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IS "TRUE PHILOSOPHY" LIKE "TRUE ART"?
Kai Nielsen

I

"Philosophy," unlike "oak" or "robin," is not a name of a natural kind. It is now and has been for a very long time many different things, going on in a cultural context where standardly there is no clear sense of what their relationship is to each other. More than that, they seem often at least to be conflicting things. It is not very easy to see what (if anything) makes all these things philosophy. I shall display something of these differences, and in doing so show why "What is philosophy?" is itself a philosophical problem and indeed one which is deeply contested, perhaps intractibly contestable.

Why should it be that "What is philosophy?" is itself a philosophical question and such a taxing one at that? Don't philosophers know what they are doing? "What is chemistry?" or "What is art history?" are not problems in chemistry or art history. We could say similar things for botany and engineering and a host of other subjects. Introductory textbooks on these subjects, as well as other similar subjects, as Thomas Kuhn has shown, oversimplify a bit and make things more straightforward than they actually are, but, that to the contrary notwithstanding, they usually give definitions or general characterizations of their subject matter in the first few pages of their texts – characterizations that usually do not seem essentially wrong to other people in the field. But this is not so with philosophy for if the sampling of philosophers is at all wide, taking into consideration the history of the subject and diverse cultures, the very characterization of what their discipline or activity is will be keenly in dispute. Some philosophers will say that other philosophers are fundamentally mistaken in their very conception of what philosophy is and they will set out what they take to be the correct conception which in turn will be similarly rejected by other philosophers. Jacques Maritain, Rudolph Carnap, J. L. Austin, Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida are all famous philosophers—in famous famous philosophers in some quarters—and they all do philosophy very differently. More generally, definitions and characterizations of philosophy differ radically. Some philosophers find the characterizations offered by some other philosophers to be utterly wrongheaded or sometimes just plain gibberish.

What are we to make of an activity in which there is such chronic dispute over what it is all about? Why should philosophy be such a tower of Babel? Perhaps philosophy is a cluster of conceptual confusions that should be dissolved, revealed by careful analysis to be the pseudo-problems philosophy gives voice to. All good contemporary philosophy books, such philosophers believe, should be anti-philosophy philosophy books. But then there is the question of the very status of the conceptual analysis that does that dissolving. Is that itself a bit of philosophy and, if that is so, and if its conceptual analysis is soundly carried through, then it surely looks like not all philosophy can be conceptual confusion. Moreover, that aside, another at least initial response should be that throughout their history human beings have grappled with certain very fundamental categorial questions: good and evil, mind and body, freedom and necessity, God and immortality, and what is it for something to exist or for some of those somethings to be persons? These questions are not the creations of philosophers but something that nearly everybody at one time or another, but typically when they are quite young, find it natural to reflect about and to seek to answer. It seems at least, the response goes, gratuitously dogmatic to push them
aside as pseudo-problems. One would have to have—or so it seems at least—very good
grounds indeed for saying that all the problems of philosophy are pseudo-problems:
symptoms of a conceptual malaise. Moreover, this very claim, namely, the claim that all
philosophical questions simply reveal the existence of a conceptual malaise, would itself
have to be made out on philosophical grounds. So while it is reasonable to remain
skeptical and suspicious about philosophy, it is not reasonable to dismiss it so easily as a
putative discipline specializing in conceptual confusion.

Granting that “What is philosophy?” is itself a contentious philosophical question,
why could it not have an uncontested historical-sociological answer given by philo-
sophically informed historians of ideas standing, though still with an understandings of the
subject, outside of philosophy altogether? Such historians, as such specialists, would
know about philosophy in the sense of having a good knowledge of what philosophers
have said, including the reasons they have given for saying what they say, and even of
what they are saying now, but such historians still would, qua historians at least, be
without philosophical views themselves. Why could such historians not take careful note
of various activities that philosophers engage in and regard as philosophical, note what
common and distinctive properties (if any) they have or what family resemblances they
have (if any) and then, if there are such distinctive commonalities or resemblances, build
a philosophically neutral definition or characterization of philosophy on these common-
alities or resemblances? If no such features show up then the historian of ideas will report
that there is not in fact the overlap necessary to yield a general characterization for the
varied activities that different people over historical time and cultural space have
thought of as philosophical. This is, after all, an empirical issue, and indeed (or so it
seems) rather straightforwardly so, and surely it is not impossible that a philosophically
trained, though philosophically viewless, historian of ideas, if she were diligent enough,
could either come up with a philosophically neutral characterization or show why the
activities called “philosophical” are so various that no such general characterization can
be given, given the facts of the case.

