

A
A
0
0
0
0
0
8
2
8
0
0



UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY

B
53
F45w



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

BY

G. C. FIELD, M.A., B.Sc.

Lecturer in Philosophy in the University of Liverpool

LIVERPOOL . . . THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
LONDON . . . CONSTABLE & CO. LTD.

1920

Price Two Shillings Net

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

A Public Lecture delivered at the
University of Liverpool

BY

G. C. FIELD, M.A., B.Sc.

Lecturer in Philosophy in the University of Liverpool

LIVERPOOL . . . THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
LONDON . . . CONSTABLE & CO. LTD.

1920

Price Two Shillings Net

L 605 931 630 0

What is Philosophy?

It could be argued that the question thus raised is not one of first-rate importance. Definitions of the scope of a science or branch of knowledge, it might be said, are so largely arbitrary, and matters of the use of words only that there is always a possibility of difference of opinion about the use of them, and it would be a mistake to waste too much time on a fruitless attempt to resolve these differences.

It would, indeed, be a waste of time if we always insisted on postponing the discussion of any particular problem that interested us until we had come to a universal agreement as to the correct title of the branch of knowledge to which it should be assigned. There are certain particular kinds of problem which we generally and naturally call philosophical, and there are others, more or less closely allied to these, about which we might be in more doubt. Some would restrict the limits of Philosophy so as to exclude all the doubtful cases; and, in doing so, they find themselves obliged to exclude a great many cases also which ordinarily have been always included within its limits. On the other hand, the view here adopted is that it is more convenient to define the study so as to include all the subjects usually included, within the subject matter of Philosophy, even if that involves opening the door also to more doubtful claimants.

But, either way, we must remember that the problems and subjects remain just the same, we can consider and discuss them, if they interest us, just as freely, whether we call them Philosophy or not.

Our natural tendency in defining the nature of any

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

branch of knowledge is to ask "What is its subject matter?" "With what facts does it deal?" And we find the different sciences divided according to the different groups of facts with which they deal. There we seem to have a clear and intelligible ground of distinction. The bodily structure of animals is one thing, the wealth-producing activities of mankind is another. Anatomy deals with one, Economics with the other. There is no difficulty here; and even if we find that in some cases two groups are rather difficult to distinguish or even overlap at the extremities, it will not seriously worry us. But if we try to apply this method to Philosophy, if we look for a separable or distinguishable group of facts with which Philosophy is to deal, we shall be faced with many difficulties.

In the first place, we shall find our philosophers dealing with facts which seem to have been already assigned to another group with a science of its own. For instance, Mr. Bergson, in his most important book, seems to be coming at every point into contact with the field of operations of the biologist. In some of Mr. Bertrand Russell's works it would be difficult to tell where Philosophy ends and Mathematics begins. And we are familiar with expressions like the Philosophy of Art, or the Philosophy of History, which, if they mean anything, mean that in some way the philosopher can go over again some of the ground already covered by students in other branches of knowledge. On the other hand, if we attend to all the varying subjects with which Philosophy deals, we shall find it extremely difficult to give a common description of all of them, which will enable us to put them in a single group by themselves. Let us look, for instance, at the subjects of some of the papers which were read before a society whose avowed object is "the

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

systematic study of Philosophy." I select the following at random ; " The Belief in External Realities," " The Place of Experts in Democracy," " Is the Conception of Good Indefinable ? " " The Psychology of a Dissociated Personality," " The Phenomena of Poetic Effectiveness." Is there any common description which would include all the facts dealt with in those papers ? If we added to the list, the impossibility of finding one would become even more obvious. It really seems clear that any attempt to define Philosophy as the knowledge of any special group of facts is foredoomed to failure. It will end either in making Philosophy co-extensive with the whole field of knowledge, or else in denying it any subject matter, and ultimately any justification for its existence, at all. I believe that in their heart of hearts, the majority of people incline to the latter alternative, and that not without encouragement from some who ought to know better.¹

The view of the nature of Philosophy here put forward has strong support. It has been variously expressed by saying that Philosophy is a " criticism of categories," that it is an " examination of assumptions," that it is " a systematic attempt to become aware of and to doubt all preconceptions." The first point about these definitions is that they define Philosophy, not by its subject matter, but by its point of view. We cannot regard our preconceptions or assumptions as a special group of natural phenomena, which are to be described and classified as Zoology describes and classifies the species of animals. They run through everything, they are present in all our thinking. And Philosophy is the point of view, the attitude of mind which, instead

¹For instance, Sir Ray Lankester in his Preface to Mr. Eliot's *Modern Science and the Illusions of Prof. Bergson*.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

of accepting them and using them, as is our ordinary way, examines and criticises them. It is a shifting of the centre of interest, a continual moving of the previous question.

