



Philosophy and the Human Situation

Taking Stock

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It's important to consider what philosophy is and it's important to stress we have no monopoly on the use of the word 'philosophy', and it has familiar and traditional uses that go a long way beyond what we mean by the term, as you can see every time you go into a book shop and see what appears under the shelves called 'Philosophy'.

It's often useful to clarify something by drawing contrasts with what it is not. So start by considering some ways in which people think and speak about philosophy. For instance people commonly talk about 'their philosophy' or 'their philosophy of Hotel Management' or 'personal relationships' and if you say you're a Philosopher, then they may well ask you what your philosophy is, or whose philosophy you teach. In these contexts philosophy is being thought of as some kind of finished achievement, but philosophy as an academic subject is best thought of not primarily as a finished product, or a set of pronouncements or attitudes or theories, but as a kind of enquiry, and in this respect philosophy is rather like science, which is also best thought of not as a list of established truths with a special kind of authority behind them, but primarily as an investigation of what the world is like and how it works.

But if philosophy is an enquiry, what is it an enquiry into? People often find it difficult to imagine what philosophy can be about, because all the most likely candidate topics seem to have been taken already by other disciplines. It can't be the study of the mind, because that is psychology. It can't be religion because that's theology, it can't be the fundamental nature of the world, because that's physics and cosmology, it can't be people and societies, because that's sociology and anthropology. And by the time you have reached the end of that lot, there seems very little left for philosophy to be about, except ultimate truth, or the purpose of life, or all the questions that have no answer, or perhaps even worse, the paranormal and the occult. Now philosophy has a subject matter and it has indeed recognisable connections with familiar ideas about philosophy. Questions about freedom, goodness, beauty, truth, reality and so on, which everyone recognises as philosophical, are all studied in philosophy departments. But it's probably best, at least for a while, to think of the subject, not in terms of its subject matter, but rather its methods, how the enquiry is conducted, rather than what it is trying to find out. And the most useful way to think about philosophical methods is to contrast them with empirical enquiry. Empirical enquiry is the kind that involves experiment and observation and philosophical enquiry in contrast is always non-empirical: its tools are reasoning, logic and analysis, not observation.

Obviously, empirical enquiry occurs at more or less sophisticated levels. Children experiment with balls to see which bounce best, chemists look at the structure of molecules to understand what makes substances elastic. Other scientists ask questions it is impossible even to understand unless you have enough background knowledge.

When empirical enquiry becomes systematic and self-conscious enough it becomes recognisable as science, but there is no hard and fast boundary between routine, daily empirical enquiry and the systematic sort that scientists do, it's all a matter of degree. Science can be understood as a continuation of ordinary empirical enquiry and although non-scientists may not have much idea of about how this enquiry is conducted, at least they understand what kind of thing it is.

Now in the same way that science as an enquiry can be thought of as a systemitized continuation of ordinary empirical investigation, so philosophy can be regarded as a continuation of ordinary reasoning. Reasoning is something we do all the time. When reasoning becomes more systematic and self-conscious and is applied to particular kinds of problem, it becomes philosophical.

It's important to recognise that the questions addressed by philosophy really are of a different kind from the ones that need empirical investigation. A student once asked me why it was that philosophers did what scientists could do so much better. He obviously thought that philosophy was a just a lazy way of doing science: sitting in arm chairs speculating about the world, rather than taking the trouble to go and look. But the questions philosophers ask are

not the same as the ones scientists ask and they are not questions to which empirical evidence would even be relevant.

Many people seem unaware that such an area of enquiry even exists. It often seems to be taken for granted that if people disagree about something, there are only two possible sources of that disagreement: either difference of opinion about facts, which can in principle be resolved by empirical investigation, or simple difference of opinion, about which there is nothing more to be said. What philosophy reveals is a whole area of enquiry between those two, an area of real problems, where there are real investigations to be done, real arguments to be produced, mistakes to be made, truth to be discovered and techniques to be learned. It takes some time to get a sense of the scope and nature of this enquiry, but once you have this sense you see philosophical questions everywhere and your whole view of the nature of enquiry changes.

One of the advantages of starting with moral and political problems is that it helps to make clear the distinction between philosophical and empirical enquiry. All questions about how we should act are ones that raise both empirical and philosophical questions, and to address those questions you need to be aware of the distinction between the two and know which techniques are needed to address each of them.

Consider for instance the question of whether people should be allowed as much negative freedom as possible, limited only by the principle that we should not be allowed to harm others. When people argue about this, some of the things they argue about are empirical: whether liberty makes people happy, whether it helps to foster human inventiveness in the Sciences and the Arts, whether particular liberties have particular harmful effects, whether free access to pornography increases the incidents of sex abuse, for instance. These are questions that can be answered only by empirical research, often of complicated and difficult sorts.

The opinions of philosophers in armchairs, unless they've already read or done the research, are quite irrelevant. But the problem as a whole, as you will realise, also raises questions to which such empirical research is irrelevant. For instance if you ask whether freedom makes people happy, you seem to be pre-supposing that happiness is what matters. But is freedom something whose importance depends on whether it makes people happy, or is it important in itself? And if what matters is making people happy, what criterion of happiness should be used? Those aren't questions that empirical research can possibly help with. Research may be able to show whether freedom produces certain kinds of happiness, but it doesn't show which of them is important – which, if either, we should take as a guide when planning political institutions.

