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1.1 What is philosophy?

The question ‘What is philosophy?’, unlike the apparently similar questions ‘What is history?’ and ‘What is science?’, does not admit of a straightforward answer. Indeed it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say, paradoxically, that the question is itself a philosophical one – in so far as different philosophers tend to have different conceptions as to the nature of their chosen discipline. Perhaps the best way of finding out what the various answers are is to plunge straight in and to ‘do’ philosophy by studying this book. Nevertheless, we shall first provide you with a number of general accounts which will help you to find your bearings before you set out on your journey of intellectual discovery.

(1) The word ‘philosophy’ is derived from two Greek words, *philos* (‘lover’) and *sophia* (‘wisdom’). The first thinker to describe himself as a philosopher may well have been Pythagoras (born c. 570 BC), but it is with Plato (born c. 428 BC) that the term in its original and primary sense is most closely identified. For him wisdom is a condition or state which gifted individuals seek to attain as a result of many years of education culminating in ‘dialectic’. Having achieved wisdom they are enabled to apprehend Truth or Reality and thereby to acquire virtue – the knowledge of how to live rightly. Philosophy thus comes to be **the study of ultimate reality**, the fundamental principles of existence which in some sense both unify and transcend the insights offered us through both religious faith and the scientific knowledge we gain as a result of observation and experiment.

The possibility that such ‘ultimate’ knowledge might be achieved through the exercise of pure reason was the motivation which lay behind attempts made by many later philosophers to construct all-embracing metaphysical systems. Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel and Bradley are good examples of this kind of thinker. A major criticism which has been levelled against these representatives of ‘**rationalist**’ and ‘**idealist**’ traditions is that they ignore or pay insufficient attention to the claims of sense-experience. In any case, it is argued, ‘pure’ reason on its own can give us no knowledge of the world. Accordingly we find a number of major philosophers – Locke, Berkeley and Hume, and later still Russell and Ayer, to name but a few – starting out not from pure reason but from the data of our everyday senses. (This is not to say, of course, that the philosophical premises of such ‘**empiricist**’ thinkers do not involve any metaphysical presuppositions of their own.) A recognition of the legitimate claims of both reason and experience was the achievement of the eminent eighteenth century German philosopher, Kant: for him philosophy was essentially **an investigation into the preconditions**

and limits of human knowledge. He rejected rationalist metaphysics yet argued against any philosophy which failed to take account of the role played by reason in giving sense-experience its structure and coherence.

(2) P.F. Strawson has made a fruitful distinction between 'descriptive' metaphysics, which 'describes the actual structure of our thought about the world', and 'revisionary' metaphysics, which is 'concerned to produce a better structure'. Descartes, Leibniz and Berkeley, he says, are revisionary, while Aristotle and Kant are descriptive. The philosophy of Hume is in part descriptive and in part revisionary. Strawson is to some extent influenced by Kant, but his writings also exhibit an important characteristic of much twentieth century British philosophy: the turning away from any attempt to discover fundamental features of the 'world' or 'reality' toward **a systematic investigation of the language** we use to describe it. Associated with this concern for language, two contrasting approaches are discernible: there are those who set out to discover a 'perfect' language which will accurately 'picture' the world, while other philosophers seek to uncover and describe the *variety* of ways in which, they believe, language may be used for different purposes – each being entirely appropriate within its own sphere and conforming to its own criteria. The movement from the first approach to the second is identified particularly with Ludwig Wittgenstein. Representatives of both positions tend to agree, however, that the primary task of the philosopher should be to show that the traditional problems of 'metaphysically-minded' thinkers are as often as not pseudo-questions which have arisen through their disregard of the rules or 'logical grammar' underlying the correct use of the language they use. The philosopher's role thus becomes both analytical and therapeutic.

(3) This concern with language is closely linked with another interpretation of the nature of philosophy, which has gained currency during this century – again particularly in Britain and America – the view that philosophy is a '**second-order discipline**'. Whereas earlier philosophers were concerned with system-building, with an examination of the basic data and structure of experience, or with investigations into the scope and limits of human reason, the job of philosophy, according to this third account, is to analyse not only its own concepts, principles and methods (as in epistemology, that is, the theory of knowledge), but also those specific to other disciplines. This approach therefore gives rise to 'philosophies' of science, religion, history, mathematics and so on.

