



PHILOSOPHY'S PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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Part 4 of 4

I turn now to the second major disorder of philosophy in modern times—the emulation of science and mathematics. This begins in the seventeenth century. It can be discerned in Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes, as well as in Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. Beginning then, it runs through the following centuries right down to the present day.

The philosophers of the seventeenth century, misled by their addiction to *epistemé*, looked upon mathematics as the most perfect achievement of knowledge, and tried to “perfect” philosophy by mathematicizing it. This was done in different ways by Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, but the effect upon philosophy was the same—the frustration of trying to achieve a precision of terminol-

ogy and a rigor of demonstration that are appropriate in mathematics, but inappropriate in philosophy as an attempt to answer first-order questions about reality—about that which is and happens in the world or about what ought to be done and sought.

The fact that science can be mathematicized to a certain extent—the achievements of mathematical physics in particular—accentuated the mistake on the part of those who failed to see that the application of mathematics to physics depends on the special data of measurement, which have no analogue in the noninvestigative enterprise of philosophy.

This mistaken emulation of mathematics and the consequent effort to mathematicize philosophy reappear with unusual force in the twentieth century: in the “logical atomism” of Bertrand Russell, and in all the attempts to treat the language of mathematics as a modern language, to be imitated in philosophical discourse.

The effort to give philosophical discovery the simplicity of mathematical symbolism and the univocity of mathematical terms, and the effort to give philosophical formulations the “analyticity” of mathematical statements, put philosophy into a straitjacket from which it has only recently broken loose by a series of almost self-destructive convulsions.

Beginning also in the seventeenth century, philosophers began to be awed by the achievements of science and became more and more openly envious of certain features of science—the kind of progress that science makes, the kind of usefulness that it has, the kind of agreements and decisions that it can reach, and the kind of assent it wins from an ever-widening public because its theories and conclusions can be tested empirically.

Not recognizing that all these things can be achieved by philosophy in its own characteristic way, but only if it tries to achieve them in a manner appropriate to its own character as a noninvestigative discipline, philosophers over the last three hundred years have been suffering from an unwarranted sense of inferiority to science.

This sense of inferiority has, in turn, two further results. It has driven some philosophers to make all sorts of mistaken efforts to imitate science. It has led others, such as the logical positivists in our own century, to turn the whole domain of first-order inquiry over to science and to restrict philosophy to second-order questions, where it does not have to compete with science.

Either result is unfortunate. Philosophy should neither ape science as a first-order discipline (in view of their basic differences in method) nor be the second-order handmaiden of science conceived as the primary first-order discipline (in view of philosophy's rightful claim to its own first-order questions and its superiority to science in rendering the world intelligible).

The third major misfortune suffered by philosophy in modern times occurs by way of a reaction to a reaction. I am referring here to the counter reactionary restoration of philosophical systems in post-Kantian thought—in Georg Friedrich Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Johann Gottlieb Fichte on the Continent, and in such British Hegelians as F. H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, Edward Caird, and J.M.E. McTaggart, and in American Hegelians such as Josiah Royce.

The critical reaction to the philosophical systems of the seventeenth century reached its climax and, in a sense, spent itself in the Kantian critiques. Just as that critical reaction as a whole was justified by the dogmatic excesses of the seventeenth century, so the post-Kantian counter reaction was justified by the excesses and mistakes of the critical movement from Locke to Kant—the epistemologizing and psychologizing tendencies described earlier.

However, just as the dogmatic excesses of the seventeenth century could have been corrected without foisting these new misfortunes upon philosophy, so the psychologizing and epistemologizing excesses of the critical movement could have been corrected without reinstating the very thing—the imposture of system building—that the critical movement tried to get rid of.

That, unfortunately, is not the way things happened. Instead, what I shall call the “Hegelian misfortune” befell philosophy¹ What we have here is the evil of system building carried to its furthest possible extreme—an extreme to which, it must in all fairness be said, Hegel's more commonsense British followers did not go.

The Hegelian system is much more dogmatic, rationalistic, and out

¹I think this appellation is justified by the fact that Hegel is the most powerful and influential of the nineteenth-century system builders, as well as the focus of all the twentieth-century reactions to his type of philosophizing. See, for example, Karl Popper's now famous diatribe against Hegel, with the spirit of which I fully agree: *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 190), Chapter 12, especially pp. 252-73; and see also Section 17 of the Addendum (1966).

of touch with common experience than the Cartesian, Leibnizian, and Spinozist systems of the seventeenth century.

