

2 Philosophy as Rational Systematization

I. PHILOSOPHY AS A VENTURE IN RATIONAL ENQUIRY

The definitive mission of philosophy is to provide a basis for understanding the world and our place within it as intelligent agents – with ‘the world’ understood comprehensively to encompass the realms of nature, culture, and artifice. The aim of the enterprise is to provide us with cognitive orientation for conducting our intellectual and practical affairs. And the data of philosophy by whose means this project must be managed include alike the observation-based science of reality, the imaginable realm of speculative possibility, and the normative manifold of evaluation. Given this massive mandate, the prime flaw of philosophizing is a narrowness of vision. Granted the issues are complex and specialization becomes necessary. But its cultivation is never sufficient because the details must always be fitted into a comprehensive whole.

Philosophy is a potentially many-sided enterprise. Some philosophers want to energize action, some to edify aspiration, some to clarify thinking, some to enhance knowledge, some to improve living. Some are concerned primarily for the body, some for the intellect, some for the spirit. But common to the affective pursuit of all these objectives is understanding – understanding ourselves, the world we live in, and the linkage between the two.

Philosophy is a venture in question-resolution – a cognitive enterprise addressing the traditional ‘big questions’ about ourselves and our place in the world’s scheme of things. At the centre of its concern lie the traditional issues of correct believing, appropriate valuing, right acting, good living, and the like, that have formed the core of the subject since its inception in classical antiquity.

The development of understanding is a matter of rational enquiry, a cognitive enterprise subject to the usual ground rules of cognitive and practical rationality.¹ The discipline seeks to bring rational order, system, and intelligibility to the often confusing diversity of our cognitive affairs enabling us to find our way about in the world in a practically effective and cognitively satisfying way. Philosophy is indeed a venture in theorizing, but one whose rationale is eminently practical. A rational animal that has to make its evolutionary way in the world by its wits has a deep-rooted demand for speculative reason. It is rooted in human curiosity – in the ‘fact of life’ that we have questions and feel a need to obtain cognitively satisfying answers to them.

Philosophizing in the classical manner – exploiting the available indications of experience to answer those big questions on the agenda of traditional philosophy – is predicated on the use of reason to do the best we can to align our cognitive commitments with the substance of our experience. In this sense, philosophizing involves an act of faith: when we draw on our experience to answer our questions we have to proceed in the tentative hope that the best we can do is good enough, at any rate for our immediate purposes.

In the final analysis there is no alternative to philosophizing as long as we remain in the province of reason. The salient point was already well put by Aristotle: ‘[Even if we join those who believe that philosophizing is not possible] in this case too we are obliged to inquire how it is possible for there to be no Philosophy; and then, in inquiring, we philosophize, for rational inquiry is the essence of Philosophy’ (Aristotle 1955: vii).² To those who are prepared simply to abandon philosophy, to withdraw from the whole project of trying to make sense of things, we can have little to say. (How can one reason with those who deny the pointfulness and propriety of reasoning?) But with those who *argue* for its abandonment we can do something – once we have enrolled them in the community as fellow theorists with a position of their own. F. H. Bradley hit the nail on the head: ‘The man who is ready to prove that metaphysical knowledge is impossible ... is a brother metaphysician with a rival theory of first principles’ (Bradley 1897: 1). One can abandon philosophy, but one cannot *advocate* its abandonment through rational argumentation without philosophizing.

2. THE DATA OF PHILOSOPHY

In perusing a philosophical discussion, the first question that should figure in the reader's mind is: 'What problem is this discussion endeavouring to solve – what questions is it trying to answer?' And then two others fall naturally into place, namely 'What sort of answer is being offered to us?' and 'Does this way of dealing with the issue make good sense, or does it pose more difficulties than it resolves?'

In philosophizing we strive for rational coherence in achieving answers to our questions. But how is one to proceed in this venture? It is clear that here, as in other branches of enquiry, we must begin with data.

