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Questions Philosophers Ask

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I. Introduction

What one conceives philosophy to be is largely a function of one's own philosophical position. So if the history of philosophy has been characterized by radical disagreement between different philosophical positions, it should be no surprise that a similar disagreement happens to characterize discussion on just what philosophy itself is. In the following essay, I shall attempt to suggest a set of criteria--namely the questions that philosophers characteristically ask--for grounding an adequate definition of philosophy. The articulation of these questions, and the examination of how different philosophers have given priority to certain questions over others, will then make possible some helpful generalizations concerning the history of philosophy as a whole.

II. The Difficulty of Defining

As Ortega y Gasset once wrote, "To define is to exclude and negate."[1] In other words, all definition involves, however implicitly, the specification of parameters which effectively

delimit the intentional scope of the defined, and thereby exclude from such scope those things which are said not to "fit" the definition. A definition which does not, at least implicitly, exclude something is no definition at all.

Of course, this description gives rise to an ostensible double bind. If the parameters specified in a definition are too broad, then they will not exclude enough, and hence will admit within the intentional scope of the defined more than is really intended by it. On the other hand, if the parameters specified in a definition are too narrow, then the definition will be too restrictive, excluding some genuine instances of the defined along with the specious. This double bind is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in the unresolved attempts of Socrates and his interlocutors to arrive at satisfactory definitions of courage, piety, beauty, justice, and virtue.[2] While Socrates' interlocutors could point to specific instances of the terms in question, invariably they were unable to articulate explicit definitional parameters which would be neither too broad nor too narrow.

Now this double bind, which affects any attempt at explicit definition, would seem to involve special difficulties if one would define philosophy itself. For in a discipline such as philosophy, there appear to be virtually no limits on what can be said or thought or proposed. As Descartes noted, "One cannot conceive anything so strange and so implausible that it has not already been said by one philosopher or another."[3] Because of the rampant disputation which continues to characterize philosophical discourse even on the most fundamental levels, one would be hard pressed to identify some criterion of philosophical "plausibility" which is not contradicted, directly or indirectly, by some other well-accepted philosophical position.

As a result, any purported definition of philosophy based on some particular criterion of plausibility is likely to exclude

as non-philosophical many of the ideas and thoughts which are generally considered to be part of the history of philosophy. So unless one is to end up with a very skewed notion of the history of philosophy, it would seem that even a criterion of plausibility can play no determinative role in a definition of philosophy. But on the other hand, a definition of philosophy which does not provide at least some criteria or grounds for exclusion would hardly be a definition at all. How is the double bind of definition to be resolved in the case of philosophy?

III. Defining Philosophy by the Questions

I would suggest that a non-vacuous definition of philosophy can be provided, in spite of the on-going disputation, if the definition is based on philosophical questions, instead of on the various doctrines that philosophers have proposed in their attempts to answer these questions. While the former constitute a more or less homogeneous whole, the latter, as we have noted, are diverse and contradictory. In order to illustrate just what is meant by a definition based on questions, I think it might help to consider the method of problem-solving peculiar to algebra.

In solving for an algebra equation, the mathematician first gives the yet unknown value a name, let us say X. The mathematician does not yet know the value of X; otherwise, he would not have to solve for the equation. Nevertheless, the other values and operations provided in the equation effectively set parameters on what the value of X can and cannot be. Thus even though he may not yet know the specific value of the solution, the mathematician *does* know the general requirements which such a solution would have to satisfy.

I would suggest that the proper *object* of philosophy--i.e. both its aim *and* content--can be similarly delimited, if we consider the kinds of questions that philosophy is intended to

answer. Though there may yet be widespread disagreement about what the correct answers are--and, in fact, whether there are any "correct" answers--we can still know the general requirements which such answers would have to satisfy, namely that they at least pertain to certain kinds of questions. A definition of this kind would also entail implicitly specified grounds for exclusion; for if a given discourse were to stray too far from the kinds of questions specified, then we could appropriately say that such discourse is no longer philosophical. Finally, the validity of such a definition would in no way be jeopardized by the conflicts which continue to characterize philosophical discourse, or by those which may yet arise. For such conflict becomes possible at all only if the different answers provided by philosophers are answers to essentially the same questions.