The meaning of this will become clearer by some instances. And let us take first an instance which seems to illustrate this point particularly clearly. We are all in our every-day life making what we call moral judgments. "So-and-so is a good (or a bad) man," "such-and-such an action is right (or wrong)"—to mention two of the commonest types. Now, ordinarily, our interest is centred on the question whether any particular judgments of this kind are true. Is so-and-so a good man? Is this action or this sort of action right? But when we think philosophically we change our centre of interest. We no longer ask questions like this, except incidentally. What we now want to know is what does "good" or "right" mean? What is the complete nature of these facts which we attribute to some things and deny of others? In ordinary moral judgments, we assume that there is something which we call "goodness" or "rightness" which is present in some cases and not in others. And we try to decide in what cases it, whatever it is, is present, and in what cases it is not. But the philosopher only concerns himself with this point so far as it may help him to answer his main question. And his main question is "What is this thing which we call goodness?" Or, to go further back still, "Is there any such thing?"

At this point, those who are fonder of abstract dialectics than of observance of the facts will, perhaps, object, "But people must already know the answer to your question, before they can begin to make moral judgments at all. How can they even ask whether such-and-such a thing is right unless they already know what 'right'

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

means ? ” And they may strengthen their objection by reference to the procedure of some science, say, Zoology, where the student must first know what a fish is, before he can begin to ask whether any particular animal or kind of animal is a fish or not. But I think a very brief examination of the actual state of the case will dispose of this objection. It will make it perfectly obvious that people can and do constantly assert that such and such an action is right or wrong without having even asked themselves the question what right and wrong mean. Of course, I do not mean to say that these are mere meaningless words to them. They are assuming certain things about the facts that they represent. But they use them and apply them, asserting them of some things and denying them of others, with an amount of explicit knowledge about them which is very small indeed compared with what philosophical reflection may reveal. Examine the attitude of mind of the unphilosophical “ plain man,” (say, our own minds before we got into the habit of philosophical reflection, or when we are in an unreflective mood). We shall find that it is not even clear to us how much or what we are assuming, and still less do we make any attempt to examine or criticise these assumptions. When we do make such attempt, we very probably find that we have been assuming contradictory things at different times. Are there not many of us who have said about some particular action of some particular man. “ Oh, if he likes doing it, there is no merit in it ? ” Assuming, that is to say, that the moral goodness of an action is incompatible with the pleasure of the agent in it. And then at other times have we not talked as if the highest development of goodness was to like doing right, assuming that is, that the moral goodness of the action was increased by the pleasure of the agent in it ?

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

And here we are at once presented with one of the chief problems of Moral Philosophy, the relation of pleasure to moral goodness.

But even apart from possible contradictions in the assumptions that we make, we might safely say that very few of those who pass moral judgments could say without reflection exactly what assumptions they were making, and still fewer would be found to have examined them. How much do we assume about, for instance, the fact indicated by words like " good " or " right ? " I suppose we might say that we all assume that goodness is in some way a reason for pursuing those things where it is present and avoiding those where it is absent. And probably, too, we might safely say that we assumed that it was the sort of thing which could be present in actions and characters of human beings. Yet how many people who use these conceptions realise that they are assuming these points ? And how many have ever asked themselves the question whether these assumptions are justified, whether there is any real fact of which they are true ? And even if we had done this, we have clearly not reached the end of the questions one might ask about the facts of which we assumed this. I think this illustration is sufficient to make it clear that it is possible and is, indeed, our ordinary procedure, to use certain categories and assumptions freely, without ever attempting to make clear to ourselves exactly what or how much they mean, or examining their validity.

