

PHILOSOPHICAL LECTURE

PHILOSOPHY AND PHILOSOPHY OF

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THE teaching of philosophy to the young has long been a matter of dispute. In my own university of Oxford we never allow an undergraduate to study philosophy alone, but insist that if he wants to read philosophy he must also read something else, arguing that it is good for the young to be kept sane, and after having been stuffed with nonsense in one tutorial to go and be brought down to earth again in the other; and to learn that in spite of metaphysical doubts about the reality of the past, it is none the less possible to work out the causes of the Peloponnesian War, and that Berkeleyan uncertainties about the existence of fields leave working physicists profoundly unworried. We look with unenthusiasm at the former Moral Sciences Tripos in The Other Place, where they read nothing but philosophy, and simply go round in circles following one another's entailments, unfertilized and unstimulated by any experience of any other subject. No wonder, we think, that our graduates prove themselves to be such wise men of the world that they are deemed worthy to hold important positions in the Civil Service, the Press, the Benches, and in Parliament. Cambridge sees it differently, and notes that, while Oxford has been very good at producing non-philosophers, it has produced no school like that of the Cambridge Platonists, nor any individuals to equal Moore, Russell, or Wittgenstein; and concludes that pure philosophy, unsullied by any extraneous subject, is the proper study for those who wish to philosophize well.

There is a corresponding conflict about the nature of philosophy within philosophy itself. On the one side, the Oxford side, philosophy is thought to arise from reflection, very largely reflection on other intellectual activities. We talk, we conduct scientific experiments, we do mathematics, we deliberate, we go to law, and we debate public policy; and in thinking about these activities we develop a philosophy of language, of science, of mathematics, and the like. The problems these particular branches of philosophy

address come from subjects that are themselves not necessarily philosophical, but in attempting to answer them we are led to general problems not confined to any one branch of philosophy, general problems which constitute the central core of philosophy. But that central core needs, and has greatly benefited from, the philosophies of this and that particular subject. They provide the input. Philosophy, we sometimes say, is thought about thought. And we cannot think about thought unless we sometimes think thoughts not themselves about thought but about something else.

The other approach is to see philosophy as a project of pure enquiry, in which we neither need, nor welcome, thoughts about existing thought. Existing thought is often wrong. Even if it is not in fact wrong, it is not proved to be right. It is admittedly a matter of great difficulty to determine what it is to be proved right, and what constitutes a satisfactory starting point for the enquiry—whether it should be some Form of the Good out there, as Plato thought, or some internal intimation of one's own Cartesian existence. But *χαλεπὰ τὰ καλά*, *chalepa ta kala*—worthwhile things are difficult: although perhaps we shall never attain an entirely satisfactory philosophical position, what we are bound to seek is some single insight into the nature of reality, which will offer a complete logic of justification, explaining what it is rational to believe, and why. It is no good mulling over the thoughts of other men unless and until some reason has been given for thinking that what they thought is worthy of belief.

It is natural to see Plato and Aristotle, and Descartes and Locke, as exemplifying the contrast, but they are, necessarily and significantly, not pure types. Plato was often an empiricist, and much of his power derives from his acute observations of human nature and the way of the world. Aristotle, though he lost his faith in the Form of the Good, never lost his Platonic urge to explain and unify. Descartes was a great experimentalist: much of Locke is deeply Cartesian. Nor are these mere lapses on their part. No philosopher can be only a pure philosopher without any concern for particular disciplines, or he ceases to speak to us about concerns we can recognize as our own: no philosopher can philosophize about this or that subject, without any basic intuitions or principles to guide him; in distilling principle out of practice he is potentially prescribing as well as describing, and must on occasion endorse or criticize what practitioners actually do.

Although the two ways of doing philosophy complement each other, they none the less differ in the direction of argument and, in so far as they have them, their starting points. *Philosophy of*, as I

shall term it, starts from where we are, and works back to where we can be; by contrast, philosophy *sans phrase*, or *pure foundational philosophy*, as I shall call it for the sake of clarity, although later we shall see that the word 'foundational' has misleading connotations, starts from where we should be, and hopes to reach where we actually are, or if not, to show us where we ought actually to be. Their ambitions and achievements are correspondingly different. *Philosophy of* is characterized by a desire to keep one's feet on the ground, not to make speculative leaps that outrun the warranted certainty of reason, and a willingness to be an under-labourer in the fields of knowledge rather than to queen it over the other sciences. The philosophers of common sense have never minded being dull, so long as they were sure of not saying anything extravagant or false. Not for them exciting speculations that time might be unreal or the Absolute not identical with itself; sufficient for them that Mr Bradley can catch trains, and that there are some tame tigers in London Zoo. The progress made by its pedestrian practitioners may have been unremarkable, but has been real, and has been appropriated, if only anonymously, into our common culture. *Pure foundational philosophy*, by contrast, aims high. It seeks some single, unified, synoptic vision that shall give us a key to the whole of understanding, and has always been ready to correct, and often to enjoy correcting, the errors and follies of those who have not seen the light. It has never tried to be dull, and if in other respects its ambitions have outrun its achievements, at least in this it has succeeded in its aims. But its message is more heard than heeded, and it is the fate of revisionary philosophy to be often discussed and seldom believed.