Questions like these are just the ones that are so often regarded as simply matters of opinion, about which people differ, but about which there is no more to be said, and indeed this may well be true of some of them in the long run, but if so, it's only in the long run. The other thing that the texts have shown is that these issues are not just matters of opinion, where everyone's ideas are as good as everyone else's. There are all kinds of quite objective things that can be said and discovered about ideas, both your own and other peoples. You can discover, if you look, all kinds of confusions, vaguenesses, unresolved ambiguities, contradictions, fallacious inferences and as long as these things exist there's something quite objectively wrong with our opinions, just as objectively as if we believed the earth was flat. Philosophers don't invent these ideas and impose them arbitrarily. If you say something like "He told me that he hadn't been to London for three months and he told you he was in Trafalgar Square yesterday, so he must be lying" you're depending on exactly the ideas of contradiction and inference that lie at the root of philosophical argument. Philosophy involves a continuation and refinement of ordinary reasoning, not something different from it.

You've probably already discovered that ideas you thought you were committed to are confused or vague or have logical implications that you find you can't accept. Perhaps you thought you knew just what was meant by 'Animal Rights' and whether you were for them or against them. Now you can see just how many complications underlie that apparently simple idea. Or you may have thought that environments mattered only because they mattered to sentient beings and then found yourself taken by surprise when you encountered the 'Last Person' argument. When this sort of thing happens you've discovered quite objectively that something is wrong with your collection of ideas as it stands. You may not see what, or see what to do about it, but you won't even look until you recognise the problem, and it's recognising the existence of this kind of problem and enquiry that is the beginning of philosophy. Once you are aware of them you begin to see philosophical problems everywhere

and recognize how important they are, and you may wonder why so many people seem unaware of them, or why you didn't recognise this vast area of enquiry earlier. To whatever extent this is true, it's no doubt partly because most of life for most people is a matter of practicalities and it doesn't allow much time for this kind of abstract thinking. It's also partly because philosophy isn't often taught in schools and some people, it has to be admitted, are just never interested in it; they never see the point of it or find anything interesting enough to pursue. But it's worth suggesting that part of the invisibility of philosophical questions may have another source: the fact that there are quite different uses to which we put our reasoning, both philosophical and empirical. Part of that use is to work out what's going on in the world and devise strategies for dealing with it, but a quite different use to which we put our reasoning abilities is to persuade other rational beings and when we are bent on persuasion our aim is no longer reaching the truth, but bringing about certain effects. It's then that we are most likely to go in for the emotive language that's likely to make people sympathetic to our ideas, or for the wishful thinking that leads us to invent or exaggerate facts that will help to support the case we are trying to make.

It's this that sometimes misleads people into thinking that because this so often goes on in argument, it's all that goes on and that all we should do is expose the motives behind what people are saying. This is often something it's appropriate to do, but it's not something to do instead of considering whether an argument is a good one. People can have bad motives for producing good arguments and good motives for producing bad ones, just as they can with good and bad science. They can go in for flagrant fudging of arguments, or they can make innocent mistakes.

One of the most important things to learn in philosophy, and for some people the most difficult, is not to confuse the empirical question of why somebody is producing a particular argument with the philosophical, or scientific question, of whether the argument is a good one. It's a useful rule of thumb in philosophy never to ask questions about people's motives for arguing the way they do. There may be some justified exceptions to this, but the basic point needs to be thoroughly grasped before possible exceptions can be assessed. We are concerned with whether arguments are good ones, not with the psychological question of why they are being produced.

Finally, it's often said by people who have no time for philosophy and even by some who have, that it never gets anywhere. It's said that it doesn't provide answers or reach conclusions, that it knocks things down without building anything in their place, or that philosophers never reach agreement about anything and that the subject goes round and round without making progress. Do you think this is true?

One of the problems faced by philosophy is the absurdly high standards people set for what they are going to count as success. This is connected with the idea that philosophy is something people have – a finished account of life, the universe and everything, which will tell them how to lead their lives in a calm and unruffled way. If reaching this state of things is what is supposed to count as success in philosophy, then it's not surprising that the subject has had no success and is unlikely ever to have much, but why on earth should anyone have such absurdly high expectations of the subject? Nobody thinks that science is a failure because scientists disagree, because there's a good deal they don't know, because ideas abandoned at one time are taken up later and because scientists often prove certain ideas wrong without having anything to put in their place.

It's easy to recognize that progress in science is gradual and that every bit of progress raises new questions to which the answers are as yet unknown. We have no trouble in recognizing that science has made progress, in spite of the fact that the end is not yet in sight. If you start looking at philosophy in the same way, you are likely to take a different view of the matter of progress. Almost certainly you will have made a great many discoveries as you went along, not of facts of course, because philosophy isn't about facts, but about clarifications, arguments, inconsistencies, techniques of argument, confusions you hadn't noticed before; and once you have seen these things, you can't go back to where you were before, any more that you can go back to believing in a flat earth.

Once you've recognized the distinction between two ideas that you used to conflate you can't go back to the conflation and if it seems to you that all this progress is negative, destroying old ideas and wondering what to put in their place, remember that this is also often true in science. People made discoveries that showed that the simple original view couldn't be true, as for instance when they discovered that not all the heavenly bodies moved in perfect circles, but it wasn't in the least obvious what to put in their place. If they hadn't discovered

that there was something wrong with their old ideas, they would never have had any reason to do the work that led to their finding out more about the truth.

The same is true of the problems of philosophy. If issues like how we treat each other and animals and the environment matter at all, it matters to get them right and get rid of confusions and contradictions in our ideas. That can't be done without philosophical analysis, and that makes it worthwhile to battle away with this difficult subject and recognise progress for what it is, even though it does often seem painfully slow. That's what keeps us all going and we hope it will do the same for you.