We may find the same thing in the field of politics, where there is indeed a particularly good opening for some systematic criticism of assumptions. A good instance of the effect of this occurs to one in the history of the political thought of the 19th century. Political discussion was being carried on, as indeed it is to a great

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

extent still, mainly by the assertion of certain rights inherent in certain human beings, and the counter-assertion of contradictory rights inherent in others. It was the philosophic criticism by men like Burke or Bentham of the whole conception of natural rights, which made people begin to ask whether these absolute rights underived from anything else really existed at all, and to realise that if there were to be any basis for political discussion they must be shown to derive what validity they had from some simpler and more intelligible principle.¹ Many other instances of criticism actually made or needed on various political conceptions will occur to everybody. From one point of view, almost the whole of political speculation may be made to turn on the exact nature of the fact, or rather the many different facts which we denote by the name "liberty."

To turn now to a somewhat different field. It would be fair to say that, in the unreflective stage, we naturally assume that all the objects about us which we perceive by our senses are really there, independently of whether we perceive them or not, and that the same things can be seen by other people like ourselves. Yet the realisation and criticism of these assumptions have given rise to the whole great question of Realism and Idealism, which occupies the centre of interest in the philosophical world at the present time. We begin, even in the pre-reflective stage by an elementary criticism of the assumptions ourselves. Our experience of dreams and hallucinations makes us deny their validity in some cases, and we draw a rough line in what we are aware of between the things that are really there and the things that are not. That becomes a fresh assumption which we are continually using. Yet it is very certain that in using

¹ See Dicey, *Law and Public Opinion in England*.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

it, we do not necessarily think about all that is involved in it or realise all the difficulties with which it is faced. To suggest but one difficulty, and that of the simplest and most elementary kind, which certainly never occurs to most people. How can we ever be sure that we are distinguishing the two experiences correctly? Certainly there is nothing in the experiences themselves to enable us to do so: the dream, while we are dreaming, seems just like our waking life. And if we appeal to the testimony of other people, we shall be reminded that this is conveyed to us by those very sensory experiences which are on their trial. There is clearly room here for very much further examination than, in our ordinary experience we undertake. Or again we are familiar with the ordinary illusions of the senses, and know that the size or the temperature or the colour of a thing will appear different to us according to the condition of our body or our position relatively to the object. And we set up a standard in each case, and say that this is the real size, or the real temperature, or the real colour. But this familiar distinction is just one of those assumptions which Philosophy will criticise. And we get Protagoras saying that the thing is nothing in itself, but is simply to each man what it appears to him. Here again he will find plenty of arguments to support him, which the common-sense that laid down the distinction has certainly never considered. We say that what we see is the real colour and what the colour-blind man sees is not the real colour. But it is difficult for common-sense to show any reason for preferring the evidence of our senses to the evidence of his. And many other problems arise in connection with these points. We speak of the object being really green not red. But what is the object? We assume the division of the world up into a number

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

of different objects. And for our ordinary purposes this seems to act all right. But as soon as we begin to examine this, to ask what is the ground of distinction between one object and another, we shall be faced by many problems and difficulties.

Our instances might be multiplied. No distinction is more familiar to us than that between true and false, or right and wrong thinking. We all know what the difference is up to a point, of course. But the whole history of Philosophy has shown that there is room for much discussion and difference of opinion in the attempt to describe it more accurately. Books are continually being written on the Meaning of Truth, and there is no sign yet that the controversy is exhausted.

It is to be hoped that enough has been said to show the sort of point of view that Philosophy, as here conceived, takes. It is the point of view that examines the assumption and categories that in other sorts of thinking we use without such examination.

So far, throughout, our instances have been taken from our ordinary, everyday thinking. But instances of the same kind could be found in the natural sciences. To establish this in detail would be the work of one who has an intimate and extensive acquaintance with the subject matter of these sciences. But at least it seems clear that in any one of them the scientist uses certain categories or conceptions which he does not need to criticise and examine beyond a certain point. There is nothing, of course, to prevent the scientist examining these, if it interests him. But the point is that it is not necessary for him *qua* scientist to do so, that as far as advancing knowledge within the boundaries of his own chosen subject-matter goes, he can get on perfectly well without examining these assumptions of his more than

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

a very little way. He can use them perfectly well for his purposes without having considered their full meaning, all that they involve and the difficulties which they raise.