(4) Some mention should also be made of several developments this century in Germany and France. Philosophy there has been dominated by three, often overlapping movements. (a) **Marxism**, originating in the nineteenth century, rejects Hegel's idealism but applies his dialectic method to the 'material' world, claiming that human actions and institutions are determined by the laws of economics, and that change is brought about by class struggle. (b) **Phenomenology**, associated in particular with Husserl, attempts through a process of 'intuition' or 'grasping', followed by the method of 'transcendental reduction', to uncover acts of experiencing and then to analyse the structure of experiences as such, without admitting any of the metaphysical or other explanatory presuppositions of traditional philosophy. (c) **Existentialism** emphasizes personal experience – freedom, moral conflict, commitment – in

what is seen by many to be a meaningless and deterministic universe. Existentialists, however, eschew all metaphysical systems and moral codes which are imposed on the individual from outside; each person is ultimately responsible to himself alone for making his own being, his own 'world' and his own values.

More recently, the writings of the German philosophers Gadamer and Habermas have attracted wider interest outside their own country. Drawing on phenomenology, Gadamer has made a major contribution to **hermeneutics** – a philosophical movement concerned with the interpretation of texts and indeed of culture in general. Habermas is a representative of the so-called 'Frankfurt School' of **critical theory**. He is influenced by Marxism and attempts to develop a systematic theory of the social sciences with a view to showing how 'distortion of communication' by ideologies can be eliminated. The debate between these two thinkers concerning the attainability of truth and the role of critical reason is of considerable importance. It is interesting also to note that the work of Gadamer and especially Habermas typifies the willingness of many contemporary 'continental' philosophers to make use of the resources of Anglo-American linguistic philosophy to develop their own philosophies.

Despite their differences these various movements have at least two features in common. (i) Philosophy is seen neither as an arid obsession with the dissection of language, nor as a futile search for 'metaphysical' explanations of reality, but primarily as a response to the human condition resulting in *action*. (ii) Philosophy tends to be integrated with human culture in general – with art, religion, literature, the natural and social sciences, and politics. These characteristics can be clearly seen in the work of Sartre, perhaps the most typical of recent 'continental' thinkers, and certainly the most widely known in this country by philosophers and non-philosophers alike. A novelist of repute and a political activist, as well as a philosopher, he brings together in his writings elements drawn from both phenomenology and existentialism, while his last published work before his death shows a commitment to Marxist dialectical materialism. Breadth and insight are also features of Ricoeur, whose writings span phenomenology, critical theory and methodology, hermeneutics and literary theory, language, religion and ethics, and who may well prove in retrospect to be a major figure in the philosophy of the late twentieth century.

It must be stressed that the four accounts we have given of philosophy are themselves generalized and are over-simplified. To gain an adequate understanding of these, and other interpretations of the nature and methods of the subject, you would have at the very least to embark on a thorough and systematic study of its history. Our intention here is no more than to help you appreciate that there is no *single* description which may be regarded as uniquely definitive of philosophy. This should become clearer as you work through the book. If one *had* to pick out some lowest common denominator of all philosophical schools or traditions, all one could say, perhaps, is that philosophy deals with certain sorts of problems which cannot be solved by, or are no longer regarded as the proper concern of, other disciplines, especially the natural sciences. A more cynical commentator might be inclined to think of the philosopher as the refuse-collector of the intellectual world, picking up the many

problems discarded by workers in other fields. But think what would happen to a civilized society, as ours purports to be, if there were no dustmen!

