

PHILOSOPHY AS EPISTEMOLOGICAL REFLECTION

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P. L. Heath, writing in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* about "Nothing," says, "Nobody seems to know how to deal with it. (He would, of course)." There may be a correlation between "Nobody" dealing with "Nothing" and a philosopher discussing the nature of philosophy. Be that as it may, the purpose of this paper is to delineate an area of philosophy comparable in importance to ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology. This area has been termed "metaphilosophy" or "the philosophy of Philosophy," and a fundamental concern of such philosophizing is the justification of philosophizing at all.

Each area of philosophy seems to be defined by the sort of questions with which it deals. Ethics, for instance, is concerned with the problems of what one ought to do, the nature of good, and with absolute versus relative standards of conduct. Metaphysics deals with the nature or principles of ultimate reality. Epistemology deals with how the proposals of ethics or metaphysics may be *known*, i.e., how it is that these proposals have meaning at all or can be true. A fundamental characteristic of each of these areas is that the questions posed and debated are not only ultimately unanswered (perhaps because so many different answers are proposed) but for the most part seem unanswerable.

There are other questions in philosophy in addition to those included in the various areas mentioned. For instance, there are questions as to whether philosophy is a *lived* endeavor or whether philosophy is abstraction and analogous to pure research or pure science. Another division in philosophy is that between speculative and critical philosophic approaches to various problems. One claim is that all that philosophy can legitimately do is analyze language and procedures in various human and academic endeavors. Opposed to this is the system-builder, whose aim is to unify, synthesize, and even construct systems beyond the scope of any other investigative discipline. An allied dispute occurs between the respective proponents of intuitive and scientific methodologies in philosophy.

It has been illustrated that there are questions here, as philosophical in character as those of metaphysics and epistemology, yet seemingly not capable of categorization as ethics, metaphysics, or epistemology. This area of questioning is metaphilosophical, in which the subject of concern is the methodology or nature of philosophy itself. This is an area often neglected, officially at least. As a matter of fact, that there is such an area may itself be argued and become a subject for philosophical debate. Some philosophers may deny this as a separate area of question, declaring that

such questions can be asked and answered within the confines of specific problems in ethics, metaphysics, or epistemology. Others might decide that while separate from the accepted areas of philosophy, such methodological procedures are not themselves strictly philosophical but mechanical, and in so far as they do differ from logical questions which are in the realm of epistemology, are unimportant, if not unnecessary. Finally, others who deny neither the uniqueness nor importance of such questions might deny that they are neglected. Many articles, books (e.g., Ducasse's *Philosophy as a Science*), and even journals (the most recent APA bulletin mentions a journal, *Metaphilosophy*) all deal with this area and the problems listed. Still, the mere question of whether there is such an area, whether it is important, and whether it is neglected are *themselves* questions of the sort being investigated, though perhaps on another level of inquiry.

There are other ways in which such a new level of inquiry is indicated. In the twentieth century there are several schools of philosophical thought, the major ones being pragmatism, positivism, analytic philosophy, and continental philosophy as exemplified by existentialism. The question here is on what level of inquiry and in what school of philosophy is the man who takes an overview of all these schools, who sees something correct in more than one or in all these points of view? A new level of inquiry is required for the comparison, a level that is no school itself but is simply philosophical. Likewise, consider those philosophers who consider themselves of no school but professionally to be philosophers of ethics, or metaphysicians, or epistemologists. The question of essentially what makes a philosopher belong to the discipline of ethics or metaphysics or epistemology is not an ethical, metaphysical, or epistemological question: it is, however, a philosophical question.

To review, if one concedes that the methodological considerations are indeed metaphilosophical and even that such an area is already acknowledged as separate, whether on the same level as ethics or metaphysics, etc., or on a higher level because it ranges over all the other areas, the question of the relation of this area to the others is on yet another level. In the same way, the comparative merits of schools of philosophy or the definitive limitations of the various disciplines within philosophy are questions which belong to yet another level than that of any of the schools or disciplines of philosophy.

