

PART I

*The Singularity of
Philosophical Thought*

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Philosophy and Its History

PHILOSOPHY HAS OFTEN BEEN THOUGHT of as a kind of art or as a kind of science, but its history, by comparison with the histories of either art or science, exhibits a curious discontinuity. Each moment of philosophical advance seems to regard itself as a completely new beginning, which appears to require a correspondingly complete repudiation of everything that came before, including all the previous new beginnings, each of which was to place philosophy at last on suitable and enduring foundations. It is characteristic of the great philosophical thinker to discover that everything that went before rested on some hopeless and fundamental mistake. So the past of philosophy is kept alive by the need of those who mean to advance the subject to disengage themselves from their predecessors by some monumental refutation. The exposed error then points the way to a new path to be followed, a new landscape of the mind to explore. As a general rule, the philosopher will attempt, all alone, to solve all the problems, or to show how all of them can be solved. Of course the philosopher will have followers, who for a while will take their problems from the founder's program, and devote themselves to its establishment and consolidation. But almost never is there any subsequent interest in the work of those underlaborers in the service of an original philosophical vision, and everyone waits for the next visionary to come along, who will show us how to liberate ourselves from the past and begin afresh, build anew, design a bold new structure to house us in a

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universe the whole previous suite of philosophers had radically misconceived. So there is no body of accepted data handed down from generation to generation, no accumulation of knowledge, no progress, but instead an almost comic replacement of those who replaced their forerunners by those who will in turn be replaced in a precarious position at the proclaimed apex of total understanding of which philosophy is supposed to consist. The great works of philosophy are often works of astonishing brevity, considering the vast perspectives they open up, and in which whatever is philosophically visible is philosophically seen.

No view of philosophical thought could be adequate, I should think, which did not account for the curious rhythms of the history of philosophy—the perpetual return to beginnings, the internal urgency of having to dismiss as mistaken the entirety of the tradition save those who may have anticipated one's own breakthroughs, the magisterial laying down of the few simple hidden truths that up to now have defied discovery. For example, the mistakes of the past must have been easy to make and almost impossible to discover, by contrast with theories in the history of science that may have been wrong but often and even typically show considerable ingenuity on the part of those who framed them, and are to be rejected only when theories of greater explanatory power, or more consistency with observations, are advanced. But the usual case in philosophy is suggested to have been by way of an illusion on the part of previous theorists, a deep mistaking of appearance for reality, of men having raised a dust, as Bishop George Berkeley once phrased it, and then complaining they could not see. Whatever may have been the trouble with a theory of the sort held by Priestley—to the effect that combustion is due to the release of a volatile component, known as phlogiston, in all combustible substances—it clearly was not a mistake of the sort whose paradigm might consist in confusing shadows of things for the things themselves. Nor could the overthrow of the phlogiston theory, through a famous crucial experiment by Lavoisier, be at all of the sort that consisted of showing his scientific opponents to have been taken in by appearance. But, as we shall see, in philosophy one has to show that the nature of

one's own discovery explains how one's predecessors should have failed to see it—and this means that philosophical discoveries will be restricted primarily to things where a possible confusion of appearance with reality is thinkable.

And philosophical errors will, accordingly, be defined in just these terms. They are not mistakes of judgment, they are not hypotheses that are false or theories that are wrong, but theories instead based on a certain *kind* of wrongness, a kind that, once revealed, casts into almost total irrelevance any thought based upon them. But this means, in effect, that by contrast with the history of science, where what came before was a stage in the discovery of what we now know, as the present itself is a stage in what will come to be known, the whole history of philosophy will be treated by the new philosopher as so much illusion and, hence, not part of a cognitive development. The present is like awakening from a dream, and the dream is not part of waking experience but an aberration from it, belonging to an irrelevant realm of experience, a symptom of cognitive disorder rather than a piece of cognition in its own right. And this explains why the original philosopher feels that history begins with him. Begins and *ends* with him, it might be better to say, for, having shown the way, he has in effect shown all there is to show: The way leads to an end so conspicuous that it is almost pedantic actually to enter on the path. So, internally speaking, philosophy does not have a real history. It is given all at once and, if right, it need never be undergone again. Or, more dramatically yet, the history of philosophy is a long nightmare from which philosophy longs to waken, and from which it seems at any given point to the working philosopher that he *has* awakened—even if, from the cruel vantage point of his successors, it will instead seem as if he had been but part of the nightmare.

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The Character of Philosophical Problems

THE SUBJECT OF PHILOSOPHY, if this account of its history is true, must be such that mistakes of this order are possible in connection with it, and I will even at this early stage venture the thesis that a problem is not genuinely a philosophical problem unless it is possible to imagine that its solution will consist of showing how appearance has been taken for reality. I want to illustrate this with some examples that I shall later discuss in some detail.

