
Philosophy as Comprehensive Vision

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PHILOSOPHY AS COMPREHENSIVE VISION *

The fact that I have the happy privilege of addressing this distinguished audience of psychologists and philosophers stems at least partially, I take it, from the fact that the founders of this Society and those who have helped it to grow and flourish had some appreciation of the traditional aims and activities of philosophy and of their relevance for psychology. Many philosophers and psychologists now feel, however, that a survey of the history of philosophy and psychology shows that this appreciation rested on a serious misconception and that the direction of history points toward a sharper and sharper separation of the two fields. I have no wish to deny that both psychology and philosophy have distinctive functions, methods, and subject matters; but in the course of this paper I should like to stress the importance of close relations between the two fields and to express my conviction that the idea of having a joint society of philosophers and psychologists rests upon a sound insight. Some of those who are dubious of close relations between the two fields, however, have been particularly critical of one of the traditional philosophic goals I should most like to re-emphasize: namely, that of achieving a broad perspective within which all things may be given their due place; for I feel that, in spite of the difficulties involved, it is important that the philosopher seek to make comprehensive sense of the full range of facts from whatever field they may be drawn, whether from common sense, the sciences, the arts, religion, politics, man's working life, or his play activities. The dangers of the sort of narrow specialization which either refuses to look beyond its own little province or treats as nonsensical attempts to go beyond it far outweigh the risks of attempting a world view. Hence I feel that it is important that at least some philosophers conduct their criticism, analysis, and interpretation within as broad a perspective as possible.

But let us examine what these critics feel to be the lessons of history regarding the relations between philosophy and psychology and see what light this examination may throw on the conception of philosophy as comprehensive vision. The word "philosophy," as we are often reminded, comes from the Greeks and means the love or pursuit of wisdom, and with

* Presidential address delivered at the fifty-first annual meeting of the Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology in St. Louis on March 28, 1959.

the Greeks almost all forms of knowledge or learning were included under the term. With the passage of time, however, theology, physics (or natural philosophy), and the various sciences branched off from the central body of philosophy and set up their own methods for dealing with their particular subject matter. Psychology was one of the more recent sciences to branch off, but its progress since becoming separated from philosophy, like that of the other sciences, has been rapid. Its knowledge has gained in exactness, clarity, and definiteness. There is a tendency toward a larger measure of agreement among workers in the field. Its problems are formulated with increasing precision, and testable hypotheses are proposed for their solution.

Philosophy, on the other hand, relies heavily on meditation, conjecture, imagination, and speculation, all of which make for a high degree of tentativeness or uncertainty and permit vague, ambiguous, and somewhat fanciful developments. Instead of verifiable experimentation, we may have what is sometimes referred to as pure reason at work, with logic being used to discount or negate the evidence of the senses. Conflict between opposing schools and failure even to agree on what are the significant questions are more likely to be found among philosophers than agreement or cooperation. Whereas in the sciences present inquiry is likely to mark so much of an advance over earlier work as to leave the older out of the discussion, among philosophical systems it is difficult to demonstrate that any is definitely wrong, and the speculation of the ancients may demand as much attention as the latest thinking on the subject. The present subject matter of philosophy includes a group of embryo sciences – like logic, aesthetics, and possibly theory of value or ethics – which may be splitting off before many decades from the central body of material, which is largely metaphysical or epistemological. If we note that logic, for example, has been making remarkable advances within the past one hundred years and that its distinguishing characteristics are contrary to much of what we have been saying about philosophy, it may be urged that this simply affords evidence that basically it is a science which is nearing the point of becoming a separate discipline. Thus in philosophy we seem to be moving in the direction of having what can be given definiteness and precision separate off to develop sciences, leaving a more and more restricted body of material of an increasingly unscientific character.