The two approaches both stem from the nature of argument. Arguments are dialogues, and there is no limit to the number of possible dialogues we can engage in, but we cannot engage in them all at once. We can argue with anyone about anything from any premisses and drawing any inferences, but if we are to argue effectively we need to delimit the range of people we are addressing, the questions we are trying to answer, the assumptions we take for granted and the patterns of inference we employ. If we have open-ended discussions in which all take part, every question is raised, every assumption questioned, and every consideration adduced, we do not get very far: we need to discipline ourselves, if we are to achieve anything. Different disciplines delimit different ranges of question that may be asked, different assumptions that may be taken for granted, different types of argument that may be used. By many careful measurements I might persuade you that

3-4-5 triangles are always right-angled, but I shall not be accounted a geometer, and my argument will not be accepted as rigorous, unless I argue after the manner of the geometers *more geometrico*. Similarly, it is no good arguing with a historian that it ought to be the case that Cadbury Castle is King Arthur's Camelot because it rings true, and chimes with the vibes I feel when I visit the place; the historian will be unpersuaded. Only certain sorts of evidence will be admitted as historically cogent and as capable of establishing that King Arthur once lived on Cadbury hill. We delimit different disciplines thus, because we have to concentrate on certain issues, leaving others for the time being undiscussed, in order to make progress: we accept some assumptions and inferences, and reject others, without question, not because they are unquestionably right or wrong, but because they cannot profitably be all called in question at once. The scientist does not question the validity of the experimental method or seek justifications of the law of natural uniformity; the historian does not wonder whether the world, with all its written records, came into existence five minutes ago; the lawyer does not discuss whether bargains should be kept, or try to prove that property is not theft; the moralist does not doubt that others should be considered as well as ourselves, or that there are duties which it is incumbent on us to discharge. Each discipline rests on assumptions we *can* question but *do not* question—at least not while we are engaged in that discipline. These assumptions we establish by *fiat*, and make it constitutive of the discipline that we allow some arguments and disallow others without question.

There are great advantages in this '*fiatory*' approach, in which we simply stipulate what the rules of inference and canons of relevance of a particular discipline shall be. Russell was unfair in stigmatizing them as the advantages of theft over honest toil: they are often, rather, the advantages of inheritance over laborious acquisition. It is good to enter into other men's labours. They enable us to start sooner and go further. Freed from all philosophical doubts, I can press on towards achieving definite results, without having to watch every step to make sure I am on safe philosophical ground. Many mathematicians of my acquaintance have been visibly put out by questions about the foundations of mathematics: 'Don't shake the foundations,' they seem to say, 'while I am up aloft, or you will put me off my balance.' Likewise lawyers and men of affairs are irritated by arguments from first principle: life is short, and if every question were to be worked out from first principles, we should never get anywhere: the only way

we can reach definite conclusions is for us to operate within agreed guide-lines, and ask not what the law ought to be, but whether a particular statute was validly enacted by a competent authority, or a particular decision taken in due form and according to the requisite procedure. We secure rigour by limiting the canons of relevance, and admitting only certain types of inference from certain basic postulates. Grosseteste was a great and original thinker who worked out everything from first principles, but we can have some sympathy also for Pope Gregory IX and his *Curia* listening to lengthy, but to them irrelevant, arguments about how the Church ought to organize its affairs,¹ or for an Inspector at a modern Public Inquiry, being lectured at by ardent environmentalists on what the world ought to be like without regard to the limitations on the sort of consideration he is allowed to take into account. Relevance, defined and deemed by established practices, is the key to effectiveness.

But relevance cannot really be defined, or deemed, away. Though we may disallow various sorts of argument within the confines of certain disciplines, the arguments may still be voiced and heard, if not within the discipline itself then about it, questioning whether the discipline is itself adequate or relevant. Although lawyers have tried very hard to make legal reasoning rigorous and formal, they have again and again been forced to consider substantial questions about the source, or the purpose, or the justice, of the legal forms and procedures within which they were trying to operate. In a very different way the established orthodoxies of historical reasoning are every now and again shaken, sometimes by new questions being asked of the historian, sometimes by new canons of proof being recognized: astronomy is not normally part of history, but, in dating the solar eclipse at the battle of the Halys to 585 BC, it forced historians to rethink the chronology of Lydia, as carbon dating is now introducing an overriding control on the papyrologists' view of the styles of writing, and thermoluminescence on the evolution of decoration on pottery.

For these reasons we cannot always stand pat on a *fiatory* account of different disciplines being simply and by definition constituted by the way we do them. On occasion, though admittedly on relatively rare occasion, good arguments arise calling in question some assumption not normally questioned or bringing to bear some consideration not hitherto recognized as relevant, and we need then to engage not in the discipline itself, but in philosophizing

¹ R. W. Southern, *Robert Grosseteste: the Growth of an English Mind in Mediaeval Europe* (Oxford, 1986), ch. 11, pp. 276–81.

