

THE NATURE OF PHILOSOPHY

We can identify the nature of philosophy by its subject matter, by its aspirations, or by its techniques. Philosophy is not defined by its subject matter, in the way that chemistry is, but there is now an established group of topics on which philosophers focus. However, the topics range so widely that they encompass virtually all of existence. For each topic, it seems to be its generality which makes it philosophical. 'How do I know where Madrid is?' is rather specific, but 'how do I know where anything is?' sounds more philosophical. We can identify the main areas of philosophical enquiry as the principles and nature of thought, the nature and possibility of knowledge, the structure and categories of what exists, persons and their relations to the world, the values and principles that should guide persons, the principles of social organisation, and whether or not anything transcends the natural world. A few of the topics have been taken over by the sciences, but philosophers have found new problems to replace them. A further topic is the study of how our views on these varied topics fit together with one another. There seems to be a dream of a wholly consistent and coherent picture of reality, within which all detailed human enquiry can plausibly be fitted.

In the past philosophy has sometimes aspired to even greater things. If there is more to reality than the physical world that confronts us, then the main subject matter of philosophy is that transcendent world, in which we may find a divine mind, or the eternal principles which shape nature, or a separate world of unchanging and necessary truths, all of which can only be grasped by the power and discipline of good reasoning. Growing self-criticism among philosophers has undermined confidence in that project. Although few philosophers deny the interest of the big picture, the commonest approach is to focus on a few problems, ones where progress seems possible. For many thinkers the aspirations have been reduced to a very humble level, where philosophers are the servants of mathematicians, scientists, doctors and legislators, offering a little generalised objectivity to keep those activities on track.

One clue as to the nature of philosophy is to be found in its starting point. Most people just get on with life, but some people are bewildered and puzzled (even as children) by what others take for granted. Can an event happen twice? Could a copy of me give me immortality? How many waves are there on the sea? Could my mind occupy a different body? What is actually wrong with being 'naughty'? Might gravity become twice as strong tomorrow? Practical people laugh at such questions, but they lead those who are gripped by them into more significant and interesting enquiries. That progress in enquiry has been found to converge on what are now the settled big topics of philosophy.

If philosophy were nothing more than staring in bewilderment at these puzzling aspects of existence, it would not amount to a subject. The long history of the human race will always have seen people who are gripped by these puzzles, but the subject got going when a serious effort was made to address them, and to develop techniques for the purpose. Whatever is meant by 'reason', there is a consensus that philosophers try to get to grips with the puzzles by reasoning about them. The first step in the enquiry is always to ask for the reasons why we believe something, or why we doubt what many people believe. It is once these reasons have been made clear, and can be assessed and compared, that philosophy really gets going.

A hallmark of science, rather than less determined enquiry, is the care, patience and precision which is brought to theorising and experimenting, and the same qualities distinguish philosophy from casual thinking. In the best philosophical assessment of the central puzzles, care is taken to express the reasons with maximum clarity, to separate ambiguous reasons into their components, to put reasons into forms that make comparison easier, and to check the support for the reasons. This study, however, takes philosophy to another level, because careful study of reasons raises new puzzles, about what a reason is, and how one can be compared to another, and what we mean by a belief being 'true'. It is no accident that formal logic was invented by a philosopher, because that seems to provide a set of universal rules for checking the way in which a set of reasons hang together. There are also standard techniques of argument which emerge, and successful arguments whose pattern can be copied in other disputes. Thus if someone asserts that something is universally true, it is checked by searching for a 'counterexample' to disprove it. If a reason has further implications, it is checked by seeing if some remote implication contradicts the original reason. If some belief has been accepted, the surprising presuppositions of the belief can be pointed out.

Philosophers do not just assess other people's reasons, though. When launching a new theory in philosophy, the aim is to avoid all the pitfalls which have emerged from assessing previous arguments. Hence a theory about one of the major philosophical puzzles will lay out its presuppositions for scrutiny, then aim for the utmost clarity in its expression, followed by an assessment of possible counterexamples, and a look at any worrying implications. Modern theories might go a step further, outlining how the language of the theory works, what sort of logic is being used in its construction, how the elements of the theory can be known, and what picture of reality underlies it.

This makes philosophising sound like a delightful and fruitful activity, but the determination to check every aspect of reasoning has led to doubts about the subject itself, even among the philosophers. If humans are too limited to know very much, none of their reasons will be of much interest, and if reasons can't really be compared then a consensus will be impossible. If we are not even sure about the language in which reasons are expressed, and we cannot agree on the logic used to check them, then the fruitfulness of our studies may be an illusion. Hence modern philosophy has moved yet another step away from the original puzzles, and often attempts to evaluate the nature of our sense experience, our language, our logic and our ordinary daily thought, to see whether our tools are up to the huge task they are to be used for.

Other questions are asked about philosophy. Is such questioning appropriate for young persons, or is knowledge and maturity required? Given its difficulty, is it only for the elite, or for anyone who is bothered by the puzzles? Should real life be the priority of philosophy, or just idealised theory? Can teams work on it, or must philosophy be solitary? However we answer these questions, the puzzles don't go away, and there just might be some nice answers that rise above our personal interests, and the prejudices of our cultures.