
De Philosophia

Philosophy, understood classically, may be said to be comprehensive critical reflection oriented by the existential question and therefore to include centrally both metaphysics and ethics. So understood, philosophy has the task of disclosing, at the secondary level of critical reflection and proper theory, the same truth about human existence that is always already disclosed at least implicitly on the primary level of self-understanding and life praxis.

* * * * *

Philosophy, in general, is a critically reflective self-understanding that is comprehensive in scope and generally secular rather than specifically religious in constitution. As such, it centrally includes, although it is not exhausted by, both a metaphysics and an ethics, i.e., both a theory of ultimate reality in its structure in itself and a theory of how we ought to act and what we ought to do given the structure of ultimate reality and its meaning for us.

* * * * *

Philosophy is to be understood as the comprehensive critical reflection constituted by asking about human existence simply as such. Thus it belongs to philosophy that it should consist, in one aspect, in an analysis of meaning and thus of the different *kinds* of meaning involved in understanding ourselves and leading our lives through all the forms of culture, religious as well as secular.

But philosophy is more than analysis of meaning, and in its other main aspect, it has the task of critically validating all the different answers to the existential question, implicit as well as explicit, so as to formulate its own constructive answer to this question—indirectly, at the level of critical reflection and proper theory and solely on the basis of common human experience and reason. If the claim of any such answer to be true is valid, it can only be because

what it represents as the truth about human existence is the same truth that philosophy, also, is responsible for telling.

* * * * *

Philosophy is a form of critical reflection oriented by the existential question, which is to say, the most vital of our human questions, which we all ask about the meaning of our lives in their ultimate setting as parts of the encompassing whole. Thus, in asking this existential question, we ask, at one and the same time, about two things: about the meaning of ultimate reality for us; and about our authentic self-understanding, or understanding of human existence.

Philosophy is *constituted*, however, as distinct from being oriented, not by the existential question, any more than by any of our other vital questions, but by certain *theoretical* questions—specifically, the two theoretical questions about the meaning of our various self-understandings and life-praxes and about the validity of the claims to validity that are expressed or implied by them.

Therefore, philosophy may be defined succinctly as critically reflective self-understanding—or, in more traditional terms, as the love of wisdom, in the sense of the search for, or the critical reflection directed toward, authentic self-understanding.

As such, philosophy necessarily has two aspects or tasks that are as distinct as they are inseparable. It has, first, a purely analytic aspect or task, which consists in explicating the necessary conditions of the possibility, or, if you will, the “criteria,” not only of the various regions of human life-praxis and culture, but also of human existence, and thus of self-understanding and life-praxis as such, including the strictly necessary conditions of the possibility of anything whatever. Thus, in this first, purely analytic aspect or task, philosophy comprises not only all of the various peripheral philosophical disciplines, i.e., the various philosophies *of*. . . , law, science, religion, art, and so on, but also the

central philosophical disciplines of metaphysics and ethics. But philosophy also has a second, existential aspect or task, which consists in critically validating—on the basis of its purely formal analysis of meaning and of all the different kinds of meaning—all answers to the existential question, religious and theological as well as philosophical, and then constructing the answer to this question warranted by appeal solely to our common human experience and reason. If, in this second aspect or task, philosophy perforce acts as a control on all religious and theological answers to the existential question, the converse statement is just as true: religion and theology also act as a control on philosophy's answers to the same question.

* * * * *

The question orienting philosophy is the most vital of our vital questions and may be called "the existential question." This is the question we human beings seem universally engaged in somehow asking and answering about the meaning of our own existence in its ultimate setting as part of the encompassing whole.

On closer analysis, this existential question, although a single question, has two closely related and yet clearly distinguishable aspects. In one aspect, it asks about the ultimate reality of our existence with others as parts of the whole encompassing us. And this aspect may be distinguished as its *metaphysical* aspect, because, although it is distinct from the proper question of metaphysics in asking about this ultimate reality concretely, in its meaning for us, rather than abstractly, in its structure in itself, the two questions are nonetheless closely related, in that any answer to either of them has definite implications for how the other is to be answered if it is to be ^{answered} consistently.

In its other aspect, which may be distinguished as *moral*, the existential question asks about how we are to understand ourselves authentically, or realistically, in accordance with the ultimate reality of our existence. Thus, while it is distinct from the proper question of morality in asking about our self-

understanding, rather than about our action otherwise—how we are to act and what we are to do—the two questions, once again, are nonetheless closely related, because the answer given to one of them sets definite limits to how we have to answer the other if we are to avoid self-contradiction.

It is the existential question, thus understood, that orients philosophy as a distinctive form of critical reflection. Precisely because it is "critical," however, philosophy is *constituted* as such, not by the existential question that orients it, but only by the corresponding way of asking the properly theoretical questions about meaning and validity—about the meaning of any and all answers to the existential question and about the validity of their claim to express the truth about human existence.