There are at least two problems with this. First, if we delete enough detail we may well
get something that is common to everything philosophers do. We could note, for
example, that philosophers “reflect and think” or “ask questions” or “give arguments.”
Such things would, however, hardly be (a) both common to and distinctive of what
philosophers do for activities that are not at all philosophical also involve those things
and (b) what we find is so general as to be trivial. It gives us no good idea of what
philosophy is about. It is highly unlikely that we will find anything that is significant and
common to the various activities that get called philosophical. What is more likely is that
such an historian could only responsibly note that philosophy is said to be X or Y or Z or
V or T or.... But these features (even the ones listed) would themselves sometimes at least
yield conflicting beliefs about what philosophy really is or should be. Some philosophers
would go on saying about some of these conceptions that they were radically mistaken,
hardly deserving to be called philosophy. Moreover, philosophers have often been well
aware of certain characterizations of their discipline, and yet they have gone out of their
way to say either that this is not what philosophy really is or that such characterizations
actually obscure the “true goals” of philosophy. The great innovators in philosophy –
Plato, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Dewey, Husserl, and Wittgenstein
—all thought the old philosophical foundations and conceptions were in shambles and
sought to conceive of philosophy in a radically new way. It is these, and other, distinctive
conceptions that count in trying to conceive what philosophy is.

The historian of ideas can draw our attention, when we get too ethnocentric or parti...
pris, that philosophy has not always been just what we say it is and that there are other conceptions of philosophy about in the world. But the struggle is over which activities are genuine philosophical activities worthy of pursuit and which are not. But here the historian of ideas, qua historian of ideas, can supply little guidance. He can only enrich our historical perspective. Only philosophers, if anyone, can substantively help us here. They alone, if anyone, can tell us what genuine philosophy is. That is a philosophical issue and must be argued out and thought out on philosophical grounds. That is why, as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell have stressed, there can be no metaphilosophy if by "metaphilosophy" is meant a view prior to any philosophy which can tell us what philosophy is and to be reasonable must be. There is no nonphilosophical vantage point that can decide that. Philosophy cannot help but be a bootstrapping operation. The skeptical philosophical worry is that "genuine philosophy" might turn out to be like "true art," "real champions," "genuine religion," or "real native cuisine."

Let me illustrate. I know perfectly well that Rudolf Carnap regards philosophy as the logic of the sciences and Martin Heidegger regards it as "the correspondence to the Being of being"; but I regard both such conceptions as radically inadequate. Carnap's is wildly one-sided catching at best what some philosophers do and Heidegger's approximates gibberish. (This is not to give to understand that everything Heidegger says is so approximate.) Moreover, neither in their characterizations get at what I take to be the heart of the matter – what is really important in philosophy. But, though I perfectly unequivocally feel that way, the historian in me prompts me to ask. Perhaps some of this onesidedness, after all, gives us the only sort of thing that philosophy can really do if it is to aspire to give us genuine knowledge or insight. Perhaps philosophy of science is philosophy enough. Moreover, can I be so sure that what I regard as gibberish really is so? Heidegger has many admirers; and philosophers from my own tradition whom I very much admire (Richard Rorty, Charles Taylor and Stanley Cavell) take Heidegger to be a philosopher of very considerable importance. I should, given such considerations, be a little skeptical about my beliefs about what is really fundamental or about what is really gibberish.