Neither individually nor collectively do we humans begin our cognitive quest empty handed, equipped with only a blank tablet. Be it as single individuals or as entire generations, we always begin with a diversified cognitive heritage, falling heir to that great mass of information and misinformation afforded by the 'knowledge' of our predecessors – or those among them to whom we choose to listen. What William James called our 'funded experience' of the world's ways – of its nature and our place within it – constitute the *data* at philosophy's disposal in its endeavour to accomplish its question-resolving work. These specifically include:

- common-sense beliefs, common knowledge, and what have been 'the ordinary convictions of the plain man' since time immemorial;
- the facts (or purported facts) afforded by the science of the day; the views of well-informed 'experts' and 'authorities';
- the lessons we derive from our dealings with the world in everyday life;
- the received opinions that constitute the worldview of the day; views that accord with the 'spirit of the times' and the ambient convictions of one's cultural context;
- tradition, inherited lore, and ancestral wisdom (including religious tradition);
- the 'teachings of history' as best we can discern them.

There is no clear limit to the scope of philosophy's potentially useful data. The lessons of human experience in all of its cognitive dimensions afford the materials of philosophy. No plausible source

of information about how matters stand in the world fails to bring grist to the mill. The whole range of the (purportedly) established 'facts of experience' furnishes the extra-philosophical inputs for our philosophizing – the potentially usable materials, as it were, for our philosophical reflections.

And all of these data have much to be said for them: common sense, tradition, general belief, and plausible prior theorizing – the sum total of the different sectors of 'our experience' in the widest sense of the term. They all merit consideration: all exert some degree of cognitive pressure in having a claim upon us. Yet while those data deserve respect they do not deserve acceptance. And they certainly do not constitute established knowledge. There is nothing sacred and sacrosanct about them. For, taken as a whole, the data are too much for tenability – collectively they generally run into conflicts and contradictions. The long and short of it is that the data of philosophy constitute a plethora of fact (or purported fact) so ample as to threaten to sink any ship that carries so heavy a cargo. The constraint they put upon us is thus not peremptory and absolute – they do not represent certainties to which we must cling at all costs. Even the plainest of 'plain facts' can be questioned, as indeed some of them must be, since in the aggregate they are collectively inconsistent. And so for the philosopher, nothing is absolutely sacred. The difficulty is – and always has been – that the data of philosophy afford an embarrassment of riches. They engender a situation of cognitive overcommitment within which inconsistencies arise. For they are not only manifold and diversified but invariably yield discordant results. And here philosophy finds its work cut out for it.

In philosophy, we cannot accept all those 'givens' as certified facts that must be endorsed wholly and unqualifiedly. Every datum is defeasible – anything might in the final analysis have to be abandoned, whatever its source: science, common sense, common knowledge, the whole lot. In view of such tensions those data cannot be viewed as truths but only as plausibilities. They are merely suggestive and indicative in their bearing and significance rather than decisive. Nothing about them is immune to criticism and possible rejection; everything is potentially at risk. One insightful commentator has affirmed that: 'No philosophical, or any other, theory can provide a view which violates common sense and remain logically consistent.'

For the truth of common sense is assumed by all theories ... This necessity to conform to common sense establishes a constraint upon the interpretations philosophical theories can offer' (Kekes 1980: 196). But this is very problematic. The philosophical landscape is littered with theories that tread common sense underfoot. There are no sacred cows in philosophy – common sense least of all. As philosophy goes about its work of rendering our beliefs systemically coherent, something to which we are deeply attached will have to give, and we can never say at the outset where the blow will or will not fall. Systemic considerations at the global level may in the end lead to difficulties at any particular point.

For these data do indeed all have some degree of merit and, given our cognitive situation, it would be very convenient if they turned out to be true. But this is unhappily not the case, for they all too often give conflicting indications. And yet philosophy cannot simply turn its back on these data without further ado. Its methodology must be one of damage control and salvage. For as regards those data, it should always be our goal to save as much as we coherently can.

3. PHILOSOPHY CANNOT AVOID SPECULATION

The use of data in philosophy is necessary and unavoidable. But it is not sufficient because for philosophical purposes these data are merely suggestive and inconclusive. They invariably fall short of providing answers to our questions. For those 'big questions' are large and far-reaching while those data are particularized, limited, and circumscribed in their bearing. They lie within the horizons of our experience, while the questions we propose to settle by their means are large and experience transcending in scope. Even as in natural science observation cannot *demonstrate* a theory but only *evidentiate* it, so in philosophy our data can do no more. They need to be extended and transcended – supplemented by speculative conjecture.

But of course those philosophical conjectures should not be unfounded and arbitrary. Our claims must coordinate with those data in a rationally harmonious way. And this is where systematization comes into it. For the reality of it is that if our philosophizing is to proceed in a cogent and convincing way, these issue-resolving

speculations must achieve a condition of an optimally best-fit with the data at our disposal.