Finally, a consideration which leads to an explanation of the title of this paper. Rather than the defining limits of ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology, their relationship to each other should be considered. Many philosophers have claimed the fundamental thrust of philosophy to be in the realm of ethics, as the primary and practical concern of all men. Other

philosophers, seeing that ethical questions seem incapable of resolution, turn to metaphysical considerations in the hope that seeing "the way things are" may inform them as to what they ought to do about them. However, many people believe that the study of metaphysics is finally unprofitable, either because it is meaningless speculation or because some consideration of meaning itself and of what or how one may know must be developed before any kind of profitable answer to "What is real?" can be formulated. Thus the study of epistemology is fundamental and most important. Metaphysics and ethics, however important in their own right, depend for solutions upon epistemology, and thus epistemology is that area most closely allied with philosophy itself, that which philosophy is really "all about." It must not be forgotten, however, that epistemological considerations are themselves controversial, its questions also unanswered.

Two conclusions may be drawn from this review of the status and interrelation of the areas of philosophical endeavor. First, the problem of the relation of ethics, metaphysics, or epistemology is not itself a problem belonging to any of these areas individually or collectively. Even if one allows the claim that each area makes in declaring itself as the true and fundamental concern of philosophy, the question of which of these, if any, is a valid claim is not itself answered or answerable by the participants in these competitive claims. Thus the question of the individual importance, relative importance, and philosophical relationship of these areas belongs to philosophy itself, not to any one or all of these areas of interest.

Second, accepting the claim of priority by epistemology, the consideration of epistemology alone and without comparison to the other areas requires a reflection more fundamental than that involved in epistemology itself. The reasoning for the initiation of epistemological investigation, the justification of such reflection, and finally the foundation of such reflection are not epistemological in the normal sense. Epistemology seems to involve its student in an infinite regress about the knowing of knowledge, and the step *outside* that regress to question its validity, to consider whether it is proper to continue in this regress forever approximating but never reaching knowledge, or to consider at what point the regress must stop, i.e., what presuppositions one must or can make about how to begin knowing, is not itself epistemological but philosophical. This consideration is more fundamental than epistemology itself and must be done consciously or unconsciously before epistemological problems can themselves be considered.

There is a level of philosophizing going on here different than the level at which ethics, metaphysics, or epistemology proper take place; indeed it

is a level different and prior to even those philosophical considerations discussed earlier in this paper, e.g., critical philosophy versus speculative philosophy. There is a deeper reflection involved here, a reflection without the technical aspects necessary to the other levels. What is involved here is a purely philosophical reflection.

Since it is philosophy itself which is constituted in this reflection, and which this paper attempts to evoke and describe, to label it "philosophical reflection" is unhelpful. In *The Idea of Phenomenology*, Edmund Husserl has a passage: "Only with epistemological reflection do we arrive at the distinction between the sciences of a natural sort and philosophy."¹ Husserl's identification of philosophy with phenomenology and both with epistemology is not the point here. Philosophy is not only the sort of reflection that takes place in epistemology, and thus this essay is not entitled "Philosophy as Epistemology," but "Philosophy as *Epistemological Reflection*." The likeness is there because one probably does proceed from epistemology to the sort of more fundamental reflection of which I speak, and also possibly because it is for the most part a concern with some kind of "knowing," though a different kind than that of perception, judgment, or rationality *per se*. It is *like* epistemology, hence is epistemological; but it is not identical with or part of epistemology.

The following are two examples from the literary world that may demonstrate the existence of this strange "epistemological" phenomenon. In the novel, *All the King's Men*, the protagonist, Jack Burden, returning to Louisiana from California picks up a hitchhiker who has a twitch in his left cheek, a twitch which was "simply an independent phenomenon, unrelated . . . to anything." Speaking of the hitchhiker, Burden says:

I did not ask him if he had learned the truth in California. His face had learned it anyway, wore the final wisdom under the left eye. The face knew that the twitch was the live thing. Was all. But having left that otherwise unremarkable man, it occurred to me, as I reflected upon the thing which made him remarkable, that if the twitch was all, what was it that could know the twitch was all? Did the leg of the dead frog in the laboratory know that the twitch was all when you put the electric current through it? Did the man's face know about the twitch, and how it was all? And if I was all twitch, how did the twitch which was me know that the twitch was all? Ah, I decided, that is the mystery. That is the secret knowledge. That is what you have to go to California to have a mystic vision to find out. That the twitch can know that the twitch is all. Then having found that out, in the mystic vision, you feel clean and free. You are at one with the Great Twitch."²