This means, among other things, that the critical interpretation proper to philosophy is "critical *existentialist* interpretation," which is to say, the way of critically interpreting oriented by the existential question about the meaning of our existence and therefore constituted by the corresponding way of asking theoretically about meaning.

* * * * *

The existential question by which philosophy is oriented is the question of the meaning of ultimate reality for us. This means, first of all, that the reality about which it asks is the ultimate reality of our own existence in relation to others and the whole. This reality is properly said to be "ultimate" on the assumption that, by the term "reality" used without qualification, we mean, in William James's words, "what we in some way find ourselves obliged to take account of." Clearly, whatever else we may or may not find ourselves obliged to take account of, we can never fail to take account somehow of ourselves, others, and the whole to which we all belong. In this sense, the threefold reality of our existence simply as such is the ultimate reality that we all have to allow for in understanding ourselves and leading our own individual lives. But if this reality is what the existential question asks about, the second thing to note is how it

does this—namely, by asking about this reality, not in its structure in itself, but in its meaning for us. This means that in asking about ultimate reality, the existential question asks, at one and the same time, about our authentic self-understanding, about the understanding of ourselves in relation to others and the whole that is appropriate to, or authorized by, this ultimate reality itself. Thus, by its very nature, the existential question is a single question having two closely related and yet clearly distinguishable aspects—in one of which, its *metaphysical* aspect, it asks about the ultimate reality of our own existence in relation to others and the whole; in the other of which, its *moral* aspect, it asks about our authentic self-understanding.

This means that, by the very nature of the existential question, there are two main aspects to the procedures appropriate to determining the truth of any and all specific answers to it. Broadly speaking, we may say that a specific answer is true insofar as it so responds to the question as to solve the problem that any answer to it purports to solve—the problem, namely, of making sense somehow of our basic faith in the meaning of life, given the facts of life as we actually experience it. But whether, or to what extent, a specific answer is capable of doing this can be determined only by verifying its necessary implications, moral as well as metaphysical. If it is true, its implications also must be true, and unless they can be verified by procedures appropriate to moral and metaphysical claims respectively, it cannot be verified, either.

To recognize this is to understand the difficulties of validating claims to existential truth. As compared with science and technology, where there is extensive agreement concerning appropriate procedures of verification, morality and metaphysics are both profoundly controversial fields of inquiry, even at the level of the principles and procedures by which true claims are to be distinguished from false. In fact, there is not even agreement about the proper analysis of metaphysical and moral utterances, which some philosophers construe as having a noncognitive kind of meaning that obviates even asking about their truth or falsity. Small wonder, then, that one of the standing temptations of all who make existential claims is to try to find some way of

avoiding the difficulties of critically validating them, whether by simply deducing their truth from some alleged authority or by construing them as matters of sheer faith, whose truth supposedly cannot and need not be validated. But only a little reflection confirms the futility of all such moves, especially in a situation such as ours today, in which the plurality of existential claims is an ever-present fact of life. Unless one is prepared to allow that one's claim to existential truth is something very different from the kind of cognitive claim that it gives every appearance of being, one is left either with reneging on the promise implied in making the claim or with critically validating it in a non-question-begging way by the only procedures appropriate to doing so. Consequently, there is no avoiding the difficulties of validating existential claims if one is to be responsible in making them as claims to truth. By the very logic of such claims, the only way to validate them is to verify their necessary implications both metaphysical and moral by the same procedures that would be appropriate for validating any other claims of the same logical type.

This is no to say that any specific answer to the existential question can be deduced simply from a true metaphysics and a true ethics, taken either singly or together. Any such answer is more than a certain understanding of existence insofar as it is also the "cultural system," primary or secondary, through which that understanding is explicitly represented as true. Therefore, while the truth of its understanding, insofar as it is true, must indeed be implied by a true metaphysics and a true ethics, it itself as a particular way of conceiving and symbolizing its understanding is irreducibly historical. As such, it is simply given—a datum for metaphysical and moral reflection rather than a deduction from them. And this means that validating its claim to truth also always involves certain properly historical and hermeneutical procedures.

Nor is it to be supposed that one must first have a true metaphysics and a true ethics before one can determine whether or not a specific existential answer is true. To argue that determining the truth of such an answer logically requires verifying its necessary implications for both belief and action does not imply that one must already be in possession of metaphysical and moral truth when one

undertakes to verify them. On the contrary, it is entirely possible that in following the procedures requisite to their verification, one will not only determine the truth of the answer implying them, but will also determine the falsity of a metaphysics or an ethics that one previously took to be true .