In addition, a fault intrinsic to the earlier systems becomes much more exacerbated in the Hegelian system. It offers those who come to it no alternatives except wholesale acceptance or rejection. It constitutes a world of its own and has no commerce or conversation with anything outside itself.

The conflict of systems of this sort (for example, that of Hegel and that of Schopenhauer) is totally beyond adjudication: each, like a sovereign state, acknowledges no superior jurisdiction and no impartial arbiter.

The pluralization of systems in the nineteenth century, each a personal worldview of great imaginative power and poetic scope, took philosophy further in the wrong direction than it had ever gone before—further away from the tendencies it had manifested in earlier epochs, tendencies to acquire the character of a cooperative venture and a public enterprise.

The final misfortune of modern philosophy arose, as preceding ones did, by way of reaction to an existing state of affairs. This fourth and last disorder consists in three mistaken directions taken by twentieth-century thought, having one central animus in common—namely, that they all spring from a deep revulsion to the Hegelian misfortune.

There is, first of all, the existentialist reaction to Hegel and all forms of Hegelianism. I mention this first because, while it departs from Hegel in substance, it embodies two of the worst features of the Hegelian misfortune. The existentialist philosophers—Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Gabriel Marcel—all produce highly personal worldviews of their own, systems to be accepted or rejected as wholes, even if they are not rationalistically constructed, as Hegel's is.

The other two reactions are alike in that they both move away from Hegel in procedure as well as in substance. Both, in despair about philosophy as first-order knowledge served up in the Hegelian manner, urge philosophy to retreat to the sanity and safety of an exclusively second-order discipline.

One of these reactions to Hegel is the retreat conducted by the positivists, Viennese, British, and American. When the members of

the Vienna Circle referred to “metaphysics” and attacked it as an abomination that must be forever extirpated from the philosophical enterprise, they had Hegel, and only Hegel, in mind.

The other reaction is not to Hegel himself as much as to British Hegelianism. It is the retreat conducted by the British analytic and linguistic philosophers and their American followers.

The end result of both retreats is very much the same: philosophy is relegated to the plane of a second-order discipline, that is, analytical and linguistic philosophy. However, there is this difference between them: where the positivists were content to have philosophy serve as handmaiden to science in performing second-order functions of linguistic and logical clarification or commentary, the analysts and linguists took on other second-order tasks, among them the analysis of commonsense opinions as expressed in everyday speech, and the attempt to cure the puzzles and paradoxes that are of modern philosophy’s own making, by virtue of its own epistemologizing and psychologizing tendencies.

So far I have had nothing good to say about the career of philosophy in modern times. However, just as in treating the auspicious beginning that philosophy enjoyed in Greek antiquity I also pointed out that its first epoch was attended by serious misfortunes, so now, in concluding an account of philosophy in modern times, I am going to point out two auspicious developments that relieve this long tale of disorders and misfortunes. More than that, they point, I believe, to the dawn of a new day.

The first of these is, perhaps, the more important. It is the successive separation of all the positive sciences, both natural and social, from the parent stem of philosophy.

It is sometimes said that philosophy is now bankrupt because it has now fully performed its historic function of giving birth to the particular positive sciences, from astronomy and physics to psychology and sociology. If it were true that philosophy’s only role in human culture is that of being the parent stem from which the particular sciences break off to lead lives of their own, then philosophy might very well be considered bankrupt—barren, dried up, finished. That, I hope I have shown, is not true.

The central fact of importance here is that only in modern times have the natural sciences gradually separated themselves from what in the seventeenth century was still called natural philosophy. Similarly, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the behavior-

al sciences gradually separated themselves from what was once called moral philosophy.

With these successive secessions, the scientific enterprise as a whole finally became clearly and plainly established as an autonomous branch of human knowledge and a distinct mode of inquiry. At last, after twenty-five centuries, it becomes possible to draw a sharp line between the domains of science and philosophy; and philosophy is freed of the burden that, for lack of clarity on this point, it carried so long—the burden of treating as philosophical questions that belong to science and are outside philosophy's competence.

The second gain that has been made in modern times, almost as important as the first, is in one way only the restoration of an earlier condition beneficial to philosophy.