1. There is a famous passage in the *Meditations* of Descartes, to which philosophers return again and again, in which Descartes finds that the experience he is having is indistinguishable from the experience he might have had if he were *to be dreaming* instead of awake. Since nothing internal to his experience will discriminate satisfactorily between the state of dreaming and being awake, everything he believes on the basis of that experience is immediately put in question. It is conceivable that his experience could be just as it is but had by a being without a body, or without there being a world for the experiences to be about. The difference between dream and waking is not like the difference between anger and sorrow, which we can learn to tell, or the difference between blue and yellow, which we scarcely need to learn to tell, or the difference between seeing a camel and seeing a giraffe, where each has distinguishing features. Indeed, there can be no differences internal to the experi-

ence, or the problem would not have the force it has. Any solution, accordingly—if there is to be one—must refer to factors external to experience, not part of experience, whatever these factors are to be.

2. Kant, who sought a criterion of moral conduct, insists that no such criterion can be found in the behavior of the agent alone. For the person may simply be acting in conformity to principles without knowing what these principles are—like a blind man, to use an image of Plato's, who has taken the right road by accident. Conduct is genuinely moral, then, only when it refers us to moral principles the agent actually uses—but nothing about the conduct itself will assure us that it is moral. So we can imagine two pieces of behavior, exactly alike, one of them moral and the other one not, and the mistake of supposing the one to be the other is easy to make and almost impossible to avoid.

3. David Hume, concerned with the analysis of causality, offers grounds for the possibility of imagining two universes exactly alike—one of them deterministic in that everything happens as a matter of necessity, and one of them a world of pure chance. In the one, matches light when struck because of the way the world is made. In the other, matches burst into flame on being struck just because they happen to do that, but anything else is equally thinkable, whether it ever happens or not. The two universes are absolutely indiscriminable, but the difference, though not internal (like the difference between two universes, one of which contained giraffes and the other did not), seems somehow momentous. So any difference is to be sought at right angles, so to speak, to the universes themselves.

4. The philosophical mathematician Alan Turing once imagined a case in which the output of a machine is indiscriminable from that of an intelligent human being. If, Turing argued, there could be no way, internal to the two outputs, of telling which was produced by the human, then either we would have to ascribe intelligence to the machine or withhold ascribing it to the human. If you believe that—comparability of output notwithstanding—there really is a difference between what machines and humans do, you will have

to explain where the difference is located, since it is not to be located in the outputs.

5. Bishop Berkeley distinguished two sorts of fundamental realities—what he called “spirits,” which are minds—and what he called “ideas,” which are the objects of minds. It is impossible, Berkeley argued, for there to be images of spirits, for they are nonspatial. He also argued that God is a spirit, who must accordingly be unpicturable, unimaginable, indeed invisible. But that means that a universe in which God exists could not be told apart from a universe from which God is totally absent. The presence or absence of God seems to make no difference to how minds experience the world, and if the difference seems momentous even so, then somehow we must think of God as outside the universe. Spinoza thought God was identical with the universe, which again would mean that there is nothing internal to the universe, no inner differentiating feature, and hence no conceivable observation on the basis of which we can tell that God exists. The world of the atheist and the world of the believer would look exactly alike.

6. The artist Marcel Duchamp created works of art that looked in every outward particular exactly like ordinary objects that were not works of art at all: dog combs, urinals, bottle racks, bicycle wheels, and the like. Indeed, these readymades, as he termed them, had been mere real things before they became works of art by Duchamp, who after all did not make the combs or snow shovels—what would be the point of that?—though he made the works of art. It had seemed down the ages that works of art must be importantly different from mere real things, from which they could easily be told apart. Duchamp showed that the difference, because after all philosophical, was not one that meets the eye.

The differences between dream and waking, between moral conduct and conduct that merely resembles moral conduct but is morally neutral, between determinism and chance, between thinking beings and mere machines or works of art and mere real objects—or between universes in which God is respectively present and absent—are differences of a different sort than those that divide pairs of things that happen to resemble one another a great deal, such as

identical twins, or two products off the same assembly line, or two insects of the same species. The philosopher Leibniz believed it to be a truth of reason that two numerically distinct things, however much they resemble one another, must differ at some point or they would not be *two* things. So, we may be assured, if Leibniz is right, the two insects have at least one unshared feature. Such a feature may be extremely difficult to identify, however, and for practical purposes we may wish simply to create a difference—dress the twins in different-colored skirts, color code the product for quality control, and irradiate the insect we are anxious to track. Still, in each of these cases, the pairs of things belong to the same *kinds*, whereas the philosophically distinct pairs seem to belong to quite different kinds: Yet, in a way, they seem to have everything in common, in the sense that the history of a universe of necessity might be indiscernible from the history of a universe of chance, just as a waking person's sequence of experiences resembles in every particular that of a dreamer. And, though Leibniz's principle assures us that Duchamp's snow shovel differs through *some* feature from the snow shovel that is not a work of art, that feature surely could not make the difference between a work of art and a mere real thing. I mean, suppose the actual difference consisted of a difference in weight of, say, a millionth of a milligram?