Of course, any definition of philosophy based on a determinate set of questions runs the risk of glossing over the actual diversity and richness which characterizes philosophical discourse. However, I think this risk can be minimized if one thinks of a question not so much as a specific interrogative statement which must be conceptualized or spoken, but rather as the inquiring disposition which precedes theoretical conceptualization, and motivates all philosophical reflection and dialogue in the first place. By "question," then, I mean nothing other than what Aristotle meant when he spoke of wonder (*thauma*) as the beginning of all philosophy.[4] Finally, since we do not just wonder, but always wonder about something, it is possible to specify the content of philosophy, at least in very general terms, by reference to the kinds of questions that philosophers characteristically ask.

It would seem that the articulation of five basic and interrelated questions will suffice to delimit the content of Western philosophy, at least as it has been practiced up to now. For the sake of convenience, these can be formulated as a set of simple interrogative statements.

First, there is the possible philosophical question, "What takes place when one is knowing"? In seeking answers to this question, philosophers are doing what might be called cognitional theory or phenomenology of knowing.

Secondly, "Why is such knowing valid or objective"? The branch of philosophy which aims to answer this question is epistemology.

Thirdly, "What is the content of valid or objective knowing"?[5] The branch of philosophy that deals with this question is ontology or metaphysics, since that which is known objectively can be designated as the real, or being. Of course, such designation can prescind from the further question of whether the real or being is essentially material, ideal, historical, hermeneutical, or otherwise.

Fourthly, "What is the constitution of the real or being as regards desire or--in medieval terminology--appetite"? The branch of philosophy which investigates this question is ethics, since that at which any desire aims is considered "good" according to the immanent norms of the desire. Once again, this designation can be made while still prescinding from questions concerning just what desires or goods are "correct" or normative. Furthermore, since the scope of desire extends beyond the strictly factual, the pronouncements of ethics need not be confined to the factual, but may also pertain to what ought or ought not to be.

Fifth and finally, "What is the constitution of the real or being as regards sensibility or taste?" The branch of philosophy which seeks to answer this question is, of course, aesthetics.

The above definition of philosophy corroborates and is corroborated by what Whitehead called "the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition," namely that "it consists in a series of footnotes to Plato."[6] By this, Whitehead does not mean that the positive doctrines of

Plato have always interested Western philosophers as viable philosophical explanations. He means, rather, that the Platonic *corpus* contains within it, at least in latent form, all of the basic questions that have continued to animate philosophical discourse up to the present day. In Whitehead's own words, Plato's writings are "an inexhaustible mine of suggestion."[7]

Finally, a field of study is not to be considered "non-philosophical," simply because the formulations characteristic of it do not resemble the formulations given above. Again, what matters is not so much the formulations, but the general direction of the inquiry. Thus there can be any number of possible philosophical specializations: the philosophy of history, of language, of law, of science, of society, of sexuality. However, given the above definition, it would be appropriate to call these kinds of studies "philosophical," only insofar as one or more of the issues specified in the five basic questions has some bearing on the particular content being investigated. Once this is no longer the case, then one is no longer doing philosophy, but historiography, linguistics, legal theory, or something else.

IV. The Priority of Questions in Pre-Modern and Modern Philosophy

It is quite clear that philosophers have maintained radically divergent opinions concerning the relative importance of the basic questions and issues in philosophy. For example, a question or issue which plays a predominant role in guiding the thought of one philosopher or philosophical school, may have little or no significance for another.

However, in spite of the wide range of possible differences, I think that a second "safe" generalization about Western philosophy might be added to Whitehead's first. Very briefly stated, it would seem that in pre-modern philosophy--

conveniently demarcated as the period ending before Descartes--issues pertaining to the latter three questions were given priority to those pertaining to the first two, so that answers to these latter questions could be used to ground answers to the first two. In modern philosophy, the order has been reversed, so that the issues of knowing and objectivity are generally considered to take priority over the others--in the sense of both meriting first attention, and grounding answers to the latter three questions.

To illustrate briefly what is meant by this generalization, we might begin by considering the two dominant figures in ancient philosophy, Plato and Aristotle. In providing answers to the first two questions, both Plato and Aristotle self-consciously appeal to ideas or doctrines which already presuppose answers to one or more of the latter three questions. Thus in expounding upon the nature of knowing and the difference between knowledge and opinion, Plato relies upon his doctrine concerning the nature of the reality known, i.e., the doctrine of the Forms. And when he does not rely upon metaphysical doctrines to make his point about the soul and its knowing, he appeals to the moral and aesthetic sensibilities of his readers through the use of myth. Aristotle, likewise, is not interested in providing a theory which can pronounce on the nature and validity of our knowing--i.e. which can never answer the first two questions--without reliance upon any other philosophical doctrines. His positions concerning knowing and objectivity, rather, are formulated in a faculty psychology which unabashedly presupposes his metaphysics, or "first philosophy."