I will give an instance in the words of a distinguished scientist. Prof. J. Arthur Thomson in his little book, *Introduction to Science* in the Home University Library, writes : " One reason for this [the difficulty of Science] is very familiar—that things are not always what they seem to be. And though Science does not raise the characteristic metaphysical question as to what is meant by being real, it has in its own way to distinguish seeming from reality." This seems to illustrate the point admirably. Most sciences, within their own field, are called upon to distinguish in many particular cases between appearance and reality. And to do this, they have to have formed some idea of what in general the distinction means, they have to have a working criterion. But they " do not raise the characteristic metaphysical question as to what is meant by being real." That is to say they are content with a criticism which works in their own field. They do not ask whether this is all there is in the distinction, or whether it works everywhere, or whether this is the only meaning which can be applied to the distinction or any of the many further questions about it which may be asked and which the philosopher does ask.

Another instance suggests itself. Prof. Gotch has defined Science as " the causative arrangement of phenomena." That is to say, each science sets itself to discover the causes of the facts which it investigates. For this purpose, it assumes the fact of causation, that there is a connection between certain phenomena which we call causal. And it proceeds to ask between what phenomena this connection exists. To do this, it must

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

have some idea of the nature of this connection. But it does not need to know very much about it. It may be content to describe it with Mill, simply as a "uniform antecedence," or with Prof. Thomson as the fact that "a certain collocation of antecedents and no other will result in a certain collocation of consequents and no other." And for the purpose of discovering what causes what within the realm of the natural sciences this is all one needs to know about it. But there are obviously many more questions that might be asked about it. Is that all there is to be said about the causal connection? If there is anything more in it, which is the essential fact about it and which is merely the symptom? Is it of universal application or is there any territory where its authority does not run? These are only some of the questions which the philosopher must ask, but which the scientist need not. And so we get the sciences progressing and advancing undisturbed by the fact of the disputes between Hume and Kant, or by Mr. Bertrand Russell's destructive criticism of the whole conception of causation.

Other instances suggest themselves. For instance, an important part of some sciences, Zoology for instance, is the classification of its subject matter into species, genera, etc. But we cannot suppose that, in order to do this, the zoologist thinks it necessary to have reflected on all that is involved in the possibility of classification at all, to have considered, for instance, the question at issue between Realism (in the Scholastic sense) Nominalism and Conceptualism, or to have grasped what Plato meant by his Theory of Ideas. Yet these are all questions which arise, in part at any rate, from a consideration of the full meaning of classification.

But, on the other hand, and this raises an important

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

point, we must remember that, in general, the kind of conceptions which we use in ordinary common-sense thinking have to be cleared up to a certain extent by the beginnings of philosophical criticism before they can be used by science.¹ For instance, to refer back, the scientist is not content with the ordinary view of the meaning of reality as opposed to appearance. Nor is he content with the ordinary loose use of the idea of cause. He must have something more definite than this to work on. And so science generally begins with a philosophic examination of the uncriticised assumptions of common sense. And this is why in considering the beginnings of speculation among the Ionian Greeks, we speak of the same men indiscriminately as scientists or philosophers. Both these branches of knowledge spring from the same root, which may be roughly described as the criticism of the assumption that the world is in reality just what it looks like to our senses. But for the

¹ There are great possibilities of danger for the advance of knowledge in the premature attempt of a particular science to emancipate itself from Philosophy. Many people would hold that this danger is particularly real at the present time in the case of Psychology. Such a view is not mere ignorant obscurantism, as the "scientific" psychologist is fond of asserting. It arises from a realisation of what is fairly obvious to anyone who studies modern psychological controversies, namely, that we are as yet nowhere near a satisfactory agreement about the assumptions and categories of Psychology. Without a great deal more philosophical reflection on these points, there does not seem to be a very promising future for Psychology as a science. As a matter of fact, at the present stage of knowledge, all psychologists have to be philosophers to a certain extent, whether they like it or not. The only question is whether they are to know what they are doing, whether they are to do their philosophising consciously and well, or unconsciously and badly. Nothing is more amusing than the way in which certain psychologists, while proclaiming all the time their absolute freedom from any taint of Philosophy, produce the most startling metaphysical views, without, so far as one can see, the least appreciation of their full meaning or of all that they involve.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

scientist it is not necessary to carry this criticism more than a certain way, while the philosopher carries it as far as it is possible to go. And so, soon after the beginnings of speculation, the two branches of knowledge divide off in the way we have described.