about it, in order to articulate and assess the assumption in dispute. Philosophizing about a subject differs from the subject itself in direction and purpose. As Plato said in the *Republic*,¹ it works backwards rather than forwards, seeking to justify assumptions rather than to use them to obtain or justify other consequences. It starts from where we are, our existing thought and practice, which we accept as going concerns. In some cases we are simply crystalizing out principles hitherto only implicit. At the turn of the century mathematicians came to formulate the Axiom of Choice as a separate assumption they had been using for some time without being explicitly aware of it. Much of our moral, legal, and political thought involves implicit inference which we need to articulate explicitly and expose for scrutiny, and then, perhaps, to criticize, or defend against criticism. In doing this, we do not need first to establish the foundations of history or mathematics before going on to do history or mathematics, but, having done some history or mathematics, we may then seek to examine its basis to determine the nature of its grounding. In the philosophy of history we do not need a complete analysis of the concept of an action, or an exhaustive account of human motivation, or a final resolution of the problem of free will. Of course, we may have to discuss these topics and achieve a partial clarification, in dealing with some question that arises and obtaining an answer adequate to our purpose; but we do not have to reach definitive conclusions on them all before being able to address ourselves to any questions in the philosophy of history. Our argumentation has to be much more open-ended than the well-disciplined inferences of the established subject we are philosophizing about, and our conclusions correspondingly more tentative. Similarly in the philosophy of mathematics, we are not obliged to answer fully, to the satisfaction of the pure foundational philosopher, all the questions that may arise about the ontological status of universals, although equally we cannot be sure that we shall not be required to answer at least some of those questions in the course of giving mathematics an adequate grounding. Such questions we may neglect, though only on a tentative and provisional basis, not a settled one of permanent unconcern. We may be forced, either in the course of our own inquiries or by some adventitious metaphysical consideration from outside, to adopt a nominalist or a Platonist position, and reshape our understanding of mathematics accordingly. But unless and until that happens, it is reasonable to adopt a policy of not tangling with

¹ *Republic*, vi. 510-11.

difficult metaphysical issues unnecessarily, and to be content to relate mathematical to other basic concepts even if we cannot give a satisfactory account of those other concepts themselves.

Frege drew back from the conclusions he had reached in the philosophy of mathematics because he did not set his sights low enough, and demanded more than *philosophy of* can vouchsafe. In his *Grundlagen*, he locates the natural numbers on the logical map. He shows brilliantly and convincingly that they are answers to the question 'How many?' and are analogous to the quantifiers, or as I should prefer to call them the 'quotifiers', such as 'All', 'Some' and 'None'. Nought is the number of things there are when there are none of them, and the successor of a number can be defined in terms of quotifiers and other logical constants alone. But then Frege back-tracked. He did not think it was good enough to say that numbers were 'quotities', unless he could give a complete account of what quotities were. So instead of following where the argument was leading him, he made out that numbers were extensions, *Umfänge*, of concepts, or, as we might plausibly render it, that numbers were some sort of sets. It was a disastrous move. Frege's set theory turned out to be inconsistent, and all subsequent attempts to use axiomatic set theory as a foundation for mathematics have proved cumbersome and unenlightening. If only Frege had been content to root mathematics in logic, instead of feeling impelled to find non-existent foundations, the philosophy of mathematics would have progressed much further in the right direction and towards realizable aims.

Whereas Frege was made too diffident by not recognizing the limited aims that *philosophy of* could be expected to achieve, philosophers of science and philosophers of history have often been too confident of the right of philosophers to preach to mere practitioners. Sir Karl Popper is unashamedly prescriptive in his approach to science. His falsification principle is a criterion for distinguishing science from non-science. The Freudian or the Marxist is not doing science. If anyone wants to count as a scientist, then he must conform to Popper's canons, or forfeit his title to being a pukka scientist. Demarcation is in this way prescriptive. It is no objection in Popper's eyes that many so-called scientists do not practise as he preaches, for even if they are genuine scientists, the way they actually come up with their hunches and hypotheses is no concern of his:¹ his concern is only with how they justify them. Heuristics—the way scientists actually find out things—is a

¹ For a detailed account of this see T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962).

question of psychology, not of epistemology. Epistemology is the theory of knowledge, not of the mental processes that go on in scientists' minds, and is concerned with what we can properly claim to know, that is to say, with the justification of knowledge-claims, not with what some people happen to have thought. The logic of justification is thus, again, prescriptive, however much heuristics may be a branch of descriptive psychology.

Hempel's account of historical explanation is similarly prescriptive, and although he was sensitive to the failure of historians to do as he prescribed, and modified his prescription a little to make it more palatable, his stance is essentially like that of Popper: history is an explanatory discipline, and explanation, if it is to explain, and not merely fudge the issue, must subsume particular instances under covering laws. Admittedly, many historians do not write in this way, but their writings should be construed not as fully fledged explanations, but only as explanatory sketches. Just as in moral argument, according to the exegesis offered by Hare, we speak elliptically, implicitly invoking a major premiss we do not actually assert, so in historical explanation we often leave out the covering law, leaving the reader to supply it himself, which in many cases he easily can, once the historian has provided him with the factual detail. So the actual way in which historians write history is to be discounted; actual history needs to be subjected to rational reconstruction before it can be taken seriously by the philosopher, and, when it is reconstructed, it is found to conform to Hempelian canons, and to offer all its explanations in terms of covering laws.

