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## PHILOSOPHY'S PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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Part 1 of 4

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I have now done what I can to persuade readers that philosophy, by being able to satisfy certain stipulated conditions, can be an intellectual enterprise that deserves the same kind of respect generally accorded science and history, and additional esteem for the pivotal role it can play in education and in the organization of the university, and for the special place it occupies in the hierarchy of elements that constitute culture or civilization.

I think I have accomplished this principally by showing that philosophy can have a distinctive method of its own whereby it can be an empirical mode of inquiry resulting in a distinctive type of knowledge (*doxa*) about that which is and happens in the world or

about what men ought to do and seek.

The crux of the argument is, of course, the distinction between common and special experience. If that distinction is valid, as I think it is, philosophy, like science, can have its own limited sphere of inquiry; it can have first-order questions of its own and various ways of testing the theories or conclusions it propounds, including an empirical test of what it claims to know, whereby some of its claims may be falsified. These things being so, I have argued that philosophy can be conducted as a public enterprise, in which philosophers cooperate, adjudicate their disputes, and achieve some measure of agreement.

I have also tried to explain why philosophy is generally thought, especially in learned circles, to be inferior to science with respect to agreement, progress, usefulness, and the understanding it gives us of the world. That judgment, I have conceded, may be quite sound when it is made about philosophy in its present or past state, which falls far short of satisfying the conditions stipulated.

However, the judgment is sometimes made in terms that suggest that philosophy can never achieve the kind or degree of agreement and progress that science so clearly manifests; and that philosophy by its very nature can never be as useful to mankind as science or as valuable a source of understanding.

That deprecatory estimate of philosophy, I have argued, is mistaken and unfounded. The explanation of the mistake, I have tried to point out, lies in the fact that philosophy is here being judged by reference to standards that are appropriate to science alone, instead of, standards appropriate to philosophy's own distinctive type of inquiry, method, and results.

Philosophy, as a noninvestigative discipline, cannot be expected to make the same kind or rate of progress, achieve agreement in the same way or to the same extent, or have the same kind of usefulness of which science, an investigative discipline, can rightly boast.

To recognize this is to see that in modern times—with the ever-increasing cultural preeminence of science since the seventeenth century—philosophy has suffered from these mistaken taken comparisons with science. However, it is not only in modern times that philosophy has suffered from its relation to other disciplines. As I see philosophy's historic development from its beginning to the present day, it has had a checkered career, full of misfortunes

and disorders.

In antiquity, it suffered from confusion with science, on the one hand, and with religion, on the other; in the Middle Ages, it suffered from the cultural dominance of religion and theology; in modern times, it has been suffering from the cultural preeminence of science.

Throughout its history philosophy has been led by false aspirations, arising from *its* misguided emulation of the certitude of dogmatic theology, the demonstrative character of mathematical thought, or the empirical procedures of investigative science. At all times it has suffered disorders within its own household resulting from the failure to understand itself—its separate sphere of inquiry, its four dimensions, its own distinctive method, its characteristic procedure, and, above all, what it can and cannot hope to achieve.

In view of this, the kindest thing that can be said about philosophy in the twentieth century is that its present state reveals it to be, unwittingly, a victim of its past. The most generous comment to add is that there are no intrinsic obstacles to its having a future much brighter than its past.<sup>1</sup>

Such optimism should not be expressed as a prediction, but as a hope that what is possible for philosophy to become, it will become in the future.

## 2

In the Epilogue to *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*, entitled “Modern Science and Ancient Wisdom,” I tried to explain the steady decline of philosophy from the seventeenth century to the low point it has reached at the present day.

In Part Three of *The Conditions of Philosophy* (1965), I told the story at somewhat greater length, but still trying to do so within a very limited space. To do that with requisite brevity, I chose to tell the history of philosophy in procedural rather than in substantive terms. By that I mean telling the history in terms of philosophy’s method, its awareness of its character and its relation to other disciplines, especially religion, investigative science, and mathematics rather than in terms of its theories and doctrines.

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<sup>1</sup> In *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*, I have pointed out the serious errors made in modern philosophy that have resulted in the steady decline of philosophy in the last three centuries, mistakes that must be corrected if philosophy is to recover

That procedural history was written more than thirty years ago. On rereading it I find that I cannot improve on it with regard to the main points it makes, though I can modify it somewhat here and there, abbreviate it, and supplement it in this present retelling. Since *The Conditions of Philosophy* has been long out of print and is generally unavailable, I am going to recapitulate what I wrote there, excerpting without quotation marks.

If I thought, *as I do not*, that it is only in modern times that philosophy has fallen into a parlous condition, then I should undertake to depict the high estate achieved by philosophy in ancient and mediæval times, to explain how and why it is only in modern times that philosophy has fallen from that high estate, and to recommend the ways and means by which philosophy, in the future, can once more regain it by returning to its ancient past.

However, I think that philosophy has at no time ever satisfied all the conditions of respectability and worth as an intellectual enterprise—conditions that I think it *can* and *should* satisfy. Hence, I am going to try to show the various cultural circumstances and other influences that have so far prevented the philosophical enterprise from being conducted as it should be. These circumstances and influences, it will be seen, differ in each of the major epochs of Western civilization. I will also try to show the mistakes that have been made, especially in modern times, by the various efforts to reform philosophy and to restore it to the status it was once thought to have; and the tendencies in the present century which, if developed in a certain way, might substantiate the hope that philosophy can have a future brighter than its past.