The same prioritization of philosophical issues is exhibited in the thought of the pre-modern philosophers who stand, chronologically, on either side of Plato and Aristotle. It is, of course, no surprise that throughout the Middle Ages, the issues of knowing and objectivity were treated primarily from

within the onto-theological framework of Christian belief. But even the pre-Socratics were generally in the habit of asking first about the nature of reality--e.g. whether it was essentially water, air, fire, or number-- and then determining the nature and reliability of knowledge on the basis of the answers provided.[8] By the same token, Parmenides' "Way of Truth" is not a theory of knowledge meant to provide foundations for the other branches of philosophical inquiry, but rather an epistemic doctrine which is already based upon a metaphysical or mystical distinction.[9]

This generalization about the priority of questions in premodern philosophy is not even disconfirmed by ancient scepticism, which originally emerged as a practical wisdom philosophy along with Stoicism and Epicureanism. Contrary to popular opinion, issues concerning knowledge and objectivity were not considered by the ancient sceptics to be prior to--in the sense of being foundational for--the other issues in philosophy. There was no implication in ancient scepticism that scruples concerning knowledge itself had to be dispelled first if one's positions concerning the meaning of being, goodness, and beauty were not to be shaky and uncertain. According to Sextus Empiricus,[10] the epistemic scruples of the ancient sceptics functioned much rather like a laxative, insofar as they were expected to dispel themselves along with the dogmatic excesses they ostensively remedied. Such scruples, he writes, "are included in those things to which they refer, just as purgative medicines not only remove the humours from the body but expel themselves together with the humours."[11] So far from having priority over the other issues in philosophy, the epistemic concerns of the ancient sceptics were already rooted in a practical outlook. The function of doubt was not to test the possibility of foundations, but simply to cancel dogmatism along with doubt itself, and thereby to make room for a life given over to those things whose validity never required epistemic grounding: "the guidance of nature, the compulsion of

the feelings, the tradition of laws and customs, and the instruction of the arts."[12]

With the modern period, the prioritization of issues in philosophy was largely reversed. A few brief examples will help bear this out. Descartes enounced his method of doubt, not as a self-dispelling disposition which already presupposed a certain practical outlook, but as a rigorous programme by which one could make a "clean sweep" of one's latent prejudices, and thereby arrive at unshakeable foundations for a "secure and lasting result in science."[13] According to Descartes, rigorousness of method requires that one reduce complex issues to those that are simple and readily accessible to us.[14] And for Descartes, there is nothing more immediately accessible than the operation of the mind itself.[15] Once the mind has grasped itself as a thing that thinks (*res cogitans*), then one can go on to settle more complex issues, such as the meaning of objectivity, the existence of external reality, the requirements of rational conduct, and so forth. Descartes' description of his own epistemological meditations as "first philosophy" thus reflects his deliberate reversal of the priority of questions in philosophy as previously practiced by Aristotle and the Aristotelians.

Now in spite of the wide range of differences between the empiricist and post-empiricist schools which have dominated modern philosophy since the time of Descartes, proponents of both schools generally accept the Cartesian prioritization of issues in philosophy. For example, Locke's starting point consists in making the faculty of knowing, human understanding, "its own object."[16] Once the examination of understanding and objectivity has provided a "cure of scepticism," Locke writes, "we shall not be inclined either to sit still, and not set our Thoughts on work at all, in Despair of knowing anything."[17] Even more significantly, the grasp of our own capacity for knowledge will enable us to determine "those

Measures, whereby a rational Creature . . . ought to govern his Opinions, and Actions."[18] Thus for Locke, as for Descartes, the self-examination of one's own consciousness does not presuppose, but rather help to ground a moral-practical outlook.