1.2 Is there progress in philosophy?

A scientist may justly claim that over the past five hundred years or so we have steadily gained a more complete understanding of the nature and structure of the universe. Likewise it may be said that today's historians are able to provide a more accurate and truthful account of the past than ever before. In both historical research and the natural sciences there has been substantial progress. Can philosophers make such a claim for their discipline? At first sight an affirmative answer seems unlikely. In the last section it was stated that much contemporary philosophy is concerned with problems which have ceased to be of interest to workers in other fields; to them such problems have become redundant. At one time physics (the study of *ta phusika*, 'the things of Nature') was bound up with metaphysical disputes about 'qualities', 'essences' and 'substances', which were believed to lie behind or to be manifested in natural phenomena. But from the sixteenth century onwards, with the development of systematic experimental techniques designed to test hypotheses, '*natural* philosophy' gradually dissociated itself from philosophy as such and later came to be known as physical science. Chemistry emerged as a second major science in its own right in the eighteenth century. The development of the atomic theory provides us with an excellent illustration of progress in science. The idea that the universe might be composed of small indivisible particles or 'atoms' (Greek *atomos*, 'that which cannot be divided') was first suggested in the fifth century BC by a 'school' of Greek philosophers known as the Atomists and developed by Epicurus two hundred years later. This essentially philosophical theory was, however, largely ignored for more than two thousand years until it was revived by the French Epicurean thinker Gassendi in the seventeenth century and adopted about 1800 by the English scientist John Dalton, who subjected it to experimental testing. Today we no longer think of atoms as hard, impenetrable, indivisible corpuscles but as energetic clouds of still smaller particles orbiting a central nucleus which under certain conditions can be split. Still more fundamental particles have also been postulated, for the existence of which there is some experimental support. A philosophy of qualities and essences seems to have become superfluous. In much the same way, attempts have been made to substitute the methodological procedures of experimental psychology and neurology for speculation about the mind or soul and its relationship to the body, which has been at the centre of philosophical thinking since at least the time of Plato.

Philosophers are notorious for their persistence. They refuse to admit there is nothing left for them to do – and quite rightly; for the emergence of new and autonomous disciplines continually throws up further intellectual problems. The concept of God, which first appeared in the writings of Plato, has been central to the 'science' of theology since the early years of Christianity. But questions about the existence and nature of such a being, the problem of reconciling God's

omniscience and omnipotence with human freedom and the seeming presence of evil in the world, and the analysis of such terms as 'belief' and 'faith', keep contemporary philosophers of religion fully occupied. As for the particles of the physicist, it is legitimate to question their ontological status. Are atoms, electrons and quarks equally real? Are they real in the sense that tables and horses are said to be real? What is meant by 'reality' in such cases? And what of the explanations of 'mental' activity put forward by psychologists and neurobiologists? *Is* mind reducible to or equivalent to the behaviour of the brain? *Has* modern science ruled out the possibility of a 'soul' acting in, but separable from, the body? If not, the problem of the relationship between these two entities remains to be solved. Of course philosophers belonging to different 'schools' will try to deal with such questions in different ways. That they are continuing to make the attempt is indisputable. In other fields too, philosophical argument is as lively as ever it was. In ethics, for example, there are many important issues. What makes certain actions good or bad, right or wrong? Are motives important? Should the *results* of human actions be regarded as relevant to their goodness or badness? In a complex society there are also likely to be conflicting views concerning such matters as euthanasia, contraception, divorce and nuclear war (on all of which the theologian has something to say). The philosopher too must have a role to play here – if not in providing final and incontrovertible solutions, then at least in clarifying the issues and terms used. Is there then progress in philosophy? The answer is surely, yes. To make clear what was previously unclear must count as an advance. Moreover, a careful study of the history of philosophy shows that some of even the greatest philosophers have made fundamental mistakes, and it has been to the credit of their successors that these errors have been discovered and satisfactory explanations put forward to account for them. As J.L. Austin once wrote: 'In philosophy, there are many mistakes that it is no disgrace to have made: to make a first-water, ground-floor mistake, so far from being easy, takes *one* form of philosophical genius.' And, one might add, to discover such a mistake takes another form of philosophical genius. Therein also lies progress in philosophy. (Reference to some examples will be made in the course of the book.)

But even if there were no progress at all in either of the two respects just mentioned, the cultural value of philosophy cannot easily be denied. Concern for the validity of arguments, precision in use of language, imaginative insight, bold speculations, close examination of the principles and concepts of other disciplines, clarification of controversial issues, especially in ethics, law and politics – all of these, which have at one time or another been grist to the philosopher's mill, are essential for the well-being of a liberal democracy. Moreover, many instances can be cited of the profound effect philosophical writings have had on the political, social and wider cultural development of nations. The influence of Plato's *Republic* on St Augustine and through him on the religious and political 'world-view' of early Christian Europe, the relevance of Rousseau's *Social Contract* to the French Revolution, and the significance of the philosophical works of Hegel for an understanding of Karl Marx and the emergence of Communism are particularly good examples. Whether such influences should themselves be regarded as 'good' or 'bad' is of course itself a suitable question for philosophers and historians of ideas to argue about!