4. PHILOSOPHY PIVOTS ON RATIONAL SYSTEMATIZATION

That the prospect and promise of coherentism as a cognitive methodology is nowhere more clearly manifest than in philosophy itself has been – or should have been – reasonably clear ever since Kant's critical rejection of Spinoza's sequential axiomatic *more geometrico* reasoning in philosophy.³ For in philosophy there is and can be nothing that is basic, axiomatic, self-evident, and exempt from question. We have no choice but to begin here with data whose status is largely tentative and presumptive. Charles Sanders Peirce rightly noted this aspect of network systematization when he wrote:

Philosophy ought to imitate the successful sciences in its methods, so far as to proceed only from tangible premisses which can be subjected to careful scrutiny, and to trust rather to the multitude and variety of its arguments than to the conclusiveness of any one. Its reasoning should not form a chain which is no stronger than its weakest link, but a cable whose fibers may be ever so slender, provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected.

(CP5: 265)⁴

In philosophy, our acceptance policy is based on considerations of overall best-fit, where the fit at issue is one of consonance and coordination with our prevailing commitments.

On such an approach we begin with a philosophical question, say: 'Are there ever cogent excuses for doing something morally wrong?' We then make a systematic canvas of the range of plausibly available answers (say 'never', 'rarely', 'often'). And thereupon we examine what argumentative pros and cons can be produced for each of the alternatives. Next, we weigh out, case by case, how smoothly the ramifications and implications of the reasons (pro and con) that are involved in each case fit into the overall indications of the data – of that which we otherwise know and believe – assessing what sort of discord and dissonance each of them would engender. Our philosophy thus does not in general ignore or suspend the cognitive

materials obtained on other fronts (e.g., a science or everyday life experience). Rather it tries to accomplish its cognitive work with maximal overall utilization of and minimal overall disruption to the relevant information that our other more familiar cognitive resources provide.

Philosophers generally pursue their mission of grappling with those traditional 'big questions' regarding ourselves, the world, and our place within its scheme of things by means of what is perhaps best characterized as *rational conjecture*. Conjecture comes into it because – ironically – those questions arise most pressingly where the available information does not suffice – where they are no straightforwardly available answers in terms of what has already been established.

Rational conjecture based on systematic considerations is the key method of philosophical enquiry, affording our best hope for obtaining promising answers to the questions that confront us. Our philosophical view of reality's nature is thus taken to emerge as an intellectual product achieved under the control of the idea that systematicity is a regulative principle for our theorizing. Here, evidentiality and systematicity are inextricably correlative. Philosophizing is a matter of the systematizing of question-resolving conjecture and the products of 'experience' – in the broadest sense of this term. The object of the exercise is to determine the best candidates among competing alternatives – searching for that resolution for which, on balance, the strongest overall case can be made out. And seeing that a fundamentally reductive approach typifies the procedure of philosophy, it is not 'the uniquely correct answer' but 'the least problematic, most defensible position' that we can hope to secure. The appropriate goal is the problem resolution that fits most smoothly and harmoniously within our overall commitment to the manifold 'data' at stake in these philosophical matters.

What is needed here is a methodology of enquiry that is *ampliative* in C. S. Peirce's sense of underwriting contentions whose assertoric content goes beyond the evidence in hand.⁵ We need to do the very best we can to achieve resolutions that transcend accreted experience and outrun the reach of the information already at our disposal. It thus becomes necessary to have a plausible means for obtaining the best available, the 'rationally optimal', answers to

our information-in-hand-transcending questions about how matters stand in the world. And experience-based conjecture – theorizing if you will – is the most promising available instrument for question-resolution in the face of imperfect information. It is a tool for use by finite intelligences, providing them not with the best *possible* answer in some rarified sense of this term, but with the best *available* answer, the putative best that one can manage to secure in the actually existing conditions in which we do and must conduct our epistemic labours.