The same priortization can be discerned in Kant's "Copernican revolution," through which he sought to make the world safe for both the laws of science and the autonomy of the will. The outcome of the Kantian endeavor is a more or less architectonic system in which answers given to the first basic questions in philosophy provide grounds for answering all of the succeeding questions. First, the examination of the knowing faculty leads to the discovery of certain limitations concerning the possible scope of our correct knowing. Such limitation implies, further, a distinction in the realm of being itself between the things for us (the phenomena) and the things in themselves (the noumena, which lie hidden behind all of our perceptions). Since freedom of the will falls on the noumenal side of the great divide, it remains "only an *Idea* of reason whose objective reality is in itself questionable,"[19] but one which nevertheless must be accepted if moral action is to become possible at all.[20] Finally, this presupposition of freedom is the necessary condition for the disinterestedness intrinsic to true aesthetic appreciation.[21]

V. The Post-Modern Critique and the Place of Philosophy Today

Now if one accepts what I have called the modern prioritization of issues in philosophy, then the role that philosophy plays, or at least *should* play, in culture at large will appear relatively unproblematic. As Descartes, Locke, Kant, and others have argued, the proper task of philosophy is to start by reflecting on knowing consciousness itself in order to discover and articulate sound criteria for objective knowledge. Such

criteria can then provide--more or less architectonically--immediate and non-problematic foundations for evaluating the metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic postulates which appear in other philosophies, and which implicitly guide human culture. The task of philosophy, in short, is to begin from "within" consciousness, and work one's way "outward" to arrive at reliable rational norms for guiding one's own beliefs, morals, and sensibilities, and for critiquing those of culture in general.

Since the nineteenth century, however, and the emergence of what has been called (oxymoronically) post-modern thought, the modern prioritization of issues in philosophy has come under serious attack, and along with it, the correlative conception of philosophy's place in culture. Reflection on knowing consciousness, it is argued, cannot possibly provide immediate and non-problematic foundations for answering the other philosophical questions, since such consciousness is inevitably already determined by the individual's practical engagement with the world around him; and such practical engagement necessarily presupposes, however implicitly, certain ideals of the true, the good, and the beautiful. The reflection of consciousness on itself, then, cannot provide grounds for guiding and critiquing (either individually or collectively) beliefs, morals, or sensibilities; for these *already* inform the very consciousness from which the norms are supposed to be derived.

In a word, the philosopher's self-reflective consciousness is really only a result, an effect, of those very ideals for which he would want to provide foundations in the first place. Of course, the post-modern rejection of the modern prioritization of issues in philosophy has also raised serious doubts about philosophy's purported role as cultural guide. While the post-modern critique continues to influence thought--philosophical and otherwise--right up to the present, its origins go back almost as far as Kant's own time.

It was Hegel, developing upon the thought of Fichte[22] and Schelling, who argued decisively against Kant's attempt to reflect on the individual knowing consciousness in order to ground answers to the other questions in philosophy. According to Hegel, the consciousness of the individual is always already a product of the cultural *Zeitgeist*, with all of its implicit ethical and aesthetic norms; so that the philosophical consciousness of an individual is simply the spirit of the age expressed in the form of thought.[23] Since the consciousness of the individual is thus always a function of the norms already operative in the culture at large, philosophy, in Hegel's words, "always comes on the scene too late" to give critical advice concerning how things ought to be.[24]

Now while Hegel denied that philosophy could play any immediately practical role in culture, he did at least grant it a necessary retrospective role, a role essential to history's own coming to self-consciousness. But the post-modernist critique which he articulated has led many after him to advocate the complete rejection of philosophy altogether. Two good nineteenth century examples of this are Marx and Nietzsche, who both argued--though in radically different ways--that philosophical consciousness is not the expression of just any age, but of a fundamentally troubled age; and so any truly positive transformation of culture, much rather than depending on philosophy, would entail the abolition of philosophy itself.

Since the nineteenth century, however, many philosophers influenced by the post-modernist critique have come to realize that any position advocating the complete rejection of philosophy is basically untenable. For in the very attempt to maintain such a position, one must get involved--explicitly or not--in trying to answer at least one or more of the traditional questions of philosophy. But while one has to philosophize in order to advocate the "overcoming" of philosophy, this does not mean that philosophy can return naively to its previous self-conception as cultural guide.

Of course, the role that philosophy can or should play in culture at large is still a matter of considerable debate. In concluding, I do not intend to offer any positive suggestions. For any attempt to specify the proper role of philosophy in culture would likewise require some attempt at answering specific philosophical questions themselves; and such would be well beyond my present purpose. My aim has been simply to articulate those questions which effectively define the content of philosophy, and thereby to represent the diverse trends throughout philosophy's history according to this unifying perspective, and also shed light on how the different prioritizations of the same questions in philosophy influence the way that philosophy sees itself within a cultural context.