What I have in mind here is the contribution to the development of philosophy that has been made in our own century by the British analysts and linguistic philosophers. Their retreat to the plane of second-order questions has been accompanied by a way of doing philosophical work that is the very antithesis of personal system building, not only of the Hegelian type but of the Cartesian or Spinozist type as well.

It involves the tackling of philosophical problems, question by question; it involves cooperation among men working on the same problems; it involves the policing of their work by acknowledged standards or tests; it involves the adjudication of disputes and the settling of differences. Though this can be viewed as a return to the conception of philosophy as a cooperative enterprise, first enunciated by Aristotle, and also as a return to the spirit of the public disputations in the Middle Ages, it marks a great advance in modern times.

In spite of all the regrettable vicissitudes through which philosophy has gone in modern times, the two gains that I have just described would, if sustained and combined with the advances in the right direction made in earlier epochs, promise philosophy a future much brighter than its past.

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PHILOSOPHY'S FUTURE

There is little point in asking whether philosophy has a future, for

that question hardly admits of a negative answer. The probability is great that in some sense there will always be philosophy—in the family of disciplines, in our education, in our culture.

Nor should we ask whether philosophy *will have* a future brighter than its past. That calls for a prediction that is too hazardous to make. Nothing that has been said in this book furnishes us with grounds for defending an optimistic prediction about philosophy's future. On the contrary, what we have seen of philosophy's past may lead us to think that the opposite prediction about its future is a more likely one.

This leaves the question to which I think an answer can be given with some confidence: *Can* philosophy have a future brighter than its past? The possibility of its having such a future can be argued with some assurance. In light of philosophy's past, as recounted in the preceding pages, I can indicate why I think that philosophy *can have* a brighter future.

I shall first list the misfortunes or disorders that philosophy has suffered in the past, which it should be possible to eliminate from its future. I shall then list the good starts, gains, or advances that philosophy has made, which it should be possible to preserve, consolidate, and enhance.

(i) *The negative features of philosophy's past which can be eliminated from its future:*

1. The illusion of epistémé
2. Dogmatic systems and personal system building
3. Carrying a burden of problems beyond its competence, resulting from a lack of sharp distinction of the domain of philosophy from the domain of science, on the one hand, and from the domain of religion and dogmatic theology, on the other
4. The emulation of science and mathematics in respects quite inappropriate to the conduct of the philosophical enterprise
5. Philosophy's assumption of quasi-religious status by offering itself as a way of life
6. The relinquishment of first-order inquiries to science and the retreat to second-order questions exclusively
7. Suicidal epistemologizing with all its consequences
8. The psychologizing of experience

(ii) *The positive features of philosophy's past which can be preserved, consolidated, and enhanced:*

1. Plato's and Aristotle's exploration of first-order questions, both speculative and practical. (This has been enhanced by the addition of

questions posed and explored by philosophers in subsequent centuries.)

2. Aristotle's first approximation to philosophy's distinctive method, which involves common experience as a source and as a test of philosophical theories and conclusions. (This, too, can be enhanced by our ability now to make a clearer distinction between special and common experience.)

3. The separation, in modern times, of the particular positive sciences from the parent stem of philosophy. (As a result, science as an investigative mode of inquiry is at last quite distinct from philosophy as a noninvestigative mode of inquiry, though, both deal with first-order questions empirically.)

4. The equally sharp separation, first seen as a possibility in the thirteenth century, of the domain, of philosophy from the domain of religion or dogmatic theology. (With the realization of that possibility, philosophy should be relieved of the burden of theological questions beyond its competence, just as the clear distinction between science and philosophy relieves it of the burden of scientific questions beyond its competence.)

If the philosophical enterprise from now on took advantage of the four things just enumerated, that would give philosophy, for the first time in its history, a clearly defined domain of its own, a distinctive method of its own, and a sense of its own proper value, unembarrassed by comparisons with science, mathematics, or religion.

This is possible in the future as never before. There are, in addition, hopeful indications that, in the years ahead, philosophy can finally be exorcised of its bewitchment by the illusion of *epistemé*, to be replaced by a sober respect for testable *doxa* as the only grade of organized knowledge that is achievable either in philosophy or science.