Consider a case in which two things of quite different kinds resemble one another so far as the eye can tell. Usually differences between kinds are very obvious, such as the difference between males and females of our species, based on the usual primary and secondary sexual characteristics—voice, body form, and the like. A man undergoes a transsexual operation and declares him-herself to be a woman, as for all legal purposes she is. But this individual is an athlete who decides to compete against women in athletic events, in which it is argued that she has natural and unfair advantages because of certain muscularities carried over into her new sexual identity. At this point it may be necessary to invoke criteria of being female not ordinarily employed, in order to exclude this person from the events in which it is said she has no right to participate, though otherwise female. A sex-change operation leaves chromosomes unaltered, and females

have two X chromosomes. At the level to which we have descended, the person is male, even if in most of the practices of life we accept the female classification. But until science made the discovery about chromosomes, there would have been no way of solving the problem. If males and females compose what we may call natural kinds, then there is some basis in reality for differentiating them, and it will require science to say what this basis is.

The philosopher Hilary Putnam has imagined the possibility of a Twin-Earth, exactly like Earth itself in every respect, including counterparts of you and me, counterparts of the room in which this book—or its counterpart—is being written or read: Whatever takes place on Earth has its counterpart occurrence on Twin-Earth. Any of us would feel exactly at home were we to be transferred there, so long as our counterpart were simultaneously transferred here, so that there would be none of those Shakespearean confusions to which two individuals of the same face and figure give rise. And yet Earth and Twin-Earth differ, but in ways rather like those in which females and transsexualized males differ in the previous example.

Water, on Earth, is H_2O , but water on Twin-Earth is XYZ. At the level of experience, water and Twin-Earth water are exactly of a piece: transparent, thirst quenching, hospitable to fish and frogs, subject to pollution by acid rain. And yet, at the molecular or some submolecular level, they differ. Putnam meant his example to show that *water* must ultimately have different meanings on Earth and Twin-Earth, and this will depend on what science finally has to say about the composition of water—but the important feature for us is that the difference between the two Earths is finally for science to determine. But, once more, you would not expect a chemist to emerge from his laboratory triumphantly waving a computer print-out on which he has circled the place where his researches have shown that Duchamp's snow shovel differs from an ordinary snow shovel. In whatever way their differences are hidden, it will not be for science to penetrate. They are different sorts of differences, hidden in different sorts of ways.

What I am suggesting, then, is that philosophical problems arise in connection with indiscriminable pairs, the difference between which is not a scientific one. I am supposing that the distinct kinds to which either member of such a philosophical pair belongs are not natural kinds, and that the philosophical way of dividing up the universe is very different—different in kind—from the way in which scientific analysis divides up the universe. If this is so, we might imagine having a complete scientific map of the universe in which all the natural kinds were identified and the differences between them made specific, without this helping to solve a single philosophical question. In a way, the difference between science and philosophy is a philosophical and not a scientific difference—in its way different from any of the differences that may divide the sciences from one another. The sciences, for example, may differ in point of subject matter, addressing different orders of fact. Philosophy may in that sense have no order of fact peculiar and proprietary to itself. Nothing less than the whole universe is its order of fact, for philosophical differences in a sense have to do with the question of what kind of universe it is, and differences between kinds of universes are not differences within the universes themselves (for there may, as in the examples we have discussed, *be* no such internal differences).

In any case, it is clear that mistaking one member of a philosophical pair for the other is a very easy thing to do, all the more so if no difference between them need ever be imagined as revealing itself in experience at all. Indeed, the differences are such that it might never have occurred to anyone to draw them. They are such that if it requires a special discipline to draw them, then philosophy might never have arisen as a discipline at all. Life could go forward perfectly well without these distinctions ever needing to be thought about. It is as if all the distinctions of concern to philosophy were at right angles to the set of differences it is the task of science to draw. And, hence, as if philosophical differences do not make the kind or kinds of difference that those accessible to science make in practice or understanding of the world. It is as if—just because there