

Five Approaches To Philosophy

Excerpts

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.

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.

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.

What, then, is the nature or, more exactly, the function of the religious approach to philosophy. Its function is to defend and justify ones commitment to an external Authority. At times its function is the systematic rediscovery or reinterpretation of the meaning and implications of a traditional belief system that continues to grip and fascinate the individual. This latter function is nearer to a pure metaphysical or speculative approach. But, in so far as it is limited to reinterpretation of a belief system without an explicit questioning of its basic truth or validity; the activity of speculation is only partly free. Hence this controlled speculative reinterpretation remains distinct from the pure speculative construction of worldviews or value systems by a fully autonomous individual.

The religious approach to philosophy is perhaps the oldest and persists even today in many circles of the East and West. At the early stage of human history, the individual, generally speaking, stands committed to an external Authority, who is the source of the value system and the worldview commonly accepted by the group. This shared commitment strengthens group solidarity and gives inner peace to the individual. Yet, his desire for comprehensiveness, consistency and logical or aesthetic order and system, impel him to systematize and refine the worldview. In the course of this activity, or even prior to it, he may discover certain prima facie inconsistencies in the belief-system or grounds of possible doubt. But this does not weaken his commitment. It induces him to remove those inconsistencies either by pointing out that they are only apparent or through making ad hoc assumptions. Sometimes a considerable reconstruction of concepts and beliefs may be attempted. This task requires conceptual analysis and logical deduction.

The metaphysical approach is evoked by two powerful human impulses. The first is the impulse to carry the foundational distinction of appearance and reality to its limit, once the common sense realistic view of the world and of knowledge has been questioned. The second is the impulse to construct a comprehensive theory of the nature, origin and future of the world as a whole, including man himself. In an important sense, the scientific approach is also concerned with precisely the same questions. But there is a basic difference between the two. This will be clarified as we proceed. The religious approach to philosophy also deals with the nature, past and future of the universe. But it is confined to the elaboration and explication of an infallible belief-cum-value system. This task requires considerable deductive reasoning and the speculative reconstruction of the traditional belief and value system, as already indicated in the previous chapter. But the religious approach to philosophy does not permit a completely free exploration of the theories about the nature, past

and future of the universe. It permits immanent but not transcendental speculation. The metaphysical approach questions the foundations of the framework itself no less than the concrete content of the belief system.

Culture may be defined as an evaluatively guided modification of a pre-existing natural state of affairs. Thus, leveling, ploughing the earth and growing crops are culture of the earth or agriculture. Exercising the body to develop it is culture of the body or physical culture. Training a child not to cry when he cannot spot his mother working in the kitchen is culture of the feelings or emotions. Exhorting a child that it is wrong to tell lies, or grab his little sister's toys, is the culture of evaluation and attitudes, or moral culture. Similarly, there is the culture of reasoning or inference (logical training), the culture of taste (aesthetic training), etcetera. Cultural training in the widest sense begins at the birth of an individual in a group. The learning process modifies the natural states of affairs, that is, the attitudes the child would have developed if left in a state of nature. The learning process covers the language, gestures, customs, habits, attitudes towards the in-group and out-group, aesthetic taste, the value scale and religious beliefs etc. But what is of crucial importance from the viewpoint of philosophy is the assimilation by the growing youth of the conceptual field current in the group. The concept of a conceptual field or frame supplies the key to the cultural approach to philosophy. A pre-critical worldview is primarily a more or less systematic and developed form of the conceptual field current in the group.

Moore, like Russell started as a follower and admirer of Bradley. But the notorious disagreements between philosophers as well as the disagreement between their theory and practice prompted him to question the doing of philosophy in the grand speculative manner. He was struck by the fact that philosophers asserted statements that were at variance with common sense beliefs, and that this discrepancy did not at all bother the philosophers as if it were a matter of no significance or consequence. But while philosophers might have thus lightly repudiated common sense beliefs, they nevertheless acted as if they were true. One is here apt to be reminded of the candid confessions of Hume in the Treatise, about his doubts and questionings disappearing when he left the philosophers desk and returned to the daily tasks and activities of normal living. Moore was too honest and earnest to ignore this fact. For him philosophy was not a mere intellectual game for displaying his intellectual brilliance and subtlety at the expense of common sense beliefs and convictions. For him philosophy was the honest pursuit of truth and consistency in both thought and action.

Again Descartes holds that man is a combination of mind and body. This raises the problem of the relationship between mind and body. Now these are all essential questions, since the basic aim is to understand the relationship between two universal concepts or essences, that is, thought and extension. Such questions divert our attention from facing problems of values, and of existence. Kierkegaard tries to reverse the point of departure of Descartes, by affirming the priority of the existence of the self, and by maintaining that no proof of its existence is needed. The existences of the self and of the 'Other' or the world, in the widest sense of the term, are facts of experience, the datum

of our thought. To attempt to prove or deduce their existence from or through thinking or through concepts is a misconceived and uncalled for attempt. Such doubts about the reality of the 'Other' are pseudo doubts, and the resultant questions pseudo-questions. The basic questions concern the value of the modes of human existence, and the act of choosing a definite mode. In more familiar terms, the important questions are moral, while ontological or epistemological questions are non-existential, secondary and technical. Philosophy should not be permitted to degenerate into a clash of theories about technical questions in the manner of science. It should be concerned with basic attitudes, their structure, and inter-relations and their consequences. Secondly, it should act as a powerful stimulus to make a definite choice. If philosophy does not play this role, then it is not philosophy, but technics.

The existentialist approach possesses a corrective value. Traditional metaphysics diverted the attention of man from the pressing problems of his own existence. The existentialist approach attempts in its own fashion, to unite philosophy and life, like the cultural approach of Dewey and Dilthey. But it has its own limitations.

No philosophical approach that fights shy of linguistic analysis can be free from serious confusions and fallacies. Unfortunately analytical and existentialist philosophers seldom communicate with each other. Purely analytical philosophers become narrow in their scope and vision, and their approach tends to become a technique, doing scant justice to the depth and range of human experience. On the other hand, existentialist philosophers tend to fall in language traps, and the confusion of vagueness or ambiguity with profundity or comprehensiveness.

The existentialist approach, in spite of claiming to be a concrete approach, ignores the historical determinants of the human personality. It tries to grasp man as a unique individual. But man is both unique and culturally conditioned by the group and the age. He cannot be understood in isolation: Heidegger's concept of Dasein no doubt implies that man is there, or is thrown into a situation. But he does not deal with the situation in a concrete way. He loses his path in abstract words, failing to do justice to the concrete historical and cultural determinants of Dasein or human existence. The reader is referred to a penetrating article On the Pseudo-concreteness of Heidegger's Philosophy by G. Stern in the journal, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 1947- 48. To my mind, however, there is no impediment to the fusion of the existentialist and cultural approaches to philosophy, and indeed of these two with the analytical into a multi-dimensional approach. This subject has been dealt with in the conclusion of the essay.