I hope I may be pardoned for referring here to the program of the Institute for Philosophical Research and to the work that it has done. The further prosecution of such work and the extension of it through similar undertakings in our universities would, in my judgment, advance the clarification of philosophical discourse about its own first-order theories or conclusions, and facilitate the conduct of philosophy as a public enterprise by helping philosophers to join issue and debate disputed questions.

Briefly summarized, the work of the Institute involves (a) taking stock of the whole accumulation of philosophical opinions on a given subject, (b) treating all the relevant opinions *as if* they were

contemporary efforts to solve a common problem, (c) clarifying that problem by *constructing* genuine issues about it, thus defining the agreements and disagreements that can be found in philosophical discourse about the subject in question, and (d) then *constructing*, from the recorded materials, some approximation to a rational debate of the issues, so far as that is possible.

The Institute refers to the method by which it carries out this program of second-order work in philosophy as dialectical. The work of the dialectician thus conceived is an effort to clarify philosophical discourse itself. It makes no contribution to the substance of philosophical thought, nor does it impose upon philosophical thought any critical standards whereby the truth or falsity of philosophical theories is to be judged.

Its only function, to borrow a word much in use by the analytic and linguistic philosophers, is therapeutic. However, where their therapeutic efforts are directed against the puzzles and paradoxes that arise from confusions and mistakes in the substance of philosophical thought, the dialectical effort attempts to remedy the deficiencies in philosophical thought which arise from a procedural rather than a substantive failure on the part of philosophers—their failure to conduct philosophy as a public enterprise wherein they engage collectively and cooperatively in the pursuit of truth.

I am proposing that second-order work in philosophy, of the dialectical type represented by the Institute's efforts to clarify the state of philosophical opinion about FREEDOM, LOVE, PROGRESS, HAPPINESS, JUSTICE, and the like, should be extended to cover the whole field of recorded philosophical thought, even though that is a project of gargantuan proportions.

I am, further, proposing that dialectical work of this kind should be sustained as a continuing and essential part of the whole philosophical enterprise, subsidiary, as all second-order work should be considered, to the main philosophical effort on the plane of first-order questions.

If these things were done, the main effort could be much more effectively prosecuted in the future, for it would be carried on in the light of a much better understanding than philosophers now have of the contributions, both cumulative and conflicting, that have been made to the solution of their first-order problems.

One might even hope that eventually there need be no division of labor between dialecticians working at their second-order tasks and

philosophers trying to answer first-order questions. Philosophy might finally become the collective and cooperative pursuit that it should be—an enterprise in which the individual participants communicated effectively about their common problems, joined issue when their solutions were opposed, and engaged in rational debate for the sake of resolving their disagreements and reaching whatever measure of agreement is attainable in the field of debatable opinion.

I conclude with one last summary of the argument. *If* the negative features of philosophy's past are eliminated from its future, as they *can* be—and *if* the positive features that I have enumerated are preserved, consolidated, and enhanced, as they also *can* be—then it follows that philosophy *can have* a future brighter than its past.


The full realization of the possibility just indicated may require a future far beyond the present century. The twenty-five centuries of philosophy's Western past may be at the most the period of its infancy—its first uncertain steps and stumblings. The gradual achievement of maturity in the philosophical enterprise may require a much longer span than the three hundred years—from the seventeenth century to the present—during which science appears to have outgrown its infancy and to have matured.

One reason for this delayed maturity may be that philosophical problems are more difficult than scientific ones, humanly speaking, if not intellectually. To conduct philosophical discussion fruitfully requires greater discipline of the passions than is needed to carry on scientific investigation in an efficient manner.

It is easier to lift scientific research to the high plane of the near-perfect experiment than to lift philosophical discussion to the high plane of the ideal debate. In addition, the philosophical enterprise may be a much more complex form of intellectual life than the scientific endeavor is; and, like all higher organisms, therefore slower to mature.

Considering man's biological origins, we should, perhaps, be filled with admiration that human beings took less than six thousand years after they emerged from the conditions of primitive life to produce the civilization of the dialogue. Six thousand years is a short period in the span of human life on earth; and the twenty-five hundred years of the philosophical enterprise so far is shorter still.

It should not tax our imaginations, therefore, to contemplate a much longer future in which the latent possibilities for philoso-

phy's development are realized and philosophy gradually achieves intellectual maturity. 

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