The division, however, is not necessarily absolute and permanent. When we get to the most ultimate questions, the standpoints of the two seem to coincide. We may approach these questions by way of scientific investigation or philosophic criticism. But when we have reached them, it would be hard to say that we were working in one way, rather than in the other. The fact seems to be that there is a point at which to get real knowledge we have to use both at once, and have to take into account the results of both processes. In some of the most recent work in Physics we seem to have reached this point. An obvious instance is to be found in recent discussions on the theory of Relativity. Or, to go a little further back, a satisfactory answer to the question, Does the ether really exist or is it only a working hypothesis?, seems to need a philosophic examination of assumptions and ideas, such as "real existence" or "working hypothesis," just as much as it needs scientific experiments in the analysis of matter. Here we have to be both scientists and philosophers. And it seems natural to suppose that at various other points in their careers Philosophy has touched science and, by a critical examination of the assumptions which science has hitherto been using, set it on a different track or opened up new possibilities before it.¹ But the fact

¹An instance of this suggests itself in the case of Copernicus, who, by accepting the philosophical idea (the result of a criticism of our ordinary assumption) of the relativity of motion, was able to get rid of natural geocentric prejudices and to grasp the inestimable value of the heliocentric way of regarding the solar system. (See *Mind* N.S. No. 88. *The meaning of Kant's Copernican Analogy*

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

that they sometimes come into contact in this way, ought not to obscure the fact that throughout the greater part of their careers they do not come into contact, and that there is a real difference between the two attitudes.

It must be clearly understood that by the assumptions which Philosophy criticises and science does not, is meant 'assumptions' in the sense described, the assumptions which any science must make or the conceptions with which it must work, if it is to get to work at all ; and which it perfectly legitimately and wisely refuses to examine more than is necessary for its purpose. I do not mean the hypotheses about his own subject matter which every scientist forms in the course of his work : the hypothetical explanations which he suggests and puts forward tentatively for examination. These are not assumptions in our sense. Or they are only assumed in the sense of being put forward as possible explanations to be tested by seeing how they will work. Their full meaning is realised, and also their purely hypothetical nature. With these hypotheses the philosopher has nothing directly to do ; it is entirely the business of the scientist to examine and criticise them. Nor must we confuse the assumptions of science with the assumptions of some scientists. The assumptions of science will admit at least of further examination, and the ideal scientist does not pretend that they go further than they do. But some scientists have gone much further than this. For instance, we have seen how far the scientist has analysed the conception of cause, and how many questions still remain to be asked and answered about it.

by N. K. Smith). Probably a closer acquaintance with the history of science would suggest other and better instances. A modern mathematician has told us that some of the greatest advances in his science have been made by mathematicians who were also philosophers.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

But some scientists have taken upon themselves to assert that there is nothing more in it than that ; or that because it works in their own territory therefore it is of universal application. By making such assertions they have sometimes without realising it, become philosophers. And if they take the fact that they can work with this amount of knowledge of what causation means as sufficient proof that that is all there is to be known about it, they are very poor philosophers. But the fact that a scientist may thus become a philosopher *malgré lui* does not invalidate the distinction drawn between the two attitudes.

Philosophy, as so defined, may be divided into various divisions. We have the traditional distinctions between Ethics, Logic, Metaphysics, etc. But it is doubtful whether these are of more than a very limited value. What they can do is to distinguish a difference of starting-point, to classify according to the different sorts of assumptions on which we are going to begin our criticism. The presuppositions of our moral judgments, for instance, form a fairly intelligible group on which to begin. But how we are going to classify the other groups, how, for instance, we shall distinguish Logic and Metaphysics, it is difficult to see. And at best the distinctions only indicate a difference of starting-point. They cannot be held to limit our interests throughout the course of our enquiries. It is of the essence of the philosophical attitude that there shall be no restrictions on our criticism. We begin with an examination of our moral assumptions, say, but if we are going to be really philosophical we must be prepared to go on with the examination however many fresh points it raises and however far it takes us into questions that have never been considered specifically moral. And we cease to be philosophers if we attempt to put a limit on the extent of our investigations before-

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

hand. That would be the equivalent in science, of defining the subject matter of the science in terms that implied one particular view on a disputed question within the science. That is why we cannot accept such a definition as that given by Aristotle of *Metaphysics*, that it deals with being *qua* being, with the attributes that belong to reality as such or to any particular thing not in virtue of its being of a particular kind but in virtue of its being at all. That seems to be trying to define the subject by laying down beforehand the conclusions which we are to reach. For it is just the sort of question that Philosophy raises, whether any of our assumptions, and if so which, really hold of the whole of reality. We may come to the conclusion that they do, that, for instance, we must agree with Aristotle in holding that the so-called Laws of Thought, like the Law of Contradiction, are not really laws of thought or statements of the nature of our thinking, but rather laws of things, statements of the nature of the whole of reality. But it would still be illegitimate for us to state or imply this conclusion in our definition of the subject.