Perhaps my own reactions simply give voice to one culturally and historically circumscribed conception of what philosophy is. But how, one is tempted to respond, could it be anything else? But if it couldn't be anything else or more, then why accept it? The other side of the coin is "How could anyone do anything else? How could they not but see things by their own lights? What other lights could they see them by?" Still, we can listen to others, sometimes very different others, turn over and take to heart what they say, and sometimes, in doing this, we can correct our own views or at least change our minds or (more realistically) partly change our minds. It remains, however, after all that, that there is no alternative but to see things by our own lights and we further know that we, like everyone, are creatures of a certain culture of a certain time in history with all the contingencies that brings. And we know that there is no escaping that. We cannot, as Hegel stressed, leap over history.

This contextualism (if that is the right name for it) is not unique to philosophy. But should be seen as a cautionary tale to any philosopher or philosophy that has sufficient hubris and unselfconsciousness to think it could speak for all time and eternity. Speaking for all time and eternity is not likely to be a hang-up of a chemist or economist. It is philosophers spooked by what they take to be the spectre of relativism who try to escape into Absolutism.
II

Even with this firm sense of the contingency of things (the cultural and historical variability of things) it is not unreasonable to seek some order here. A philosopher in asking what philosophy is is in reality typically asking what, of the tower of Babel that has been philosophy, would be good philosophy, the doing of something that would give philosophy a genuine point. Some initial ordering might come from these characterizations:

1. Philosophy is an analytical study of concepts.
2. Philosophy is an analytical study of the pivotal concepts that in the most general way organize our thought or action.

These are conceptions that some analytical philosophers would defend. They are also certainly conceptions which are not without their problems. First it is anything but clear that this should be the whole of good philosophy. But, that aside for the time being, it is not clear what a concept is and if, to clarify things, we say a concept is simply the use of a word we land ourselves in various ways on contested ground. Suppose we say that to speak of the concept of mind, truth or justice is to speak of the use of “mind,” “true” or “just.” We speak of concepts not in order to try to fly into a Platonic heaven (something even the early G. E. Moore did) but to make it evident we are not only talking about the use of English terms but, as well, about the equivalent terms in other languages.1 But if this is what the analytical study of concepts comes to why is it not an empirical study of the way language works and so a task for linguists or at least a task to be shared between linguists and philosophers? Still, is it not clear that here we have with such a conception a task for philosophy? But it is clear that if we so construe philosophy it would no longer be the autonomous discipline or activity that philosophers have prized.

Relatedly it is not clear what an analytical study of concepts comes to. Is it a description of the concepts, an interpretation of their import, an explanation of them and if so in what sense of “explanation” or is it a logical analysis of these concepts, but, if so, in what sense of “logic”? Logic seems to be essentially a matter of proving theorems and making various kinds of derivations but that does not seem at least to be what is involved in the conceptual analysis of concepts.2 How is clarifying the concept of mind, truth or justice anything like a matter of proving theorems or making derivations? If we call it logical analysis what does “logical” mean here? It does not seem (pace Carnap and Hans Reichenbach) that anything like derivation or demonstration is at issue here. But then what is? What does an analytical study of concepts come to and how is it – or is it – the unique province of philosophy?3

Even if such issues can be reasonably resolved we need to ask questions about the second articulation of what philosophy is. If philosophy is not the study of just any concepts you like or the concept of science (as some logical empiricists believed) but of pivotal concepts that in the most general way organize our thought and action, then it is incumbent on the philosopher so conceiving of philosophy to say what they are and to elucidate a bit what he means by “pivotal” and “organizing” here. Presumably truth, existence, human being, knowledge, rationality, reasonability, belief, evidence, goodness, justice, beauty, freedom, God and immortality are such concepts, though plenty of contemporary philosophers would not so regard the last two. Indeed some of them think of these last two as pseudo-concepts to be excised from rational discourse. But historically for many philosophers they have been thought to be pivotal organizing concepts. A good philosophy would have to have some way of deciding such an issue or at least showing that some ways of looking at things were more plausible or reasonable than others. But
in getting tolerably clear about such a conception of philosophy we need to get an idea of what we are talking about when we say that these are pivotal concepts that organize our thought or action. And why action as well as thought? Is a proper philosophy to tell us (in some general way) what to do or what right or just action is? Is that a role for the analytical study of anything? And why the qualification “general” in that characterization of philosophy? How general and in what way? Perhaps such general characterizations will yield only platitudes?