Most, if not all, of the misfortunes and disorders that philosophy has suffered come, directly or indirectly, from the state of its relationship to other disciplines, especially its relationship to mathematics; its relationship to religion in general and, in particular, its relationship to the dogmatic theology of a religion that regards itself as revealed; and its relationship to science, especially as that has developed in the modern world.

On the one hand, philosophy has suffered from a lack of distinction between itself and other disciplines; that is, at certain times in the past, the line that should sharply separate philosophy from science or religion has either been nonexistent or shadowy and indistinct.

On the other hand, philosophy has suffered from the tendency to emulate and imitate other disciplines, without regard to the differences between itself and them which make such imitation inappro-

priate.

I know that it is impossible to encompass the history of philosophy if the story were to be told, as it usually *is*, in substantive terms—that is, in terms of theories held, doctrines propounded, systems developed, and arguments advanced by individual thinkers for or against particular positions. I propose to do something else, something that can be done with the brevity required.

I propose to deal with the history of philosophy almost exclusively in procedural terms—that is, in terms of philosophy’s understanding of itself in different epochs and also its various misunderstandings of its own nature, tasks, methods, and limitations.

I propose to tell the story of philosophy’s checkered career in terms of the soundness of its procedures at various times and the adequacy and correctness of philosophy’s understanding of itself, without regard to the truth or falsity in substance of its doctrines or theories.

I have not substituted a procedural for a substantive history of philosophy merely for the sake of brevity. Only a procedural history of philosophy is directly relevant to my argument. A procedural history of philosophy will necessarily take the form of applying the conditions stipulated to the historic materials and judging the course of history in the light of them. If it conveys to the reader the general impression that I hope it does, then the historical applications of the argument should also serve to confirm its validity.

### 3

#### THE MISFORTUNES OF PHILOSOPHY IN ANTIQUITY

With the speculations of the pre-Socratic philosophers, with the dialogues of Plato, and with the treatises of Aristotle, philosophy got off to a good start in three respects.

(1) The Greek philosophers managed to pose, and to pose quite clearly, many of the fundamental questions of philosophy. The fecundity of the Platonic dialogues lies in this: they raise so many of the’ basic questions—questions about the nature of things, about being and becoming, about the one and the many, about matter and spirit, about the divine, about knowledge and truth, about language, about the senses and the intellect, about ideas, about virtue and the virtues, about justice and happiness, about the state and the individual.

Neither the refinement of these questions in later periods of thought nor the later addition of questions that open up new lines of philosophical inquiry should be allowed to diminish the magnificence of the Platonic achievement, which richly deserves the tribute paid by Alfred North Whitehead when he said that the whole of European thought can be read as a series of footnotes to the dialogues of Plato.

(2) The Greek philosophers—here Plato to a lesser extent, and to a much greater extent Aristotle—also managed to lay down the lines of correct procedure in many of the respects that are essential to the proper conduct of the philosophical enterprise. The way in which Aristotle carefully considers the questions raised by his predecessors or contemporaries, and takes their opinions into account, is an amazingly clear first approximation to what is meant by the conduct of philosophy as a public, rather than a private enterprise.

Consider these two statements by Aristotle, which eloquently express his sense of philosophy as a cooperative enterprise. The first is from the *Metaphysics*, Book II, Chapter 1:

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, but every one says something true about the nature of things, and while individually we contribute little or nothing to the truth, by the union of all a considerable amount is amassed.

The second is from *On the Soul*, Book I, Chapter 2:

... it is necessary ... to call into council the views of those of our predecessors ... in order that we may profit by whatever is sound in their suggestions and avoid their errors.

Pondering these statements, it is difficult not to attribute to Aristotle a conception of philosophical knowledge as testable *doxa*. If he had regarded philosophical knowledge as *epistemé*, he would hardly have recommended, as he does in these statements, a type of procedure that befits sifting opinions and testing them for their relative truth. If philosophical truths consisted of self-evident principles and rigorously demonstrated conclusions, one would not proceed in this way.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>For the distinction between knowledge with certitude (*epistemé*) and well-founded opinions (*doxa*), see Chapter 1, pp. 5-6, *supra*.

In addition, Aristotle is an empirical philosopher in the proper sense of that term; namely, a philosopher who submits theories and conclusions—his own and others—to the empirical test, by appeal to the common experience of humankind.

(3) The Greek philosophers—here both Plato and Aristotle, though in quite different ways—managed to detect and expose a large number of typical fallacies, paradoxes, and puzzles that result from linguistic or logical inadequacies, imprecisions, or confusions in the discourse that is generated by philosophical problems.

What I am saying here is that Plato and Aristotle initiated philosophy, not only on the plane of first-order questions, both speculative and normative, but also on the plane of second-order questions about human thought and speech, especially when these are concerned with difficult first-order questions in philosophy. To the major contributions previously mentioned, they added a third—an amazingly rich beginning of what is now called analytic and linguistic philosophy—a contribution that, by the way, the more learned of contemporary analysts properly acknowledge.

These three contributions can be recognized and given their due praise without any regard to the substantive truth or error in the philosophical positions taken by Plato and Aristotle on particular problems. When we take all three into account, it is hard to see how philosophy could have had a more auspicious beginning. Nevertheless, the circumstances under which philosophy was born and went through its first state of development were not wholly auspicious. I have three misfortunes in mind.

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