So much must suffice about the divisions of Philosophy. We have next to consider briefly some of the objections to, and criticisms of its value that we are accustomed to hear raised.

The first criticism, which is probably very familiar to most of us, consists in the statement that Philosophy never progresses, no conclusions are ever come to, the same old differences of opinion still appear. And we are sometimes called upon to contrast it with the triumphant progress of science, going on to ever new knowledge and increasing certainty, with a large territory already won for good behind it. About this, there are several things to say.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

In the first place, we may well doubt whether the boasted progress and certainty of Science is as obvious as is sometimes assumed. That the sciences progress, that is, that scientific views change, of course, admits of no doubt. But that very fact really seems to cast doubt on the certainty which is claimed for it. The path of the progress of the sciences is strewn with the wrecks of discarded theories. And there seems no guarantee that any of the great theories of the present day will not meet with the same fate. It would be interesting to know with accuracy how many of the theories deemed to be most certain a hundred or even fifty years ago have at least had doubts thrown on them since. And it seems that many of the leading scientists of modern times have amply recognised this. They appear at times only too anxious to assert that all their most important theories are only to be regarded in the light of working hypotheses which may have to be discarded at any moment.

However, when all allowances have been made for this, it still remains a fact that there is a fundamental difference between Philosophy and the sciences in this respect, a difference which springs from the essential natures of these two kinds of knowledge. But when rightly understood, it will be seen that this is no legitimate objection to Philosophy, that it cannot advance in the same way that the sciences can, and that, if we understand it rightly, we ought not to want it to. If we try to think of what progress in any one of the sciences must mean, we can see that it will be a very different thing in Philosophy.

To take one important point. The progress of Science, such as it is, obviously depends to a large extent on the possibility of tradition, in the literal sense, that is, of the handing on of knowledge from one person to another. Progress in a science means that there is a large field of

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

undisputed truths which do not need to be proved or discovered again. And clearly the scientist must start with taking over a large amount of ordered knowledge and received theory from his predecessors. Clearly he would never get to anything new if he had to discover and prove over again for himself all the knowledge accumulated by these predecessors. Further, in the course of his investigations, each scientist is always receiving information and getting new facts from other workers in the same field, hearing of the report of a new experiment that a professor of Physics has brought off, or a new species of water-beetle that a naturalist in North Borneo has discovered and described. Each science is built up of the contributions of thousands of separate workers. And this is possible because in Science it is to such a large extent allowable to give results without processes. Not, of course, in the case of the big theories, but in cases like those described it is not necessary for the zoologist to describe his adventures in search of the water-beetle, or for the physicist to give an account of all the failures he made before he carried the experiment through successfully. In general, and this applies to many of the more theoretical constructions, too, information can be accepted, because there is no difficulty in understanding what is meant by it, at least, when we have learnt the curious shorthand in which scientists generally express themselves. It is perfectly intelligible: the only question is whether it is true.

Now, Philosophy is not like this, indeed, from its nature it cannot be. We use other writers, it is true. But it is mainly because they are a stimulus, a help to us to think for ourselves. But they do not hand established knowledge on to us. There is no giving of information in Philosophy. The giving of information implies that

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

there shall be no difficulty in understanding the meaning. But in Philosophy the whole difficulty is understanding the meaning. That is, indeed, the work of philosophy, clearing up meanings. And that has to be done for each person by himself. We cannot get another person to examine our assumptions or criticise our categories for us, any more than we can get another person to learn to talk for us or to enjoy beauty for us. In both cases, and in Philosophy, too, we can get some help from other people. But the real difficulty and real point of the thing lies in what we do for ourselves. Hence, in Philosophy there can be practically no giving of results without processes, because it is in general only possible really to understand the result by going through the same or equivalent processes. It is as if no zoologist could understand what our friend in Borneo means by the description of his new water-beetle until he had himself been out there and followed the track along which his predecessor journeyed and discovered it again for himself. If that were necessary, we could well imagine that the progress of the science would be much delayed. And that is why there seems so little progress in Philosophy. It is a thing that each man must do for himself, so far as it is to be done at all. If a man has not got the energy or acuteness to discover a scientific fact for himself, he can generally receive it on the authority of someone who has discovered it. But the philosophical fact must be grasped by each man for himself : it is no use telling it to him, because the whole difficulty is to make him realise the meaning of what you are telling him. Obviously people do differ and always will differ in the power of understanding. And hence, as long as there is Philosophy, there will be differences of opinion about it.