There is a different but perhaps complimentary conception of philosophy that has often been articulated. R. G. Collingwood was an important defender of such a view. It can be stated as follows:

3. Philosophy articulates and makes perspicuous the underlying presuppositions of science, morality, politics, art, religion – in short our various central forms of life – and seeks to give a coherent account or at least a coherent picture of how they fit together.

I think it is clear enough that 3 is compatible with 1 and 2. Indeed it is probably the case that a coherent account or even a reasonable picture of how these forms of life hang together could not be had without some clarification of the concepts involved. So difficulties that attach to 1 will be passed on to 3. But 3, as interesting as it is, has problems of its own. What is a “presupposition” and what is an “underlying” one? Perhaps “underlying presupposition” is pleonastic? That last point aside, how do we detect them in science, morality, politics and the like and in our life-world more generally? (Hans Reichenbach, for example, argued that what Kant took to be a presupposition of science, namely, the principle of causality, wasn’t one.)

Is some principle of induction a presupposition for science, is some conception of rationality one for morals and is some conception of the ubiquity of power one for politics? But then how is induction, rationality and power to be conceived? And how is philosophy to articulate them?

Presumably philosophy seeks to isolate these presuppositions, dig them out so to speak from the flow of talk and conceptualization in these various forms of life and the workings of the social practices that are part of these forms of life. In making the presuppositions perspicuous, it presumably states them clearly and further clarifies them where necessary. (But when is it necessary? Do we have any conception of “complete clarity” or even of “sufficient clarity” here?) It will also display their relations. But again we can ask is what is to be displayed their logical relations, causal relations, or some other kinds of relations? And if some other kind what other kinds? Moreover, is it reasonable to expect them to fit together? And, if so, how is this fit to be conceived? We also need some characterization of what a form of life is and of what science, morality, politics, art and religion are and some demarcation of them as well. What are the respective spheres of religion and science or religion and morality or morality and politics and how is this to be determined?

It is not only with “underlying” that we have something problematic, but with “central” as well in “central forms of life.” There are many forms of life. Some at certain times and places have greater or lesser importance. Some, even though they are ubiquitous, are certainly not central. Morality is ubiquitous and central. Exorcism is not ubiquitous across cultures and times, but during some times and at some places it has been both central and ubiquitous. Many-sidedness is ubiquitous but not central. Still how we are to determine what is central and what is not is not by any means crystal clear. Perhaps it would be pervasively contested at least across times and cultures?

Finally, what is it to give an account of how these forms of life hang together? What kind of an account are we to give of their hanging together? An empirical descriptive
account, an interpretive account, a causal account, some kind of critical normative account or some combination of them and if so in what combination? Should it be some kind of metaphysical or categorial account which is distinct from any of the above and, if so, what is meant by “metaphysical” or “categorial” here? If such an account can be nothing more than a picture, how is the metaphor “picture” to be understood? And we should recall that there were philosophers in the heyday of logical empiricism who spoke of verbal magic here: who rejected picture thinking with its analogism.

The questions I have directed toward 3, as well as 1 and 2, are questions typical enough of philosophical activity particularly on the analytical side. So by illustration you can get a glimpse of what some characteristic philosophical activity looks like. I do not mean to give to understand by posing all these questions that I think these conceptions of philosophy are worthless or even unfruitful. I think all three have a point and indeed an important point. It is also easier in philosophy, as elsewhere, to ask questions than to give answers. The Socrateses always have an easier time of it than the Aristotles. It is also difficult to ascertain or even guess when we have fecklessly asked a question, asked a question once too often, as sometimes children do and as something clever sillies turn into a vocation. It is also difficult over such matters, as it typically is in philosophy, to determine where the burden of proof lies. Once this has been firmly established the battle is often at least half won. Sometimes it may even be all over. Which ones (if any) of these questions would need to be answered could only be ascertained by a detailed examination of these conceptions.