In the light of this historical development it may well be suggested that the less psychology has to do with philosophy, the better for it; and the hope of the philosopher may well be to align himself with one of the embryo sciences and help cultivate it, or to develop a different type of philosophizing, or at least get some sharply different subject matter to investigate. Some philosophers, on the other hand, apparently have felt

that the close relations between philosophy and psychology have created a dangerous situation for the former. Many of them since before the time of the founding of this Society have insisted that philosophers stick to what they took to be the philosophical issues and avoid bringing in psychology. They have stressed the importance of not confusing philosophical theory of knowledge and logic with psychology and have charged advocates of philosophical positions other than their own with palming off psychological data or facts for philosophical theory. Lotze, for example, accused his opponents of confusing the history of the growth of knowledge with the theory of the character of knowledge. Another great philosopher, the centennial of whose birth we are celebrating this year, John Dewey, charged that some of the critics of his instrumental or pragmatic outlook were making the reverse error. They mistook their theory, he maintained, for psychological fact and were guilty of "a wholesale mistaking of logical determinations for facts of psychology" (*Essays in Experimental Logic*, pp. 402-413). Dewey was not, of course, using this argument to show that philosophers needed to know less about psychology; and the remedy for this sort of confusion would appear to lie in the opposite direction.

Though I confess to great difficulty on occasion in distinguishing between the philosophical and the psychological in some important studies of ethics, aesthetics, theory of value, and psychological theory, my plea for closer relations between psychologists and philosophers is not intended as an argument for either merging philosophy and psychology or urging either to try to take over the tasks of the other. It does seem to me, however, that the lessons of history may be read with a vastly different import from either that suggested by those who cite history as an argument for having psychologists abandon concern for philosophical issues raised by their field or that proposed by those who regard the psychological data their own position rests on as simple fact and reserve the term "psychology" for material they regard as irrelevant to philosophical issues.

At any rate, the position of philosophy as mother of the sciences does not suggest to me that this is a field which any self-respecting scientist would feel it his duty to keep as far away from as possible. Quite the contrary! That from the initial philosophic wonder about the world and our place in it should have come most of the sciences would seem to point rather clearly to philosophy as a subject worthy of careful consideration. That disciplines like physics, political science, economics, sociology, and psychology, to mention a few of the major ones, should have sprung from philosophy in the past 250 years affords impressive evidence of its rich potentialities. Historically considered, it contained within its sprawling domain the seeds of new and significant growth; and there are clear indications that even now the field contains at least in embryo yet other such developments. That its offspring should have developed so rapidly,

with such distinction, and in such divergent directions after leaving the central body of philosophy would seem to be a cause for congratulation rather than a warning against philosophy.

The argument that the differences in method between philosophy and psychology or, for that matter, any of the other sciences are so great that the scientist can find little of value or pertinence for his field in philosophy does not seem strong to me. There are great differences between the method of mathematics and that of the experimental sciences, but this does not prevent mathematics from being of great value for the sciences. In like fashion the methods of the logician and the metaphysician are significantly different, but logic may be quite helpful for metaphysics. Hence *a priori* I see no reason why the differences between philosophy as comprehensive vision and psychology should make either of them of little value for the other. An examination of certain of these differences, moreover, suggests that they help make it possible for the fields to supplement each other. Whereas a primary task of the psychologist or other scientist is determining, establishing, or gathering facts, the philosopher is more likely to be concerned with the attempt to explain what it means to be a fact or with the interpretation of a body of facts and theory. He aims at understanding, at seeing things in a framework which makes sense of them. Without the facts the philosopher has nothing to interpret, and for many problems in theory of value, ethics, aesthetics, and theory of knowledge the findings of the psychologist are of crucial relevance. More often than not a philosophical conception of what it is to be a fact serves as a presupposition of the psychologist's pursuit of facts. The philosopher's characteristic concern with the presuppositions of psychology, with its methodology and logic, and with attempting to place its findings and conclusions in a wider context, moreover, appears to be one shared by many psychologists.