Reconstruction is a traumatic process, and historians have not welcomed attempts by philosophers to tell them how to do their job properly. They protest that covering-law explanations, whatever their logical beauties, are not what historians set out to give, and they doubt whether the alleged logical beauties stand up to close examination. Often the historian is not trying to cite law-like regularities to show why some historical event had to happen, but only to piece together the complicated jigsaw of actuality to show how it could and did, in fact, come about. Even when he is discussing whether the Peloponnesian War or the First World War was inevitable, he is unlikely to do so by citing law-like regularities, because any such law is either general but too vague to be certain of covering the case in question, or precise and clearly applicable, but too specific to be explanatory.¹ The same contention was put

¹ See W. H. Walsh, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (London, 1951) and W. H. Dray, *Laws and Explanation in History* (Oxford, 1957).

to an earlier generation by Newman, who pointed out how little historical argument conforms to syllogistic reasoning:

'We shall have a European war, for Greece is audaciously defying Turkey.' How are we to test the validity of the reason, implied, not expressed, in the word 'for'? The argument is from concrete fact to concrete fact. How will mere logical inferences, which cannot proceed without general and abstract propositions, help us on to the determination of this particular case? It is not the case of Switzerland attacking Austria, or of Portugal attacking Spain, or of Belgium attacking Prussia, but a case without parallels. To draw a scientific conclusion, the argument must run somewhat in this way:—'All audacious defiances of Turkey on the part of Greece must end in a European war; these present acts of Greece are such: ergo;'—where the major premise is more difficult to accept than the conclusion, and the proof becomes an 'obscurum per obscurius.' But, in truth, I should not betake myself to some one universal proposition to defend my view of the matter; I should determine the particular case by its particular circumstances, by the combination of many uncatalogued experiences floating in my memory, of many reflections, variously produced, felt rather than capable of statement; and if I have them not, I should go to those who had. I assent in consequence of some such complex act of judgement, or from faith in those who are capable of making it, and syllogism has no part, even verificatory, in the action of my mind.¹

The appeal to practice is ultimately decisive. However much philosophers of history brush aside such testimony as mere psychologism, and argue that the logic of justification cannot be determined by mere heuristics, and the way working historians think up their explanation sketches cannot of itself have any verificatory force at all, the historian is not convinced. He does not know what psychologism and heuristics may be, but does know that rationally reconstructed history, whatever its philosophical merits, is not history as he knows and practises it, and so reckons that he, and his brother, the scientist, can turn against Hempel and Popper the question that Popper brings against a priori science, 'What right have you to call your philosophy the philosophy of *history* or the philosophy of *science*?'

Empiricism similarly calls in question the right of extreme rationalism to arrogate to itself the title of natural science—Plato may despise the empirically minded astronomer who lies on his back looking up at the stars at night, but unless Plato's own *ἀστρονομία*, *astronomia*, yields some deductions about the stars that

¹ J. H. Newman, *The Grammar of Assent* (London, 1870), ch. VIII, S2, sec. 2, pp. 296–7.

can be put to the test of empirical observation, what he is doing is not astronomy but some branch of pure mathematics, very beautiful no doubt, and interesting to those who like that sort of thing, but not a branch of natural science. It is a fair criticism, and constitutes one of the strongest points of Popper's philosophy of science. But if it can be levelled against Plato, it can be levelled against Popper and Hempel likewise if they are too high-handed in pushing off the protests of working scientists and working historians. Popper may insist that in evaluating the claims of scientists we should be scrupulous in assuring ourselves that the claims are falsifiable, have been subjected to rigorous testing, and have not in fact been falsified, and may dismiss appeals to actual scientific practice, holding that it is no concern of his if scientists have failed to behave as he says they should: people often fail to do as they should. But then we ask whether, in laying down his demarcation thus, Popper is really philosophizing about science. Just as a scientist must allow his theories to be subjected to experimental check, and should be ready in the end to abandon them if they fail, over a sufficiently long time and sufficiently decisively, to square with the phenomena, so the philosopher of science, or the philosopher of history, must acknowledge that his title to be philosophizing about either disciplines, and not engaging in, say, the philosophy of gastronomy, must in the end depend on the acceptance of his account of science or history by practitioners of those disciplines, and their willingness to own his remarks as being about what they do.

There is a certain irony in convicting Popper and Hempel, who were proud to be putting forward an empiricist philosophy of science and an empiricist philosophy of history, of being unempirical. But the lesson is not for them alone. It shows the necessity of relevance—and its cost. Philosophy must not be so pure that it has nothing to learn from work-a-day concerns, or it will be so pure that it has no bearing on them at all. Not that philosophy cannot be prescriptive at all. Just as in a serious philosophy of science we allow theory some comeback against observation, and discount some putatively falsifying observations as being due to experimental error, or anomalous conditions, or needing in some other way to be explained away, so the philosopher need not adopt an attitude of abject acquiescence in the illogicalities of the scientist or the historian. He may, quite properly, criticize some practices and some inferences, and sometimes indeed whole disciplines—astrology and, in many of its contemporary manifestations, sociology—as being irrational, and his criticisms deserve to be heard

and sometimes should be heeded. *Philosophy of* is to that extent prescriptive, despite the protestations of some modern practitioners: even the common-sense and ordinary-language philosophers of the twentieth century were grinding one or two metaphysical axes of their own as they laboured away clearing the thickets of obfuscation. There is not much point in doing philosophy unless we hope it will generate some insight, and insights show us what should be, as well as what is, the case. But it is a two-way process. If philosophers are sometimes to tell other thinkers how they should think, they must always be ready to listen to them and learn from them how they actually do think.