1.3 Plan of the book

The approach we have adopted is to present philosophy to you in such a way as to take account of the various interpretations discussed in the previous section. Our aim also is to acquaint you with the main themes and arguments of a number of major philosophers within a broadly historical perspective, as well as to help you get to grips with many of the fundamental problems occupying the attention of philosophers today.

Chapter 2 offers firstly an introduction to formal logic. Most university courses in philosophy include the study of logic. There are two reasons for this: (1) it encourages clear reasoning and helps in the detection of invalid arguments; (2) some grasp of formal logic is needed for an understanding of certain problems in a field of philosophy known as philosophical logic – which overlaps with both epistemology and metaphysics. A second aim of the chapter is to introduce you to some aspects of what is often called ‘critical thinking’. Unfortunately, despite the seeming clarity of this phrase, it is not easy to define precisely what it means. If you are able to reason clearly and can identify invalid arguments in formal logic then you will already have achieved some competence as a ‘critical thinker’. Critical thinking may also be said to be exhibited in the capacity to understand and analyse different kinds of discourse, and as such it has much in common with ‘informal logic’ and the ‘language analysis’ characteristic of much of the philosophy practised in the English-speaking world in the last century. An account of informal logic is therefore also included in Chapter 2. However, critical thinking, as it is taught in many schools and colleges, particularly in the United States of America, extends beyond philosophy as such and moves into the realm of literary criticism. This of course is not our concern in this book. However, the chapter will end with a brief look at some of the rhetorical devices and informal fallacies frequently used in persuasive arguments.

In Chapters 3 and 4 we shall guide you through Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. This will not only enable you to learn something about the ethics and political philosophy of two of the greatest philosophers of all time, but will also introduce you to some of the principal presuppositions of their thought as contained in their theories of knowledge, metaphysics and ‘psychology’.

Chapter 5 will be concerned with a more extensive and critical investigation into the problem of knowledge, with reference in particular to the philosophies of Descartes, Hume, Kant, Husserl, Russell, Ayer and Ryle.

Chapters 6 and 7 will deal with some central issues in ethics and political philosophy. Again the discussion will relate to the writings of a number of major philosophers including Hume, Kant, Rousseau, Mill, Nietzsche, Marx and Sartre.

If Chapters 5 to 7 are concerned with the ‘hard-core’ of philosophy – epistemology and ethics – Chapters 8 to 10 consist of introductions to several important fields of philosophy in which it can be seen as acting in its role as a ‘second-order’ discipline. Thus Chapter 8 will introduce you to some of the main issues in the philosophy of science; Chapter 9 covers the philosophy of religion; and Chapter 10 is about aesthetics (roughly, the philosophy of art or beauty).

Chapter 11 includes an examination of four important metaphysical problems – mind, causation, freedom and reality. We shall also refer to the wider problems of the legitimacy or otherwise of metaphysics in general; and you will learn something of the different views held by, among others, Kant, Ayer, Wittgenstein and Heidegger.

In Chapter 12 we shall investigate a number of interconnected fields which have to some extent begun to provide a bridge between the ‘linguistic’ philosophy which has characterized much British and American philosophy during the twentieth century and so-called ‘Continental’ philosophy. These subject areas are the philosophy of the social sciences, the philosophy of man and culture, the hermeneutics of Gadamer, and Habermas’s ‘critical theory’.

Mastering Philosophy ends with a – necessarily brief and incomplete – survey of several non-Western philosophical traditions. This has been included partly to counter the impression that the reader might understandably have been given that philosophy is a uniquely Western cultural enterprise. It should be recognized, on the contrary, that India and China, for example, have also nurtured philosophical speculation and analysis of the highest quality for over two thousand years. It is of course also broadly accurate to say that, for much of this time, oriental philosophy was closely bound up with religious systems or ways of life such as Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism and Buddhism. Nevertheless, it is instructive to discover that despite the considerable differences between the assumptions and methods employed within Eastern and Western philosophical traditions, there are also many parallels and similarities. One might also add that some appreciation of these traditions is surely desirable in a multi-racial and pluralistic society and could contribute to greater understanding and tolerance of other cultures. It is no doubt on the basis of such considerations that ‘World Philosophical Traditions’ has been included as an ‘optional theme’ in the International Baccalaureate curriculum; and it is hoped that Chapter 13 will go some way towards meeting the requirements of students who have chosen this topic.

