

What is philosophy?

One interesting, if not sharply clear and/or consistent, answer is R. G. Collingwood's.

It is set forth most directly and explicitly in his brief essay, "Religion, Science, and Philosophy" (in *Faith & Reason*: 89-92). Actually, the topic of this essay is the "quarrel between religion and science," the source of which, Collingwood says, is that "religion has in the past tried to usurp, in certain respects, the place of science, and science has retaliated, in more recent times, by trying to usurp the place of religion" (89). This quarrel, he argues, "is based on sheer confusion of thought, first perhaps arising in the heads of the champions of religion, and now chiefly observable among the champions of science" (90). "[T]he business of good science is to be scientific, and the business of good religion is to be religious; and to recommend a religion because it is in accordance with, or verified by, or derived from science is just as silly as to recommend a scientific theory because it is consecrated by religion. In both cases, the proposed criterion is wildly irrelevant" (90). "But people never make mistakes without a reason; and in this case the reason is that they have not clearly thought out the relation of religion on the one hand, and of science on the other, to that central and most obscure activity of the human mind which is called philosophy." And then the sentence: "Philosophy is the knowledge of ultimate reality" (91). Both religion and science, Collingwood continues,

are just enough concerned with ultimate reality to facilitate a hasty identification of both with philosophy and therefore with each other. And if they are both identical with philosophy and therefore with each other, it follows that there must be war to the knife between them, because they are trying to do the same work and trying to do it with different tools, in different ways, with inevitably different results. Certainly the God of religion is ultimate reality; but in religion we seek not to grasp this reality in an act of knowledge, but to achieve a living unity with it, consciously adoring it and enjoying it in the act of adoration. And certainly, the Nature of science is ultimate reality; but in science we are analyzing it, dissecting it into features each of which is by itself an abstraction, a fiction of scientific understanding. The living unity of the object of religion is in science dismembered and scattered broadcast into an infinity of particles. Now both these methods of approaching the

ultimate reality are possible and, so far as they go, valid; more, they are both necessary; and without practicing them both, no human mind can approach reality at all. But there is something else we can do to reality, something that is neither religion nor science but philosophy: we can know it, not in its fragments, as the scientist knows, but in its wholeness; yet not living in its wholeness only as we do in religion, but knowing ourselves as living in it and it as living in ourselves. And in this knowledge, which is philosophy, we see for the first time that religion is not philosophy and that science is not philosophy, but that each is a necessary part of that life which, when it comes to reflect upon itself, recognizes itself as the life of philosophy (91).

There are things about this passage that I, at any rate, find unclear. For one thing, if anything is clear, it's that Collingwood is at pains to distinguish science and religion from one another by distinguishing them both from philosophy, with which they have too easily been identified. But, then, he proceeds to conclude that science and religion are each "a necessary part" of the life that, becoming reflective, recognizes itself as "the life of philosophy." And with this, he seems to come very close indeed to reidentifying the very things he evidently wants to distinguish! Or, again, I am not at all clear about just why he understands science to differ from philosophy. Is it because, unlike philosophy, which knows ultimate reality "in its wholeness," science knows it only "in its fragments"? Or is it (also) because, whereas philosophy "knows" ultimate reality, science doesn't "know" it at all, but "merely analyzes" it, "dissecting it into features each of which is by itself an abstraction, a fiction of scientific understanding"—as he seems to conclude by emphasizing (92)?

But, regardless of these and some other unclarities and/or inconsistencies—not to mention difficulties in reconciling this essay with the argument of *Faith and Reason*, where philosophy plays no role at all, and its knowing ultimate reality in its wholeness is in effect completely ruled out by limiting "reason," of which philosophy, presumably, is a form, solely to knowledge of the "finite," or of "fragments"!—I think Collingwood can be fairly claimed as supporting an answer to the question not all that unlike my own.

This is so, at any rate, with the provision that "philosophy," as Collingwood uses it is, for all practical purposes, what I mean, more specifically, by "metaphysics." Thus, on his view, as on mine, science and metaphysics are alike in both being matters of "knowledge" and in both having to do, in their ways, with "ultimate reality." They differ, however, because, whereas metaphysics is knowledge of ultimate reality as a whole, or "in its wholeness," science is knowledge of ultimate reality in its parts, or "in its fragments." On the other hand, religion and metaphysics are alike, and both different from science, in being concerned, in their ways, with ultimate reality as a whole. But whereas religion is, as I would say, "existential" in being concerned with achieving a living unity with ultimate reality as a whole, and thus with its meaning for us, metaphysics, like science, is "intellectual" in its concern with grasping ultimate reality in an act of knowledge, and thus with the structure of ultimate reality in itself.

My most significant difference from Collingwood, probably, is that I am (I trust!) a good deal clearer and more consistent than he is in recognizing the important difference between the "empirical" and the "existential" aspects of human experience—and in the corresponding differences it makes for between religion, science, and philosophy, or metaphysics. The distinction he makes, and seems concerned to emphasize, however inconsistently, between philosophy's "knowing" ultimate reality and science's "merely analyzing" it is perhaps the closest he comes to touching on this difference—and these differences. On the other hand, he doesn't seem to feel the need that I feel to insist that the knowledge philosophy may fairly claim to have of ultimate reality insofar as it is metaphysics is, in its own way, as "abstract" as that of science, even if the structure it seeks to know, or "analyze," is that revealed by our existential experience, as distinct from the structures accessible through analysis of our empirical experience.

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