Moral philosophy and moral philosophers have also suffered from a failure to recognize the limited ambitions and achievements of *philosophy of*. Most moral philosophy has been addressed to the pure foundational questions of what morality is and whether moral arguments are valid, and only rather little to the questions of how we actually argue, the structure of moral argument, and the principles commonly employed. Even those who have addressed these questions have often not been clear that it was these questions they were trying to answer, and have confused both themselves and their readers in consequence. The Intuitionists were sensitive moralists, and have much to teach us about the nature of moral argument, but have received a bad press in modern times because they were taken to be engaged in Popperian and Hempelian disputes when actually they were undertaking Kuhnite and Drayite activities. Pritchard asked the question, 'Does moral philosophy rest on a Mistake?', and seemed to answer it with a 'Yes', when really he was proposing a change of subject; from the standpoint of the *philosophy of* morals, the question of why we should adopt the principles of universalizability or the Golden Rule is as pointless as it is for a geometer *qua* geometer to seek for a justification of his axioms. The Golden Rule is a datum for the moralist—if I were to deny all weight to the consideration that the action I am doing will cause another suffering which I should not at all want to bring on myself, then I should be regarded in all normal circumstances as not arguing morally. Pritchard was right, in his philosophizing about morals, to liken moral principles to geometrical axioms, but did not make it clear either to himself or his readers that he was not engaged on *pure foundational philosophy*, and so invited his sensible views in the one exercise being construed as unjustified claims in the other.

It was easy for these philosophers to misjudge and be misjudged, because although the starting point of enquiry in the *philosophy of*

must be the discipline itself, the nature of the justification sought is difficult to specify. We not only articulate the principles of the discipline concerned, but assess them. And there is no simple rule for doing this. There is no generally agreed foundational starting point from which we can develop a critique or a justification, but whatever we say can be in its turn further criticized and called in question. There seems to be an infinite regress, which has deterred many from embarking on philosophical inquiry at all, and has led others to adopt heroic expedients for securing for themselves some way out of the regress. But the case is not as bad as it seems. For once again, although an argument may be attacked at any point, it cannot be profitably attacked at every point at once; and although every criticism or justification we adduce is in principle vulnerable for further questioning, quite often it is not in fact questioned further but is accepted as a reasonable answer to the question originally raised. We can thus not only articulate but often also adequately assess the assumptions of a particular discipline to the satisfaction of our hearers, though not to the satisfaction of every conceivable hearer. In the philosophy of law I may seek to give an account of law as a social phenomenon, and argue that law is not simply something enforced by a sovereign on his subjects, but is a function of the governed as much as of the government. In doing this I am not obliged to justify also the existence of society or to meet the doubts of the solipsist who has not had it proved to his satisfaction that other people exist. It is, I concede, a good question, but one that should be dealt with on another occasion another day. I do not say that the existence of other people is a necessary truth, or that the existence of society is an absolute presupposition, or anything of the like, but only that it will as a matter of fact be conceded by those I am addressing when I argue about the nature of law, and maintain, as against Hobbes and Austin, that enforcement by a superior is only one aspect of it, not a complete defining one. In grounding my account of law in the nature of society, I have worked back to *τι ἱκανόν, ti hikanon*, something that is adequate, since it is common ground between me and my opponents, and is therefore a premiss which they should be willing to concede.¹

When we are doing *philosophy of*, we need push back our questioning only as far as is necessary for clarifying and justifying the discipline we are trying to philosophize about, not as far as it is possible to go. The metaphor, suggested by Descartes and widely

¹ *Phaedo*, 101 e 1.

accepted ever since, of house-building, which talk of foundations suggests, is inapt. It is no good building a house unless the foundations are secure. The slightest weakness in the foundations of mathematics, of history, of science, of law, or of morals, and the whole edifice comes crashing down. But houses are not the only things to stand up. Trees are quite tall too. Instead of seeing philosophy as an edifice, built on firm foundations, we should see each subject as a tree, with roots, which philosophy can trace, going down into the ground, no one of which is proof against all assault, but which together are adequate for the task of holding up the tree of knowledge and nourishing it.¹ *Philosophy of* does not have to answer every objection or justify every assumption. It is enough that it answer those objections that are seriously raised and justify those assumptions actually called in question. Sufficient unto the day are the questions thereof.

Although *philosophy of* often emerges unscathed in the give-and-take of philosophical argument, it is none the less, as we have seen, perpetually vulnerable to further question. There is always some sense of unease, some dissatisfaction at the absence of a definite starting point, a little like that voiced by the Warden of my college in his history of the world at the absence of a definite date at which it should begin.² It may, indeed, be that questions will always just peter out and our philosophical arguments will be accepted without further question, but we should like to be sure, and should like to be able to start from some indisputable starting point and reach assured conclusions by means of incontestable inferences. And so we turn about, and try to formulate a *pure foundational philosophy*, which, instead of starting from where we are, and working backwards to articulate and justify the principles of our actual practice in any way that seems adequate, tries to discover where we should be, and starting from there, reach, if possible, the positions we should like to occupy, working forwards by means of only those inferences that are themselves completely justifiable.

It is easy to laugh at ambitions so vast, undertaken with resources so slender, as those of the pure foundational philosopher.

¹ Although we think of Descartes as propounding the metaphor of the edifice, he also likened knowledge to a tree: see E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (trs.), *Descartes: the Philosophical Works*, i (2nd edn., Cambridge, 1934), 211; cited by Bernard Williams, *Descartes* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 34.

² J. M. Roberts, *The Hutchinson History of the World* (London, 1976), pp. 15–17.