Here as elsewhere there is no categorical assurance that the ‘best available’ answers that we obtain through best-fit systematization are in fact correct. Nevertheless, the ‘best available’ answer at issue here is intended in a rather strong sense. We want not just an ‘answer’ of some sort but a viable and acceptable answer – one to whose tenability we are willing to commit ourselves. The rational conjecture at issue is not to be a matter of *mere guesswork*, but one of *responsible estimation* in a strict sense of the term. It is not *just* an estimate of the true answer that we want but an estimate that is sensible and defensible: *tenable*, in short. We may need to resort to more information than is actually given, but we do not want to make it up ‘out of thin air’. The provision of reasonable warrant for rational assurance is the object of the enterprise.

In the information-deficient, enthymematic circumstances that prevail when philosophical questions must be resolved in the face of evidential underdetermination, we have and can have no logically airtight *guarantees*. We must recognize that there is no prospect of assessing the truth – or presumptive truth – of philosophical claims apart from using our imperfect mechanisms of enquiry and systematization. And here it is *estimation* that affords the best means for doing the job. We are not – and presumably will never be – in a position to stake a totally secure claim to the definitive truth regarding those great issues of philosophical interest. But we certainly can – and indeed must – do the best we can to achieve a reasonable *estimate* of the truth.

Philosophizing thus consists in a rational rebuilding of the structure of our beliefs in the effort to do what we can to erect a solid and secure edifice out of the ill-assorted contents placed at our disposal by our initial restrictions to belief. On this approach, the validation of an item of knowledge – the rationalization of its

inclusion alongside others within ‘the body of our knowledge’ – proceeds by way of exhibiting its interrelationships with the rest: they must all be linked together in a connected, mutually supportive way (rather than having the form of an inferential structure built up upon a footing of rock-bottom axioms).

5. A NEED FOR THE ‘LARGER VIEW’

In philosophy, as in various other cognitive domains, two very different approaches to problem-solving can be implemented. The first is a narrower, localist course of opting for the least risky – and thus the least informative – answer to our immediate questions that can accommodate the putative facts of the case (minimalism). The second is the more ambitious course of opting for the globally most adequate – and thus most risky – among the ‘available’ answers that is compatible with the facts (maximalism).

Against this background, various schools of epistemic minimalism go about posting signposts that put all risk of engaging larger issues OFF LIMITS. Such theorists turn Occam’s razor into Robespierre’s guillotine. Their tumbrels carry off a wide variety of victims:

- *sets* in the philosophy of mathematics;
- *abstracta* in semantics;
- *unobservable entities* in the philosophy of physics;
- *dispositional theses* in the philosophy of language;
- *obligations* that reach beyond the requisites of prudence in moral theory, etc. etc.

Reluctant to venture beyond the immediate, local, case-specific requisites of the first-order agenda epistemological demands, the philosophical minimalist is content to accept incomprehension on the larger issues. All too often, observability alone is the standard of reality and causal and explanatory questions are ruled out. Why do phenomena have the character we observe? Don’t ask. What accounts for the lawfulness of their interrelationships? Don’t ask! Why are they uniform for different observers? Don’t ask! What of factual claims that go beyond observability? Throw them out! What about claims that transcend the prospect of decisive verification? Eject them.

But such an approach is not without its problems. The fact is that, in philosophy, as elsewhere, minimalism proves to be a very questionable bargain. Here – as elsewhere – some investment in added capacity is generally required for extra capability. In philosophy, as in life, the economies of a minimalism are unwise practices that frequently produce long-term waste.

To be sure, one can readily imagine a narrowly focused specialist who is prepared to say something like this:

As far as I am concerned, the limits of my core interests are the limits of my world. Having worked out what I see as the optimal solution for the local issues of my chosen field of primary specialization, I simply don't care about its ramifications anywhere else. Local optimization is all that concerns me – global implications and ramifications are a matter of indifference to me.

One can readily *imagine* someone having this attitude. But certainly one cannot *approve* of it. For it imports into philosophy a fanaticism and narrow-minded unconcern for wider ramifications that sensible people reject in virtually every other context.

The systematic nature of philosophy-as-a-whole has far-reaching implications for the proper cultivation of the discipline. In particular, it means that we should not – nay cannot – rest satisfied with isolated piecemeal, with single pieces of doctrine whose merits do not extend beyond immediate adequacy in a local problem area. For in philosophizing, as in economic matters, externalities may come into play. A seemingly elegant solution to the difficulties posed by one problem may carry in its wake hopeless difficulties for the satisfactory resolution of some other problem. Its ramifications in another, seemingly remote, area may require one to pay an unacceptable price for the neat resolution of a problem in a given domain. One may, for example, feel compelled to be forced into accepting an epistemology that one does not much like for itself (say, value intuitionism) in the interests of possibilizing an ethical position (here moral objectivity) that one deems essential.