“ As long as there is Philosophy : ” this is an im-

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

portant qualification. For consider the ways in which Philosophy might advance. We might make, we continually do make, assumptions on which we work which are really wrong assumptions, or at least incomplete, or inadequate, or wrongly applied. The criticism of these by the philosopher would be particularly necessary and valuable, and it might happen that by continual hammering away at it or by the work of one or two men of genius it was at last shown in a form that everyone could follow that these assumptions, as used, were wrong or unfounded. What would happen then? When this had been brought home to the minds of a sufficient number of people, we should all cease to make these assumptions. They would disappear from common usage. And that means that they would cease to be a subject for Philosophy at all. That assumption would no longer be there to criticise. So that when Philosophy does advance, it is self-destructive. It produces real results. But these results do not take their place in an ordered science which we call Philosophy. They take their place as part of our ordinary everyday thinking. When Philosophy does advance in that way, its advance is marked not, as in the case of Science, by an addition to what is included in its special field, but by the exact opposite, the removal of certain things from the province of Philosophy altogether.

That real advances of this kind do take place, seems beyond question. After all, the whole advance of the human race from the intellectual level of the primitive man must have largely consisted in the critical examination of assumptions. When the primitive man, instead of asking whether such and such a thing was taboo, began to ask, What does taboo mean, after all? What basis is there for our assuming it? Is there really such a thing? then Philosophy had begun. It was not called Philosophy,

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

and it was not taught by professors in primitive universities. But it was, none the less, exactly the same process. And it certainly reached definite results which have been accepted by men of later times. To come to more historical times. We know that the Greeks of classical times produced a large number of Sophistical tricks and puzzles which appeared to them as real difficulties. Some of them still are so to us, and need considerable thought to see through. But others are of the kind that now simply would not worry us at all, and our puzzle is to see how they ever thought them to be real difficulties. The fact is, that they only were difficulties on certain assumptions which at that time were more or less unconsciously accepted. But the work of philosophers like Plato and Aristotle revealed what these assumptions exactly were, and criticised them so effectively that they practically disappeared from thought altogether. Nobody would make them now. And so they are no longer a subject for philosophy. Other instances occur to one from the realm of political thought. The criticism of the conception of Natural Rights, already referred to, is certainly far from having done its work completely yet. But it has at least carried us so far that no serious thinker would now try to deduce his whole political creed from an abstract system of natural rights : no one would speak or think of rights in the way that the authors of the American Constitution did. If not dead, the category of rights is at least fatally injured by the philosophic criticism to which it has been subjected.

It ought, by now, to be sufficiently clear that we cannot expect or desire that Philosophy should develop in the way that the natural sciences do, but that on the other hand there is, to a certain extent, real progress in the study : only then it ceases to be Philosophy.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

Now, as a final task we must devote ourselves to answering the question that is sure to be asked : What is the use of Philosophy ? To answer the question properly would obviously require a philosophical criticism of the conception of use, an examination of the assumption at the back of our minds when we employ it. Do we mean, How will Philosophy help us to make a living ? or how will it help us to make ourselves, and perhaps others, more materially comfortable ? Or what ? But such an examination cannot be undertaken here. We must content ourselves with trying to suggest what Philosophy may do, what effect it may have on us : and leave it to each one to decide for himself of what use he considers that to be.

I think for most of us the question has the implication, ' What will the study of Philosophy enable us to do besides studying Philosophy ? ' And for the person who really takes up such study because it interests him, the question is largely irrelevant. He examines his assumptions just because he wants to get clear about them. He wants to know what they mean, and whether they are well-founded. And that for him is sufficient reason for spending time in examining them. For those who believe that knowledge is in itself one of the highest goods, and that philosophical knowledge is one of the highest forms of knowledge, the study needs no further justification. But it can probably be shown that it has beyond this, certain results which are of the highest value.