We picture the Cartesian philosopher as one who starts philosophizing in his youth wondering whether he really exists, and graduates to engaging in deep meditations as a don on whether there is really an unobserved tree in the quad, and whether he can be absolutely sure that his shaving mirror in his bedroom has not been suddenly transformed in his absence into a pink elephant. With luck, if he is very clever and very determined, he may win through to a belief in material objects and inductive arguments by late middle age, and finally discover that his colleagues have minds, or at least feelings, before he comes to retire; but is likely to go down to his grave without ever having achieved rational confidence in the unobserved entities of physics, or the validity of moral arguments, or the existence of God. The position of Cartesian doubt seems a bad place to start from if one is to have much hope of getting anywhere worth getting to, and so *pure foundational philosophy* a bad bet for anyone who wants to use his thinking time to advantage.

It is a criticism often made, and a fair one against some philosophers. To meet it, we need to scrutinize more closely both the ambitions and the resources of *pure foundational philosophy*. Many projects doom themselves to failure because they attempt the impossible or deny themselves the necessary means. They seek absolute certitude, and will admit no premisses that are questionable, nor any inferences save those that are incontrovertible. But knowledge is not that certain, and cannot be attained on those terms. If I lay claim to know anything, it is logically possible that I may be wrong, and therefore, if I value knowledge at all, I cannot at the same time demand absolute security against the possibility of being wrong. Knowledge is not risk-free. The only way of being sure that I cannot be wrong is to say nothing at all: and if I want to have a chance of being right, I must stick my neck out, and accept the possibility of being wrong.

Similarly, it is irrational of the pure foundational philosopher to restrict the resources available to him. He should not assume that justification has to be in terms of deduction from one absolute starting point. Traditionally only deductive arguments have been thought to be irresistible and only analytic truths incontrovertible, but to demand this much is to demand that the pure foundational philosopher should say nothing significant at all, since if it is significant, it is not an empty truism and its negation can be asserted without self-contradiction. Much of the difficulty felt by many of us in coming to terms with *pure foundational philosophy* is due to a mistaken idea that only deductive arguments and analytic truths

were acceptable, combined with a half-formulated sense that all that they could supply would be empty and not worth having. But deductive arguments are not the only arguments. We argue inductively, historically, and in many other ways. It would be absurd to make out that the only valid arguments were those where one of the parties was contradicting himself: arguments are about substantial matters in which both sides can be consistently stated, even though only one can be correct. Nor could any pure foundational philosopher set out to invalidate all our established ways of thinking and prove that we ought to allow only deductive arguments, for then his conclusion would contain an evaluative 'ought' which could not be deduced from anything other than another 'ought', itself equally open to question.

Deductivism, as I shall call it, has often been insinuated by a series of single questions, in which the sceptic successively queries each position taken by the pure foundational philosopher, maintaining, correctly, that it is logically possible to deny what has been claimed, and concluding that since each one of them can be denied, they can all be. This was Hume's strategy:

A total suspense of judgement is here our only reasonable resource. And if every attack, as is commonly observed, and no defence among theologians is successful, how complete must be his victory who remains always, with all mankind, on the offensive and has himself no fixed station or abiding city which he is ever, on any occasion, obliged to defend.¹

Yet once that strategy is made explicit, its emptiness is also evident. It offers no position to defend. But the pure foundational philosopher wants to arrive at a position: he may be dissatisfied with what we have to offer him at present, but he will not be content with a strategy that guarantees in advance the failure of his quest. So he will not just question. In asking 'Why' he holds himself open to be convinced, and if he will not be persuaded by one argument, he will say why that one is unsatisfactory, and will indicate what else might be all right. Instead, therefore, of simply trying to justify whatever the questioner can consistently call in question, the pure foundational philosopher can properly meet the questioner's doubts first by counter-challenging him to substantiate his doubts and give some reason to suppose that what is admittedly a logical possibility is anything more than that; and secondly by challenging the questioner directly to say what alternative account he can propose. If the questioner can substantiate his doubts or

¹ David Hume, *Two Dialogues on Natural Religion*, end of part viii.

has an alternative account to offer, then he has a position to defend which can be compared with ours, and a just assessment can be reached of their rival merits. But if he has no reason for doubting other than that no self-contradiction will ensue if he does, then his doubts are idle, and all he is doing is to complain that our position is not vacuous. We reject his questioning not because there is anything wrong with any particular one of his questions, but because it is part of a line of questioning which precludes any substantial truth ever being accepted. If no alternative position is offered, it would be irrational to abandon ours, wrong though it could conceivably turn out to be, for no position at all.

Even if reason is not restricted to deduction, we may still wonder whether any starting point is available to reason from. How can we reach an ἀνυπόθετον ἀρχήν, *anhupotheton archen*, an unpostulated first principle, since every argument in its favour will rest on starting points that can themselves be questioned? The solution is the same for starting points as it was for arguments. Although every justification must presuppose some starting point, there is no starting point that must be presupposed by every justification. And although *any* starting point can reasonably be challenged, any claim that *all* can is incoherent. Instead of seeking one absolute starting point from which every other principle follows deductively, we can have several principles each argued for in a number of different ways, no one of which has to be accepted, but which cannot all be rejected without evident unreason. Our fundamental conceptual structure is like a web. Time is linked with space, with causality, with explanation, with consciousness, with agency, with modality, with identity, and each of these in turn is linked with many different concepts. Many of the links are elastic; some may even be broken; but they cannot all be, and although different philosophers will start from different positions, some general truths are, one way or another, accessible to all. In particular, we may argue, as Plato argued for his Form of the Good, for one basic principle, on the strength of its explanatory and integrative power, just as we do in the *philosophy of*. If one principle turns out to be sufficient to explain many principles we had worked back to in the philosophy of this or the philosophy of that, then the very fact that it explains and unifies is a reason for accepting it as true. The problem of starting points, which arose as a corollary of deductivism, is thus dissolved, and we should characterize *pure foundational philosophy* not as a search for an absolute starting point, but as the use of argument to articulate and justify our basic principles of thought.