Philosophizing is, in this regard, akin to cognitive engineering. For the sensible philosopher, like the sensible engineer, must proceed holistically with a view to the *overall* implications of his or her particular ventures in problem solving. An engineer who allows one particular desideratum (cost, safety, fuel economy, repair infrequency, or the like) to dominate his or her thinking, to the

exclusion of all else, would not produce a viable product, but an absurdity. We would certainly laugh at someone who offered to build us a supersafe car – but one that would go only two miles per hour. Surely a similar derision is deserved by the sceptic who offers to build us a supersafe, error-excluding epistemology that would not, however, allow us to maintain a line of distinction between science and pseudoscience. In philosophy as in economics, engineering, and medicine we cannot avoid concern for externalities and have to come to grips with incidental interactions and side-effects. In chess, we cannot play rooks independently of what we do with bishops; in medicine, we cannot treat one organ independently of the implications for others; in political economy, we cannot design policies for one sector without concerning ourselves with their impact upon the rest. In almost any problem-solving context we do well to keep all our commitments in reasonable coordination overall. Why should philosophy be any different?

A philosopher who achieves her proximate, localized ends at the cost of off-loading difficulties onto other sectors of the wider domain is simply not doing an adequate job. With rationally cogent philosophizing, it is not local minimalism but global optimalism that is required. To be acceptable, a philosophical problem-solution must form an integral part of a wider doctrine that makes acceptably good sense overall. Here only systemic, holistically attuned positions can yield truly satisfactory solutions – solutions that do not involve undue externalities for the larger scheme of things.⁶

6. PHILOSOPHICAL DISAGREEMENT IS UNAVOIDABLE

The preceding discussion has argued that philosophizing is a matter of endeavouring to answer the subject's 'big questions' on the basis of considerations of best-fit harmonization with the data of experience. But if this – or anything like it – is indeed so, then it must be acknowledged and accepted that there is bound to be doctrinal disagreement in this field. For the corpus of experience of different individuals is not just likely but virtually certain to differ on the basis of their exposure to historical, cultural, and circumstantial developments. Here there can be no 'one size fits all' resolution. And where evidentiating considerations differ it is inevitable that the conclusions that can rationally be based upon them must do so as well.

The crucial fact here is that different people living in different conditions are bound to differ in regard to what their experience affords them. And even where they have many experiences in common, they can still differ in their view of significance and priority: what things are central or peripheral, what are significant or insignificant, and the like. And this circumstance will of course orientate them very differently in their approach to the data.

But this view of the matter is not an indifferent relativism. It is not a matter of taste or personal inclination which sorts of consideration are significant or insignificant, central or peripheral, inductive or incidental, and so on. Rather the crux is – or should be – a matter of rational assessment on the basis of the burden of available experience. So what we have is a rationally grounded experimental contextualism where, in philosophy as in science, a kind of empiricism obtains. For here too it is experience in the widest sense of the term that can and should determine the considerations by whose means we resolve the questions that concern us.⁷

A tenable philosophy must be a systematically dovetailed whole. For in the end the range of our philosophical concern is a network where everything is systematically interconnected with everything else.

NOTES

- 1 There are, of course, very different ways of *doing* philosophy even as there are different ways of cooking food. But the enterprise itself is characterized by its defining objective: if one isn't doing that sort of thing, then one isn't pursuing it. (Sewing is not cooking food, nor is journalism philosophy.)
- 2 For the text, see (Aristotle 1955: 28). But see also (Chroust 1969: 48–50).
- 3 Kant 1933: see the section on 'The Architectonic of Pure Reason'.
- 4 Following the standard reference system to Peirce, *Collected Papers*.
- 5 For Charles Sanders Peirce, 'ampliative' reasoning is synthetic in that its conclusion goes beyond ('transcends') the information stipulated in the given premises (i.e., cannot be derived from them by logical processes of deduction alone), so that it 'follows' from them only inconclusively (cf. CP2: 680, *et passim*).
- 6 Some of these themes are also discussed in (Rescher 1994: Ch. 2).
- 7 The author's position on metaphilosophy is developed in a series of books published over many years: (Rescher 1985, 2000, 2006a, 2006b).