Part of the difference in method and results between the philosopher and the scientist turns about the scope of their respective subject matters. A scientific hypothesis is always more or less specialized. It delimits an area and rules out as irrelevant facts from other fields. It seeks to illuminate a limited area in terms of methods and techniques appropriate to that subject matter. In philosophy as world view or comprehensive vision the same sort of delimitation is not possible. No area of facts can be ruled out because the philosopher is attempting to show that any and every fact may be given a place within his system. If he has discriminated generic traits of existence, any body of fact should be illustrative of them. His categories, if adequate, must afford illumination for any problematic area; but by the same token no single item of fact is peculiarly or crucially relevant. Hence the world view is not closely geared to specific factual items after the fashion of a specialized scientific hypothesis. For that

matter, however, more general scientific hypotheses are less closely tied to specific items of fact and more concerned with various ways of fitting facts into a pattern. Thus the broader and more general the scientific hypothesis, the more it is likely to resemble philosophy as world view.

In terms of this difference in scope it is not surprising that our most precise and reliable knowledge comes from the sciences; and the philosopher who does not have a place in his system for the methods and conclusions of the sciences thereby convicts his view of inadequacy. Including something which conflicts with specific scientific findings would be viewed by most philosophers as even more risky.

It is sometimes maintained, however, that it is not the difference in scope between scientific hypotheses and philosophical views which is troublesome. It is rather a difficulty of determining what problem, if any, the philosopher is trying to solve. There appears to be no specific item of information or fact which, if established, would show that his view is correct or incorrect. The positivists have pushed this line of criticism periodically, sometimes arguing that their non-positivistic philosophic brethren were dealing with pseudo-problems rather than genuine problems. Unless, however, one proposes by definition to deny problematic status to all questions which turn about something other than specific points of fact, there is no reason to deny that the philosopher has his problems. They are likely to turn about matters of clarification or interpretation rather than specific matters of fact; but they almost always involve a marshalling of evidence, and their pattern is that of critical or reflective thinking in general. In terms of Dewey's famous five steps in a complete act of reflective thinking, the problem or difficulty may arise because some accepted belief is questioned or because the status of a given area of experience within a conceptual framework is unclear. The clarification of the problem requires analysis and sometimes obtaining additional information. Once it is clearly defined, one may proceed to suggested solutions for the problem. The consequences of these proposals may be developed deductively, and it is then possible to see whether one or more of them affords a plausible means of clearing up the initial difficulty. Checking on whether one conceptual ordering better illuminates the facts or promotes understanding of them than another or on whether the facts fall into place better on one view than another is something involving a somewhat broader range of acceptable answers than might be true of most scientific problems; but it is possible to say that various modes of ordering facts appear to be clearly superior to, say, Thales' account in terms of water.

One familiar illustration of a philosophical problem is what has been referred to since Descartes as the problem of perception. Traditionally it has been formulated in terms of a metaphysical theory or world view

which set up, on the one hand, an external world of real things in a spatiotemporal field of location and, on the other, an "inner" domain of mind or consciousness which contains the rest of the world. Within this second realm, according to this view, fall the data of perception or what is given in perception. The problem is that of passing beyond the "inner" data to the "external" physical world, making sure that the inner subjective data correspond to the real external things. How, it may be asked, can we be sure that the object perceived presents the thing as it exists unperceived? How can we be sure that an inner reality corresponds to a never given external object? Many philosophers refuse to accept the mechanistic naturalism in terms of which this question is formulated, but perhaps the main solution within this framework is to say that though the entities immediately given in sense perception are not identical with the physical thing, they may somehow correspond with it. When they do, we have veridical perception. When they do not, we have perceptual error. Material things may appear to exist or to have properties which they do not really have because what is given is a set of data belonging to a quite different kind or order of reality from the material things themselves.

The difficulties of determining, on the basis of dualistic presuppositions, whether or not the given corresponds with the external world, however, have led mechanistic theorists to attempt other ways of solving the problem. These non-dualistic solutions ordinarily consist of wiping out one or the other of the dualist's domains and attempting to expand the other to cover what previously the two included. Others have sought a solution for the traditional problem in terms of an analysis of language. They maintain that the problem is not one of how to get from an inner realm of subjective data to a real external world but rather one of how to relate the language of sense data to the language of material things or of otherwise properly minding one's language.

