

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Every science has its distinctive subject matter, and deals with certain fundamental concepts and questions. These constitute its main body. But every science also raises or suggests certain fundamental problems about the nature of its theories, methods of investigation, criteria of truth, limits of validity or inter-relations with other sciences, etcetera. Sometimes both types of problems are treated by the same individual to a greater or lesser extent. But in the case of the natural sciences, the scientist is so absorbed in the laborious activity of factual investigation, and the formulation and testing of hypotheses, that he has little time or energy left to devote to the methodological questions, constituting the philosophy of that science, or the particular meta-science. This convenient division of labor is, however, not feasible in the case of philosophy. Meta-problems concerning the nature and method of philosophy are much more crucial than the meta-problems of natural sciences. Sciences would work, even if a particular philosophy of science were invalid. But a philosophy would, be completely vitiated if its philosophy of philosophy were invalid.

The question I wish to consider, is whether philosophy too has two types of questions, whether there is or ought to be a meta-philosophy or philosophy of philosophy, (just as there is a philosophy of science, philosophy of history, or of mathematics etcetera), as distinct from philosophy. Or ought philosophy itself to perform this function? If so, meta-philosophy would be a redundant expression like logical logic

or chemical chemistry etcetera. The nomenclature is trivial, provided, the significance of the distinction is grasped. If meta-questions of philosophy are made an integral part of philosophy, getting their due share of the philosophers attention, then there is no need for coining a new expression.

What has been the past record of philosophy in this respect? Not long ago philosophers were eager to offer systems and neat isms, claiming to be objectively and universally true. Meta-questions were not given their due share of importance, even though they could not be totally avoided. It is significant, that the greater the depth of the philosopher, the greater was his relative concern with them. Thus Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Descartes, Locke, Hume, all dealt with these meta-problems, to a greater or lesser degree. But the most notable name is that of Kant.

The trend of the development of Western philosophy has been from an implicit meta-philosophy to an explicit one. This trend is logical and inevitable. A meta-science presupposes a body of sciences, as grammar presupposes language or languages, and philosophy of religion presupposes religions. meta-philosophy presupposes not merely a philosophy but philosophies. Thus even though every great philosopher has also been to some extent or other, a meta-philosopher (the parallel does not hold for scientists); an explicit meta-philosophy could not arise until the problem of philosophical diversity had emerged. Continuing philosophical controversy in the midst of ever growing agreement in other areas of human activity further pinpointed the issue. Consequently Western thought grew to be shy of metaphysics and was oriented towards meta-philosophy. This was not poverty of thought or the drying up of creative thinking. It only reflected a fresh creative response to the contemporary situation, and the emergence of a new conceptual field.

There have been two crucial formative periods of meta-philosophy; the first was the period of the emergence of natural science and scientific method in Europe in the 16th century; the second was the period of the rapid development of natural, social and cultural sciences

in the 19th century. The first situation had stimulated a new critical approach to philosophy, distinguishing, though not totally separating, it from scholastic thought. The second epoch made man for the first time systematically conscious of the diversity of languages, art forms, morals, religions, and worldviews etcetera, in all their richness and depth. This too acted as a leaven for the formulation of fresh questions concerning the nature and relationship of philosophy to the concrete cultural and historical situation of man.

The development of meta-philosophy has taken different directions among Anglo-American and European philosophers. Generally speaking, the first have concerned themselves more or less exclusively with problems generated by the impact of natural science, e.g., problems of meaning, verification, disagreement, truth, and relationship with science etcetera, etcetera. European philosophers, on the other hand, have been deeply influenced by the impact of the social and cultural sciences.

Anglo-American meta-philosophy tends to locate the striking feature of philosophical disagreement in the scientific frame of reference or conceptual field. In brief the explanation is that philosophical disagreement is the product of a lack of clarity and precision in the concepts and statements of philosophers, or confusion about the various uses of words or types of discourse etcetera. Scientific statements, and specialized languages of logic, mathematics, Physics, are extolled as the ideal and the philosopher is pressed to imitate them. Analysis in one form or the other is held to be the means for achieving clarity. Moore, Russell, Wittgenstein, and the *Logical Positivists* represent this trend.

The German version of meta-philosophy has been different. It highlights the cultural determinants of philosophical theories and of philosophical disagreement. Philosophical statements and theories are sought to be correlated, with the situational matrix of man. This leads to a cultural approach to philosophy. Nietzsche, Marx, Dilthey, Scheler, and Dewey adopt this approach in varying degrees.

Meta-philosophy emerged in response to the challenges posed by philosophical disagreement. Its task was to show why this disagreement existed and how it could be overcome. But it is significant that it itself became a prey to disagreement. Why did this happen? I believe that this was due to a mono-dimensional approach to the problem of the nature of philosophy and the reasons of philosophical disagreement. Philosophers took selected instances of philosophizing as the Paradigm or model of philosophy as such. Similarly, selected instances of philosophical disagreement were made the basis of formulating particular theories of disagreement. It is not surprising that when the Paradigm instances differed, the corresponding meta-philosophical theories of the nature of philosophy and of philosophical disagreement also clashed. Thus the differences, between Anglo-American and European meta-philosophy are quite understandable. But they are not unavoidable. These approaches are not contrary but complementary.