In the short story, *The Man Who Saw Through Heaven* Wilbur Daniel Steele tells of the evangelist missionary from Arkansas who visits an observatory in New York, peers through a telescope and discovers that the

sky is not the floor of heaven but is infinite in reach. The attendant laughs at his confusion and points out to him that our entire universe may be an atom in some greater universe, and some other universe may be an atom in ours, perhaps in the stone in the missionary's ring. The missionary proceeds to Africa and in a series of adventures attempts to build a mud statue of God to enlighten the natives. His final success depicts a seated man-figure, his eyes peering into the stone in the ring he wears.³

There *is* something essentially convoluted, infinite and infinitely turning on itself in the nature of philosophy, and it is concerned with man's cognition of himself and his world. It is really this characteristic which prompts me to describe it as epistemological reflection. As it crops up in literature in the twitch's knowing of its twitchness and knowing of its knowing and in the infinite collection of worlds within worlds, it crops up in life as well. As the philosopher must know about knowing, so also must he philosophize about philosophy. I find in philosophy classes at all levels that students again and again ask why one should bother doing philosophy, and I have sometimes spent as much as a third of the class time in introductory courses explaining and debating those questions. They will not go away, they will not be answered, and even tentative answers only give rise to more questions.

Finally, an example from my own philosophizing as illustrative of the sort of reflection that is constitutive of philosophy itself may prove helpful, and it concerns the questions about "why philosophize" just mentioned. Given my premise that there can be no absolute answers in philosophical endeavor, can there be any answers at all, even relative ones? If there are no absolute answers, no Absolute Meaning to existence, i.e., if all meanings are relative and given (only) by the subject, then any meaning is as good as any other. The only way to claim one meaning to be better than another, which is what I must do in order to make or retain it as *my* meaning, must be to have *some standard* (which must at least be *seen* as absolute) by which to claim this. Unfortunately, no such standard can be finally validated in philosophy by the nature of philosophy as I see it. Then, if the Universe *is* ultimately meaningless, as it seems to me, why bother to philosophize at all?

An attempt at justifying tentative or relative answers as the only acceptable answers in philosophy might take a more psychological viewpoint. Suppose that while admitting that certainty is impossible, I point out that to *believe* something is to believe it true or right, even though its truth or rightness can never be known. One cannot believe something unless he believes it true. William James' well known argument that even though God's existence is unknowable one ought to believe in Him because it makes the believer better off is fallacious for just this

reason. One cannot, having accepted the uncertainty about truth, *decide* to believe in something for any other reason. One does not really *decide* to believe at all. One believes because he thinks it true or right, not because of any other considerations.

If one *does* believe, i.e., think something right, then he believes it Right, i.e., at least sometimes not only right for him but for others as well whether *they* believe it right or not. For instance, if I believe abortion on demand to be murder, then I am bound by my own principles to impose the consequences of my belief on others. Surely the least we can allow each other is the right to live by his principles—in fact it is perhaps the most we can demand of each other. Unfortunately, principles conflict, but if I live and decide, i.e., if I give one meaning rather than others to events in the universe, then I also inevitably decide for and impose upon others. No matter how careful and how much I remind myself that I might be wrong, there still are times I must decide then and there for all of us. I *do* do that, and so do you.

In the end, if we do this and must do this, then I can't say there is anything wrong with it. The mistake involved in such considerations of relativity and absolutes is akin to what Russell says is the skeptic's mistake, which is to demand the absolute of the relative.⁴ In our case, this is to demand that our relative decisions, absolute in regard to each of us, should be Absolutely correct, that we never be mistaken. Now, however, the philosopher must ask himself, "Is this true or helpful, or are we only playing a word game, hiding our inadequacies?" In other words, now that we have said all that one can say regarding philosophical openmindedness, the requirement for decisions and commitment, etc., it is still in the worst sense relative, on the ultimate level.

This last reference to levels suggests perhaps another type of solution, one in which there are different levels of life, philosophy, and answers. On one level of our existence, things and problems do resolve into absolutes versus relativity, black and white. On another, perhaps higher level it is not so simple, and here we live for relative absolutes, absolutes relative to us. Merleau-Ponty suggests that for each of us there is something we would die for, and that nothing could be more absolute than that. Yet those things we would die for are not the same for all of us, but vary from individual to individual, i.e., are not absolutely or universally absolute. This is the sort of answer to which I usually resort for the question of the worth of philosophy and life.