Seeking a solution for the problem is largely a matter of clarifying meanings and achieving a clearer vision of the nature of perception rather than of getting additional information. If further facts are sought or additional evidence adduced, it is for the sake of seeing more clearly what the place of perception is within the conceptual framework of this world view. If we step outside this framework, the problem may appear to be a pseudo-problem; and from this outside point of reference one of the chief arguments against the mechanistic naturalist's position may well be that it gives rise to this problem of the external world, a problem which does not arise if we start with certain other assumptions. If we accept his basic categories, however, this is a genuine enough philosophical problem; and so persuasively and so frequently in modern times has it been set forth for us that many philosophers who do not share the assumptions which

gave rise to it still feel impelled to start from this formulation if they are discussing perception.

But it is by no means the only philosophical problem of significance in connection with perception. Hence referring to it as *the* problem of perception is misleading. If one is to speak of the problem on a more inclusive basis, it is that of showing the place of perception within the conceptual framework of a world view; and, accordingly, there may be at least as many sets of problems as there are world views. The Platonist, the Hegelian, and the contextualist, to mention only three, all have somewhat different problems from the Cartesian; but all of them have to have some account of sense perception. Whatever the view, there are situations in which things are perceptually accepted as having values which they turn out not to have in the test situation. This fact – that of perceptual error – as well as the further fact of veridical perception each view must account for in terms of its basic categories. This raises, of course, the question both of what evidence there is and what evidence we require in justification of our perceptual claims and beliefs. Each view must also have a place for all the main types of perception, not merely for ordinary perception or any one special kind, but for any and every kind, aesthetic, disinterested scientific, or other. Any view, moreover, must be able to give an account of the perceptually accepted object – of what it is that we perceive. Hence the problem of perception turns out to be a cluster of problems, and these problems will be handled somewhat differently by the proponents of various world views.

The problems of perception arise in connection with difficulties in interpreting a particular body or area of facts – commonsense facts, everyday experiences in regard to habitual patterns of behavior as well as ones concerned to realize or enjoy quality, and psychological data of various sorts; and philosophical theories or views of perception offer interpretations of these facts or data – ones which are the special concern of psychology. Any reasoned view of these matters, I take it, must draw upon some psychological data; but what the relevant psychological facts are and just how they are interpreted are matters which different systems of psychology as well as different world views may decide differently. Tolman or Koffka may pattern them differently from Clark Hull or Spence or Freud. Accordingly, the advocates of no system or world view are entitled to assume that the data as they see them are simply neutral facts which all others must take as their starting point. We cannot expect T. H. Green or James and Dewey to accept the conceptions of experience and perception held by Plato or by Locke and Hume any more than we can expect the latter three to start with the views of the former; and no one of these philosophers is entitled to urge that whereas he speaks of what is philosophically significant in setting forth his conception of experience, the others treat simply of psychology.

With reference to the obscurity or lack of clarity with which philosophy is charged, though I do not wish to counsel our philosophic brethren to any greater obscurity, it may be worth remembering that clarity and significance are not identical and that it is far more important to become clearer about something significant than simply to be clear; and a resolute adherence to being clearer and clearer about less and less is probably not the best way to discovery in any field. Friedrich Waismann, who started his philosophizing with the Vienna circle, puts the case even more strongly, declaring,

There is nothing like clear thinking to protect one from making discoveries. It is all very well to talk of clarity, but when it becomes an obsession it is liable to nip the living thought in the bud. This, I am afraid, is one of the deplorable results of Logical Positivism, not foreseen by its founders, but only too striking in some of its followers. Look at these people, gripped by a clarity neurosis, haunted by fear, tongue-tied, asking themselves continually, 'Oh dear, now does this make perfectly good sense?' Imagine the pioneers of science, Kepler, Newton, the discoverers of non-Euclidean geometry, of field physics, the unconscious, matter waves or heaven knows what, imagine them asking themselves this question at every step – this would have been the surest means of sapping any creative power. No great discoverer has acted in accordance with the motto, 'Everything that can be said can be said clearly.' And some of the greatest discoveries have even emerged from a sort of primordial fog... I've always suspected that clarity is the last refuge of those who have nothing to say.¹