NOTES

1. "Definir es excluir y negar." *El Tema de Neustro Tiempo*, (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1958), p. 127.

2. The discussions dealing with these terms take place in the early dialogue of Plato, specifically the *Laches*, *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Major*, *Republic I*, *Protagoras*, and *Meno* (respectively). (The *Protagoras* and *Meno* both take up the question of what virtue is.)

3. ". . . on ne saurait rien imaginer de si étrange et si peu croyable, qui'il n'ait été dit par quelqu'un des philosophes." Rene Descartes, *Oevres de Descartes*, vol. 6: *Discourse de la Methode*, "Deuxieme Partie" (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1965), p. 16. It is quite clear that Descartes is borrowing from Cicero here. See Cicero, *De Divinatione II*, 190: "Sed nescio quo modo nihil tam absurde dici potest quod non dicatur ab aliquo philosophorum."

4. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 2, 982B12.

5. These first three questions are taken from an article in which the Canadian philosopher Bernard Lonergan describes the pedagogical procedure followed in his *magnum opus*: "... the procedure followed in *Insight* was to treat three linked questions: What am I doing when I am knowing? Why is doing that knowing? What do I know when I do it? The first was the question of cognitional theory, the second the question of epistemology, the third the question of metaphysics." See Bernard J.F. Lonergan, "Theories of Inquiry: Responses to a Symposium," in *A Second Collection*, ed. William F.J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), p. 37. In order to achieve an adequate portrayal of what philosophy includes, I am suggesting here the necessity of adding (at least) two more questions to these first three.

6. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929), p. 53.

7. Ibid.

8. These were the doctrines held by Thales, Anaximenes, Heraclitus, and Pythagoras, respectively. There is good reason to believe that, for Heraclitus, fire was co-extensive with what he meant by Logos. See G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven, and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 188.

9. Ibid., p. 245.

10. Sextus Empiricus, who is considered "the great codifier of ancient scepticism," lived in the latter half of the second century and the first quarter of the third century A.D.

11. *Scepticism, Man, and God: Selections from the Major Writings of Sextus Empiricus*, ed. Philip P. Hallie, trans. Sanford G. Etheridge (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1964), p. 86.

12. Ibid., p. 40.

13. Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* in *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Thomas Geach (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1954), p. 61.

14. *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* in *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*, p. 157.

15. Descartes attempts to establish this in his "Second Meditation."

16. John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 43.

17. Ibid., p. 46.

18. Ibid.

19. *The Moral Law: Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, translated and analysed by H.J. Paton (London: Hutchinson and Co., Ltd., 1976), p. 116.

20. Kant writes: ". . . the freedom attributed to the will seems incompatible with the necessity of nature; and although at this parting of the ways reason finds the road of natural necessity much more beaten and serviceable than that of freedom for *purposes of speculation*, yet for *purposes of action* the footpath of freedom is the only one on which we can make use of reason in our conduct. Hence to argue freedom away is as impossible for the most abstruse philosophy as it is for the most ordinary human reason." (Ibid.)

21. Kant writes: "Since the delight is not based on any inclinations of the subject (or any other deliberate interest), but the Subject feels himself completely *free* in respect to the liking which he accords to the object, he can find as reason for his delight no personal conditions to which his own subjective self might alone be party. Hence he must regard it as resting on what he may also presuppose in every other person; and therefore he must believe that he has reason for demanding a similar delight from every one." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.C. Meredith (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1952), sec. 6.

22. Fichte felt so strongly about the priority of ethical questions to those of knowledge and objectivity, that he wrote: "What sort of philosophy one chooses depends, therefore, on what sort of man one is." (J.G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, ed. and trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 16). Because of his conviction, Fichte despaired of philosophy's capacity to guide or transform any given culture: "Our science expects few converts, therefore, among those *already formed*." (Ibid.)

23. *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 11.

24. Ibid., p. 12. For Hegel, philosophy can be practiced only retrospectively, and so it is not its task to rejuvenate, but only to understand, "the shapes of life grown old." This is also the reason why, according to Hegel's famous image, "the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk." (Ibid., p. 13).