Yet even I see that there is another level at which one must decide the validity of the prior levels, where again questions become absolute or relative and not both, then another level beyond that, and another and another, in an infinite regress. Finally, the infinite regress itself makes all

knowledge, concern, and philosophy relative, unfounded, and unjustifiable. There *are* no final answers. If so, it becomes difficult to counter the perennial freshman analogy. If there are no answers, and we know that, if nothing else, why look? That the search itself is worthwhile will not do as a justification. Even a freshman knows that a search for something that the searcher knows does not exist is foolish.

All that I can do now is to quote you some passages that are meaningful to me, even if I know that they aren't answers. While we find Dostoevsky asking, "Can a man of perception respect himself at all?" we also find him declaring, "still, there is an ache in you, and the more you do not know, the worse the ache."⁵ Dostoevsky says this even while admitting that it may all be "a cardsharp's trick." Robert Penn Warren talks about the card game of life in *All the King's Men*, too:

I could lie there as long as I wanted, and let all the pictures of things a man might want run through my head, coffee, a girl, a drink, white sand and blue water, and let them all slide off, one after another, like a deck of cards slewing slowly off your hand. Maybe the things you want are like cards. You don't want them for themselves, really, though you think you do. You don't want a card because you want a card, but because in a perfectly arbitrary system of rules and values and in a special combination of which you already hold a part the card has meaning. But suppose you aren't sitting in a game. Then, even if you do know the rules, a card doesn't mean a thing. They all look alike.

So I could lie there, though I knew that I would get up after a spell—not deciding to get up but just all at once finding myself standing in the middle of the floor just as later on I would find myself, with a mild shock of recognition, taking coffee, changing a bill, handling a girl, drawing on a drink, floating in the water. Like an amnesia case playing solitaire in a hospital, I would get up and deal myself a hand, all right. Later on.⁶

Earlier, Warren has Burden say:

"The end of man is knowledge, but there is one thing he can't know. He can't know whether knowledge will save him or kill him. He will be killed, all right, but he can't know whether he is killed because of the knowledge he has got or because of the knowledge he hasn't got and which if he had it, would save him. . . . For the end of man is to know."⁷

There is the famous story of the final exam given in a philosophy course, an exam upon which there was written one question, "Why?" Many students wrote page upon page in answer, but there were only two essentially correct answers. One student, in reply to "Why?" simply answered, "Because." The quotations above, about why one does philosophy, amount in the end to "Because." Man simply *does* do philosophy, even philosophy *about* philosophy, no matter how foolish or sublime it may appear to be. The other equally correct answer to "Why?" was "Why not?"; more flippant, perhaps, but also perhaps more accurately revealing of the philosopher. About both of these answers, one may say with

Sartre's protagonist in his short story, "The Wall,"⁸ speaking after even his defiance of the world and death is made ridiculous by the course of events in the world, "I laughed so hard I cried."⁹

This paper began by comparing a philosopher discussing philosophy to "Nobody" discussing "Nothing." It ends with another such comparison. Fridugis the Deacon, in his *Letter on Nothing and Darkness*, written to "the most serene prince Charles," known to us as Charlemagne, says "every signification is signification of what is. Nothing, however, signifies something. Nothing, therefore, is the signification of what is, that is, something existing."⁹ Fridugis is badly confused, but it still seems that Nothing is Something, and philosophizing continues.

NOTES

¹ Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), p. 18.

² Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men* (New York: Bantam Books, 1951), p. 314.

³ Wilbur Daniel Steele, "The Man Who Saw Through Heaven," in *An Anthology of Famous American Short Stories*, ed. Angus Burrell and Bennett Cerf (New York: Random House, Inc., 1953), pp. 881-96.

⁴ Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 150.

⁵ Fyodor M. Dostoevsky, "Notes from Underground," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1956), pp. 62, 63.

⁶ Warren, pp. 99-100.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Wall," Kaufmann, p. 240.

⁹ Fridugis, "Letter on Nothing and Darkness," in *Medieval Philosophy from St. Augustine to Nicholas of Cusa*, ed. John F. Wippel and Alan B. Wolter (O.F.M.), (New York: Free Press, 1969), p. 105.

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