Various strategies and styles of argument are available. We should consider not single arguments alone but whole lines of argument, and we should consider not only our side of the argument and our position, but alternative positions and alternative lines of approach. There are some lines of argument we can deploy which the very circumstances of the argument or the commitments it presupposes make it difficult to gainsay. Descartes thought he had one such contention in his *Cogito, ergo sum*, and although it has been controverted by men of ingenuity, its intuitive appeal remains intact. But we should not stop there. When an undergraduate tells me he has become a solipsist, I ask him who he thinks he is talking to. If he is prepared to allow *cogito, ergo sum* as a good argument, it is difficult to deny weight to *loquor, ergo es*. In a very different vein I find it beyond my powers seriously to disbelieve the version of the Ontological Argument, which claims not that God, *Ens Realissimus*,¹ but that reality, *ens reale*, exists. There are difficulties about the superlative that Anselm was unaware of: but a non-existent reality, even if it be not a contradiction in terms, cannot figure largely in any ratiocination likely to command respect. If we are arguing about *pure foundational philosophy*, we are concerned to know the truth rather than just vent our views: we are, in submitting ourselves to reason, renouncing 'egotheism', the doctrine that what I think is necessarily right; each of us is committed to there being something other than himself to which he should conform his beliefs, rather than the reverse. And that is to have some intimation of reality.

Other arguments are available in *pure foundational philosophy*: *ego, ergo, ago*; I am essentially an agent, not a bare sentient being waiting passively for sensations to happen to me; the fundamental category is that of action, not substance, and what I am depends on what I do as much as the other way about. Again, arguments can be adduced in *pure foundational philosophy* to show that reason can conjugate not only across persons, but across tenses and moods. These I leave on one side, and concentrate on one style of argument which is peculiar to *pure foundational philosophy*. It is a negative argument, but since anyone criticizing a world-view is required to

¹ The Schoolmen talked of the *Ens Realissimum*, thereby suggesting that the God of the Philosophers was not a person but some impersonal Absolute. The ultimate reality may be thing-like rather than personal, and certainly all the Ontological Argument could ever hope to show was the existence of an ultimate reality, not its being in some way personal. But in our vocabulary 'God' is essentially a personal term, ὁ Θεός (*ho Theos*), not τὸ θεῖον (*to theion*), and should be so rendered into Latin.

put forward his alternative, it has positive consequences. We often non-suit the advocate of a world-view on the grounds that his advocacy belies his profession. The Marxists and the Freudians are very convincing in explaining away our contrary views as simply as the result of our class interest or our infantile neuroses, but do not like it when we in turn explain away their views in terms of their class interests or their infantile neuroses. At a more profound level mechanists and materialists are able to offer a powerful case for supposing that all our thoughts are just epiphenomena and entirely determined by physiological processes going on in the brain; but they too seek to exempt their own arguments, and claim for them a rational cogency that is not susceptible of being explained away. We are rationally reluctant to follow Sextus Empiricus and Wittgenstein in climbing up a ladder, which we shall thereupon be logically obliged to throw away; if it will not bear the weight of argument then, we reckon, it cannot bear it now. Similarly the claim of the Logical Positivists that every non-tautological proposition was either verifiable in sense experience or else meaningless was hoist by its own petard, and was either itself a meaningless pseudo-proposition, not worth serious philosophical attention, or else a counter-example to itself. In the last half century Gödel's formulation of the Epimenides argument in the rigorous terms of First-order Logic has led to a deep, and as yet not fully understood, recognition of the openness and infinite creativity of mathematics and logic. And the same principles apply to metaphysical thinking too. If Crete exists at all on the philosophical map, it is rationally inaccessible. Although irrationalist positions could conceivably be true—no inconsistency is involved in them—it is only a very bare truth that they can have, without there being any reason for supposing it to be true. Hence irrationalist positions are almost untenable by a pure foundational philosopher.

If *pure foundational philosophy* will moderate its ambitions and allow itself reasonable resources of argument, it is not foredoomed to failure. But it also must arrive at some conclusions if it is to be worth attempting at all. It must not be so pure that it has no bearing on work-a-day concerns. We must arrive at a position where we can reach rational conclusions about the questions we have to decide. Hence the need for the pure foundational philosopher to be giving guidance and thus also philosophizing about morality, science, history, and the various other concerns we normally think about. Just as the philosopher of history or science cannot tell us how we should undertake these disciplines unless he takes account

of what its practitioners actually do, so the pure foundational philosopher must also take account of *philosophy of*, being prepared not only from his vantage point to lay down some general guidelines, but also to learn from the philosophers of science, history, mathematics, and morality, the particular insights that those special branches of philosophy may yield, and to bring them together to form a synoptic vision of them all. *Pure foundational philosophy* and *philosophy of* interpenetrate and influence each other, and, although we can distinguish their aims and methods, we can never wholly separate them from each other. This is the reason why, although we naturally think of Plato and Descartes as pure foundational philosophers, and Aristotle and Locke as chief among those who took established knowledge as their starting point and went on to philosophize about what was already known, yet they are, as we observed earlier, none of them pure exemplars. Plato works back to the Form of the Good, and Aristotle always retains an architectonic vision of the different disciplines, because *pure foundational philosophy* cannot be carried on in isolation from *philosophy of*, and in deciding what is an adequate starting point for *philosophy of* we are guided by our general view of *pure foundational philosophy*.