1.4 How to use this book

Earlier we suggested that the best way to learn about philosophy is to ‘do’ it, and it was stated, perhaps rather boldly, that the purpose of this book was to show you how. We should be severely at fault, however, if we were to give you the impression that *all* you need to do is to read through the next twelve chapters and that you would then have become an expert. Philosophy is not a soft option. While a good case can be made out for the view that most of us do ‘philosophize’ unawares some of the time, to articulate our arguments, to make our premises explicit and to subject them to sustained critical analysis does require determination and a willingness to think deeply and intensively. All a book such as this can do is to set out some of the problems for you, draw your attention to the several ways in which they have been tackled by different philosophers, and suggest how *you* might approach and respond to them. In this way you will

acquire some mastery of the subject. We hope the following suggestions will be found helpful.

(1) Most chapters are largely self-contained, but numerous cross-references have been included. They can therefore be studied in any order. However, you will probably find it more convenient to read through the book systematically, though do not feel you have to work your way through the chapter on logic and critical thinking; you can dip into this while studying other topics. Note that if you are preparing for the 'A' level or the IB examinations you do not have to tackle any formal logic, but you should study the other sections in Chapter 2. To assist you we have also provided, at the beginning of each relevant section, references to the appropriate parts of the prescribed texts and, in some instances, to other texts which, although not 'set' books, will, we hope, be found useful. We suggest you read through the relevant texts before studying the material of each chapter. You can then go back to the text with greater understanding and in a better position to acquire a firmer grasp of the problems by tackling some of the books and essays suggested in the reading lists. Do not be alarmed about the length of some of these lists. Examiners will certainly not be expecting you to have read more than a small selection. (We have indicated the books which we think you should look at first.) If, however, you want to extend your knowledge and understanding of philosophical problems – perhaps you are contemplating taking a degree course – then you can always explore some of the many other listed titles at your leisure. By the way, in case you want to get some idea of the historical development of philosophy, so as to acquire a broader perspective or for general reference, a short list of suitable books has been provided at the end of this section.

(2) Make your own notes and summaries. Be ready always to *question* the arguments put forward not only in each chapter but also in other commentaries or articles you choose to study. As you read through *Mastering Philosophy* you will find interspersed throughout the text numerous hints or references (they are marked with an asterisk *) which are designed to help you think critically about the various issues. More extensive 'comments and criticisms' are to be found at the end of many sections. You might also try to find someone with an interest in the subject with whom you can discuss your reading. Philosophy is not the easiest subject to study in isolation. If you intend to study externally for the London University B.A., you may like to know that the author offers a comprehensive distance learning programme. Details are provided at the end of the 'guided' answers section.

(3) If you decide to attempt some of the essay questions listed at the end of each chapter, whether or not you have an opportunity of submitting your answers to an experienced philosophy teacher, remember these four requirements for good writing: (a) conciseness – be *economical* in your use of words; (b) comprehensiveness – make sure you have covered *all* the main points; (c) relevance – take care that you are answering the question *actually asked*; (d) avoid florid or excessively 'literary' language. (This is not to say that there is no place for 'style'; many of the great English-speaking philosophers, from Hobbes in the seventeenth century to, say, Ryle in the twentieth, have been superb

writers. Just remember when preparing tutorial essays or examination answers that you are not writing a novel or an article for a popular newspaper.)

So now to work. Good luck!

Note: To avoid confusion with other books mentioned in the course of the text, when referring to particular chapters or sections of *Mastering Philosophy* we shall use the following conventions: 'Chapter' will be denoted by 'Ch.' (with the first letter an upper-case (capital) 'C'); '2.6' (for example) will denote Chapter 2, section 6, and so on. In general, cross-references to *Mastering Philosophy* are in 'round' brackets. Cross-references to other books are denoted by 'ch.' (with the first letter a lower-case (small) 'c'); other cross-references are generally in 'square' brackets.

GENERAL READING

(For details of editions and publishers, see the comprehensive Bibliography at the end of the book.)

Copleston, F.C., *A History of Philosophy*, 9 vols.

Hamlyn, D.W., *A History of Western Philosophy*.

O'Connor, D.J. (ed.), *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*.

Russell, B., *History of Western Philosophy and its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*.

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