It would be equally erroneous, of course, to maintain that wherever we find obscurity we therefore have significance or something of momentous import, but new and significant insights do appear to develop with sufficient frequency from fumbling, ambiguously expressed or vaguely felt beginnings to suggest that the philosopher's occasional lack of clarity is not in itself sufficient reason for advising the psychologist to steer clear of philosophy.

Nor is the lack of agreement among philosophers the unmitigated evil some would make it out to be. I doubt if there is any philosopher who has not had at least occasional pangs of regret that his colleagues did not group themselves solidly and unequivocally behind the truth as he sees it instead of viewing it with varying degrees of skepticism and displaying their customary heterogeneity or diversity of outlook; but in terms of the quest for comprehensive vision, this diversity has its advantages. If we seek vision, unanimity is less important than light; and who is there among us who has not learned much from views sharply different from his own? The more different views we have and the more

¹ F. Waismann, "How I see Philosophy," in H. D. Lewis, editor, *Contemporary British Philosophy*, pp. 464–465.

different sources of possible light we have, the better our chances that some of these philosophies will shed light on our world and our place in it.

The criticism that the central body of philosophy concerned with the generic nature of what is and how we come to know about it shows its lack of progress in its continuing interest in the views of the ancients – for example, Plato, Aristotle, Democritus, and Lucretius – also has its more hopeful side; for this suggests that these ancient systems may contribute to our efforts to make comprehensive sense of the full range of facts. Their insights and those of other pre-twentieth-century philosophers still afford clues to a clearer vision. We are richer, not poorer, in finding that their analyses and interpretations still have something of value for our time. There is a sense in which each of us must think through for himself and see for himself what a given philosophical system or approach to philosophy has to offer, but this thinking through and vision are greatly furthered by the suggestions and guidance of previous thinkers.

At any rate, my reflections on the history of philosophy and on its methods and aims lead me to feel that the goal of comprehensive vision remains one of paramount importance for the philosopher. It is true that he may devote his major efforts to the development of some one of the embryo sciences still within the field of philosophy. For example, he may center his study upon science, studying the methods, operations, and objectives of the sciences as they study the segments of nature they take for their own. He may concern himself with a type of logical or linguistic analysis which focuses upon the specific and attempts to avoid ontological speculation. But it is not essential that he turn in any one of these directions; and if he does take one of them, it will still be necessary for someone operating in terms of the traditional goal of seeking to make comprehensive sense of the full range of facts to try to see how these activities fit into a more inclusive scheme of things.

Making comprehensive sense, moreover, is not simply a matter of assembling the conclusions of the various sciences. For comprehensive vision selection and emphasis are unavoidable; and it is difficult to overestimate the significance of key facts or basic analogies in effecting a master coordination of facts. It seems clear that some facts or clusters of facts are more important than others for an understanding of various ranges of facts. By this I do not mean merely that a given philosopher may prefer, say, change to permanence or a live organism to a machine or the like. Rather what I have in mind is that if we place ourselves sympathetically within the conceptual framework determined by the basic structural features of some one of these key facts, we may be able to effect a plausible ordering of the entire realm of facts. The extent to which this can be done in illuminating fashion affords a check on the adequacy of the world view generated by this key fact. The matter of tests of

adequacy of world views, however, is a topic for another occasion; and here I should like merely to note that though no view has been so successful as to preclude the search for more adequate ones, still careful study of even inadequate views may contribute to a clearer understanding of things. Hence it seems to me that the philosopher has no more important or central task than that of attempting to make comprehensive sense of the full range of facts.

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