We may here be met by the objection, " Surely, on your own showing, the philosophical attitude cannot be of any assistance to us in, or make any difference to, our non-philosophical thinking. You said that the scientist, for instance, did not need to have raised all the questions or considered all the problems about the conception of

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

cause in order to be able to use it, that he could quite well find out what is the cause of what without any further reflection than he has already given to the full meaning of causation. Does not this show that, while Philosophy may be of some interest in itself, it does not affect our thinking outside its own region? And this is equivalent to saying that the familiar objection is well-founded that Philosophy is something remote from every-day life, that it does not help us to deal with all the ordinary non-philosophical problems which press so constantly upon us."

It seems that there is a grain of truth in this objection : but only a grain. The ideal scientist assumes just as much as is necessary for his purpose about the nature of causation. He is fully conscious of the exact nature of what he is assuming and of its character, as an assumption. And he refuses to dogmatise or even to reflect upon any of the further questions that might be raised about it. And so equipped, he proceeds to enquire what is the cause of what, and may be extraordinarily successful in his investigations. Similarly, I suppose, the ideal moralist will treat the great conceptions of good or right. He will not speculate about their full nature : he is content to accept them simply as practical reasons for doing some things, and not doing others. And he may possibly be so gifted with the powers of intuition or whatever it is that tells us what is right and what is wrong, that he will know in any particular case whether an action is to be done or not. Were everybody like this, it would probably be true that Philosophy would only need to be pursued by those who felt that they wanted to know more about these things ; it would be pursued for its own sake, for interest in the subject. But it would not affect the rest of our thinking. Unless, indeed,

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

the intellectual exercise of philosophical reflection did something by itself to sharpen our wits so that we became cleverer even at finding out in particular cases what was the cause of what. But perhaps the doctrine of mental gymnastics, is, temporarily at least, too much out of fashion for this to be accepted.

But the point is that the vast majority of people are not like this, and never will become like this. In fact, we may well doubt whether such an ideal scientist, for instance, ever would be produced, except by a long process of philosophical reflection (not necessarily in a degree course at a University, of course). With the moralist, perhaps it is different. We do seem to come across some people who, without any intellectual reflection of this kind, have such a swift and sure intuition of what is right and what is wrong, that they need no further thought about the meaning of right and wrong, except to know that the one is a reason for doing things and the other for abstaining from them. But such people, if they really exist, are very few. Most of us have to eke out our confused moral feelings by reflective thinking. And what sort of thinking it is ! In our ordinary thinking we are always making assumptions and arguing from them, without knowing that we are doing it, and without knowing what they are, oblivious only too often of the fact that they are in direct contradiction to other assumptions which we have been making just a little while ago. And such a mode of procedure must infect all our thinking, in which we use such assumptions, through and through with falsity. It is hardly necessary to labour this point. We have already seen instances of this, both from moral and political thinking, both in past ages and the present time. We are always making assumptions, without knowing that we are doing so, and arguing from them.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY ?

And this fact is responsible for half the error and half the misunderstanding of each other which ever takes place. It is the work of Philosophy to produce the attitude of mind which makes us detect these assumptions, drag them out into the light of day, and put them on their trial. And it is as doing this that some admixture of Philosophy in any system of education must seem to those who accept this view of it, not only valuable but essential to right thinking and the understanding of the world and of each other.

Printed by
SPOTTISWOODE, BALLANTYNE & CO. LTD.
London, Colchester & Eton

THE UNIVERSITY PRESS OF LIVERPOOL

Demy 8vo. Pp. 113. Price 5s. net. Boards

THE
HISTORICAL METHOD
IN ETHICS
AND
OTHER ESSAYS

BY

JOHN HANDYSIDE

M.A. (EDIN.), B.A. (OXON.)

Late Lecturer in Philosophy in the University of Liverpool and
Second-Lieutenant in the King's (Liverpool)
Regiment, 18th Battalion

EDITED BY

PROFESSOR ALEXANDER MAIR

University of Liverpool

WITH A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

BY

A. S. PRINGLE-PATTISON, LL.D., F.B.A.

Professor Emeritus of Logic and Metaphysics
in the University of Edinburgh

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY
Los Angeles

This book is DUE on the last date shown

THE LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES

University of California, Los Angeles



L 005 828 883 8

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



AA 000 008 280 0