In modern times the objection to *pure foundational philosophy* has often been not that it is too little relevant but that it tries to be too relevant, and becomes procrustean in the process. For if once pure reason can give us an assured starting place for our thoughts, and a method of incontrovertible inference, then, it would seem, we must reconstruct the whole of knowledge on this assured foundation, and be content with nothing less than a proper rational reconstruction of all that we had hitherto taken on trust. Once we have had the vision of the Form of the Good, or discovered the correct method of doing philosophy, we are apt to be intolerant in our attitude to awkward facts or long-established practices. If Popper can prescriptively demarcate the boundaries of true science, how much more will the foundational philosopher, when he comes to consider the whole of knowledge, lay down the philosophic law on what the nature and limits of knowledge ought to be and are? If particular branches of knowledge do not fit the scheme that *pure foundational philosophy* approves, they must be disciplined and made to fit, in spite of any protests their actual practitioners may make. Many thinkers have therefore concluded that they should altogether eschew *pure foundational philosophy* because of its overweening pretensions: it leaves no room for *philosophy of*, or indeed for any of the subjects that the *philosophy of* is of. They fear that if it is

undertaken at all, it will take over all other philosophy and all other disciplines, constituting philosophy not as the queen of the sciences, but their absolute dictator. Any attempt to reinstate *pure foundational philosophy* must, therefore, show how it is possible to coexist with *philosophy of* without engaging in take-over bids or otherwise trying to tell them their own business.

If we start with *pure foundational philosophy*, we can come to recognize the claims of *philosophy of* by an exercise of rational humility. The foundational philosopher can be convinced that there are other thinkers, and that their thoughts are worthy of consideration, and that though it is part of his enterprise to question everything, there is no call on him to suppose that he has, or can have, all the answers. It is partly a matter of time. Newton could only see as far as he did because he stood on other men's shoulders, and if I am serious in wanting to know, I cannot suppose that, finite as I am, I shall know much if I rely on my cognitive efforts alone. It is also, and more importantly, a recognition of the existence of other rational agents, and hence of the worth of their thought processes. I may need to assure myself, in the face of Cartesian doubts, that other men are not malignant demons who are out to deceive me, and are not incorrigibly stupid, with only a random chance of getting things right. But once I take seriously that other men exist, and that they are rational agents, then I have good warrant for taking seriously also their cogitations, and the tried results of the established disciplines. I still allow, as Descartes did, that much of what is currently believed is false, and not to be taken on blind trust. But conscious though I am of their failings, I am conscious also, if I am wise, of my limitations too, and so should be ready to place some reliance, not blind but open-eyed, cautious but not zero, on their judgement, and accept established practices and received doctrines as worthy of credence. Equally important is the recognition of the limitations of the methods I employ. In addressing myself to very general questions, I can at best secure only very general answers. I may be able to prove the reality of the past, which is a great comfort to those worried by doubts on that score, but falls far short of what the historian and the philosopher of history wants to know. Just as they, in order to answer their particular questions have to leave unasked many general questions of philosophical interest, so the pure foundational philosopher in seeking answers to general questions leaves other questions unasked, and is, indeed, unable to answer them by the methods of *pure foundational philosophy* alone. Since it is reasonable to want answers to these questions, it is reasonable for a foundational

philosopher to acknowledge the credentials of other disciplines, and be guided in his thinking about science, history, politics, religion, and law, by what scientists and historians, and the practitioners of the other disciplines, have to say and do, and, even on occasion, to submit his judgement to theirs, and allow that his pure philosophical conclusions may need to be modified in the light of the more pedestrian findings of *philosophy of*.

In modern times the pride of reason has been curbed. Locke and Kant were keen to confine it to its proper place, and in this century almost every question has at some stage been held to be not merely unanswerable but unaskable. But as I look back on the fragile hold that rationality has had on men's minds in my lifetime, I see the proper modesty of the intellectual transformed into the *trahison des clercs*. It is one thing not to be sure of success, quite another to despair in advance of being able even to make the attempt. There is a necessary commitment to reason and rationality that is the precondition of all rational discussion and intellectual inquiry. Sceptics who rubbish reason are thereby debarring themselves from having their claims rationally entertained. It is fair to assess any philosophy on the score of the account it gives of itself, and reject it if it cuts off the branch on which it is metaphorically sitting, and we can generalize this to a general methodology of *pure foundational philosophy*. Instead of just a starting point we have a basic method. Instead of *cogito ergo sum*, we have *we argue, therefore we have some commitment to rationality*. We are highly fallible, and always may get it wrong, but if so we can be corrected. If argument misleads us, it can also lead us aright.