Before proceeding to describe these approaches in the main body of this essay, a few remarks on the cultural determinants of philosophical problems, and the cardinal features of the contemporary situation would be in order.

Philosophical questions and problems are situationally evoked and are not the product of a philosopher's ingenuity or reasoning alone. The latter, however, are necessary for articulating his response to the evocative stimulus of the concrete historical situation of the philosopher. Thus, varying life situations lead to the formulation of varying problems. For example, in the Middle Ages it was generally held that nothing happened without the will of God. Since it was also held that God rewarded and punished man, the problems of the freedom of the will and the justification of punishment emerged. Similarly, the problem of pain and evil was generated due to the current beliefs that (a) God is omnipotent and merciful, (b) pain and evil ought not to exist at all, or at least not in the measure in which they actually do in the universe. If either of the above judgments is modified or abandoned, the problem disintegrates. The problem arose precisely because of

and within a concrete conceptual and valuational field or situation. A change in this field leads to a change in the problem.

Consider the question: Has God created the universe? The once obvious answer was either a categorical yes/no, or a suspension of judgment. But philosophers now accept the possibility and even the validity of a third answer, namely: It all depends upon what you mean by '*God*' and '*creation*' etcetera. There is no one answer. The nature of philosophical problems thus depends upon the cultural climate, the manifold of assumptions within which the philosopher operates, and the concrete historical situation.

Mannheim refers to the situational determination of thought. But the situation evokes rather than determines thought. The significant features of the situation arrest the attention of the sensitive philosopher, while others fail to notice them or grasp their significance. People are thus not compelled by the situation to adopt a certain mode of thought or conceptual field. Rather they are stimulated by the situation as also by their own sensitiveness. Consider a stable social group suddenly brought into conflict with a radically different culture group. Once effective communication has been established, the critical and non-dogmatic thinkers, if any, of both the groups would be led by the logic of the situation to pose inter-cultural macroscopic problems in the place of intra-cultural microscopic ones. A powerful challenge would be thrown to the traditional conceptual field itself, within which the problems, agreements and disagreements had had their being. Instead of raising questions like; Can God change the past? Or, Are His attributes separable or not from His Essence? Can He commit evil? Or Are Forms and Ideas (of Plato) immanent or transcendent? Etcetera. Or, in an entirely different context, does a table continue to exist when not perceived by any mind? Do other minds exist? What is the relation between sense data and objects? Etcetera. Some philosophers would be powerfully inclined to raise questions like: How do different problems arise? Why does philosophical disagreement exist? What is the nature and function of philosophical theories? What is the correct method of approach to philosophical problems? Etcetera.

What type of problem engages the philosopher depends upon his personality type and the degree of his ability to detach himself from the conceptual field and manifold of assumptions of his age and group. If, however, he fails to appreciate the logic of the situational evocation of problems, and clings to a superseded conceptual field, then his philosophy does not grip the contemporary mind.

Granting that philosophical problems change with changing conditions, are there no stable sets of questions constituting its proper domain? I believe that the only stable and permanent questions are meta-questions. Meta-philosophy remains, while philosophies, come and go. If Plato and Kant, Ghazzali and Ibn Rushd, Shanker and Vallabh, still interest us, it is because they are either meta-philosophers, or there is a point of contact between our conceptual fields and theirs.

The present human situation is characterized by scientific uniformity and progress in the midst of philosophical controversy and religious and cultural diversity. This is perhaps the most significant feature of the contemporary situation. This generates the basic conceptual field for the critically oriented contemporary philosopher. It may be called the meta-philosophical field. Methodological, questions like the nature of philosophical, metaphysical, ethical and logical statements, the theories of meaning and truth, the nature and dynamics of philosophical or ethical controversy etcetera, arise within this field. Controversy and disagreement in the midst of progressively expanding scientific and technological standardization appear as anachronisms to the contemporary mind. It is impelled to find the causes and the cure of this incongruity. This leads to an unprecedented interest in meta-problems of almost all the branches of knowledge.

The value judgment underlying this quest is that avoidable controversy or conflict is bad and must be overcome. The contemporary analytical and meta-philosophical approaches are the new instruments to serve this basic value, even as previous metaphysical systems were the instruments of serving and defending some value system or other, embedded in past cultural traditions. In other words, harmony or agreement is the motif of contemporary meta-philosophy.

It may be said that this is the motif of all philosophy and religion as such. This is probably true. But the range of harmony sought by contemporary philosophers is immensely wider than the range previously sought. Moreover, there is a distinction between a democratic harmony among autonomous individuals freely committing themselves to values, and the harmony that ensues as a result of the commitment to an external *Authority*. No doubt the philosophical theologian claims that since his acceptance of the *Authority* is based upon universally valid reasons, the harmony that accrues is rooted in reason rather than a dogmatic or arbitrary surrender to an *Authority*. This claim will be examined in the chapter *The Religious Approach to Philosophy*.