contrast between science and philosophy; for, though in antiquity, before specialization took place, Aristotle could make contributions to the major fields of science, that is no longer possible. In fact, specialization and division of labor have now reached the point at which it is almost impossible for one man to do outstanding theoretical work in more than a single field of scientific research.

*Because there is so much specialization and division of labor in science, and so little in philosophy, as a consequence of the fact that one is and the other is not investigative, it follows as a further consequence that the authority of experts must be relied on in science and cannot be relied on in philosophy.*

The individual scientist accepts the findings of other scientists—both in his own field and also in other fields—without redoing the investigations on which those findings are based. He may, in rare instances, check the data by repeating the experiment, but for the most part, especially with regard to matters not immediately within his own special field of research, he proceeds by accepting the findings of reputable experts. He cannot do otherwise and get his own work done.

In many cases, though not in all, the individual scientist also accepts the theoretical conclusions reached by other scientists, if these have the authority of recognized experts, without checking all the steps by which those conclusions were originally reached or tested. In other words, a highly specialized scientist, working in some narrow corner of the whole scientific enterprise, accepts a large body of scientific opinions on the authority of other scientists. It would be impossible for him to do otherwise.

Since philosophers proceed entirely in terms of common experience to which all have equal access, and since it is by reference to common experience that philosophical theories or conclusions

must be tested, philosophers need never accept a single philosophical opinion on the authority of other philosophers. On the contrary, whatever theories a philosopher holds and whatever conclusions he reaches he can and should arrive at by judgments he himself makes in the light of the very same evidence that is available to all other men, including all other philosophers. Where, in the case of scientific work, the individual cannot dispense with the authority of his fellow workers, he cannot, in the case of philosophical work, rely on it. One might go further and say that the man who accepts any philosophical opinions whatsoever simply on the authority of their spokesmen, no matter how eminent, is no philosopher.

*Because science depends on special experience acquired by investigation, whereas philosophy relies on and appeals only to the common experience of mankind which, at its core, is the same for all men at all times and places, philosophers have a contemporaneity which scientists cannot have.*

Philosophical questions which arise from and relate to common experience can make contemporaries of philosophers as far apart in time and place as Plato and Bradley, Aristotle and Dewey, Augustine and William James. Another way of saying this is that there is no genuine unmixed philosophical question which concerns us today to which it would be impossible in principle to find an answer given by a philosopher who lived at some prior time. Earlier philosophers may not have actually considered all the questions with which we are concerned, but in many cases they did, and in all cases they *could* have. Hence, in dealing with controversies about philosophical matters, the disputants may be drawn from centuries far apart.

Not all philosophical questions have the timelessness indicated above. This characteristic pertains only to those purely philosophical problems which depend exclusively on common experience for their solution and involve no admixture of scientific knowledge. What I have called mixed questions in philosophy, especially those which depend, both for their formulation and for their solution, on the state of scientific knowledge, vary from time to time. Those which confront philosophers today are certainly not the same as those faced by Aristotle or Descartes. The same holds true of those mixed questions in philosophy which depend on special historical knowledge, and of those which lie athwart the border that separates philosophy from revealed religion.

With these exceptions noted, let me repeat the point: purely philosophical problems are of such a nature that the philosophers who

tackle them *can have the character of contemporaries* despite their wide separation in time and place. The accidents of their immersion in different cultural milieus may affect their vocabularies and their notional idioms, but this does not prevent them from being construed as addressing themselves to the *same* problems and as engaging in debate concerning the merits of competing solutions.

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