For certain purposes we might ignore them for all three conceptualizations. For any given inquiry certain questions need to be begged; certain things need to stand fast. Sometimes there is a point in taking a certain conception of philosophy and seeing how far we can run with it. This seems to me true of 1, 2 and 3. But in our present context in trying to give a sense of how contested and contestable the very concept of philosophy is it is important to see something of the range of questions that can readily, and not altogether artificially, be raised about these different conceptions. We, if we reflect on them, will come to see how reasonable persons might come to reject any or all of these conceptions.

There is a fourth conception of what philosophy is or at least should be that rests on the prior acceptance of something like 3 as a legitimate task of philosophy, but conceives of what it takes to be a still more fundamental or important task for philosophy, a task which gives expression to a distinct conceptualization of the subject.

4. Philosophy is a critique (a cluster of interrelated criticisms) of the underlying presuppositions of the various forms of life, practices, institutions and ideologies of humankind.

Here, too, a whole battery of questions emerge about such a conception. How does philosophy gain a foothold here? For “philosophy” in 4 we could have substituted, perhaps without loss of content, “social criticism,” “theology,” “critical social science,” “cultural critique” and perhaps other things as well. (That most of us now would not put theology in that role says something about what Max Weber characterized as the relentless disenchantment of the world.) Not a few philosophers, Wittgenstein, John Wisdom and Richard Rorty, but as well many linguistic philosophers with no philosophically therapeutic intentions, would challenge that philosophy had any or could reasonably come to have any such critical function. What kind of knowledge or understanding — knowing things that no one else can know so well — would philosophy have to have to
enable it to play the role of culture critic? What criterion does it have that enables it to show that whole domains of science are in error, that morality itself (not just some philosopher's or ideologist's conception of morality) rests on a mistake, that religion is irrational, that art is devoid of insight or that philosophy is something that yields us a kind of insight not possessed by the ordinary person? It assumes (or at least seems to assume) that philosophers have some discipline called epistemology that tells them in general terms what knowledge really is or what justified beliefs really are so that philosophy could, using this discipline, find out if there really is any knowledge or justified beliefs in any science or in morality or in any area of everyday life. It would tell us how to fix belief in any domain whatsoever. But, as the critique of foundationalism and other general conceptions of normative epistemology has forced on our attention, it is very questionable indeed whether we have any clear conception or even a fruitfully suggestive conception of how we might come to have such a general criterion for knowledge or justified belief. It is not clear that philosophers, or anyone else for that matter, could say anything non-trivial about what knowledge—any kind of knowledge at all in any domain—consists in or whether there are such general criteria at all. Perhaps we can, perhaps there is such philosophical knowledge or such a general Archimedean point, but in our very conceptualization of what philosophy is we cannot reasonably start by just assuming it. We, in some other sense of "philosophy," would have to argue for it and once we had, if we ever would have, such a sound argument then we could make a claim for its being a part of but not the whole of what philosophy is.

Could we substitute "logic" for epistemology as providing the substance of the rationale for such critique? I think not. Logic could show us whether certain sentences or propositions were consistent with each other and it could help us see the logical implications of our beliefs or at least those that had been or at least could be codified by logic. This can in some circumstances be helpful. Reasonable people do not want to have genuinely inconsistent beliefs and in gaining a perspicuous representation of our beliefs it is useful to have clearly displayed at least some of the implications of our beliefs and their logical relations. But a set of beliefs or even a whole belief-system (say, Christian Science) might be consistent and perspicuously displayed and still be utterly absurd or mythological. Logic can help in critiquing our presuppositions by showing us what follows from what and what can consistently go together but it can hardly provide the core of our critique. But we seem with such a conception of philosophy to be without any clear understanding of what critique would or could come to here.

There is a related conception of philosophy advocated by some pragmatists among others that has related difficulties but if they can be overcome it could afford us something quite useful.

5. Philosophy is the criticism of criticisms.

Here philosophy goes überhaupt from literary criticism, cultural critique, social critique, critical social science, science, theology and any of the more determinate forms of critique. It gives us, in the form of a critical theory of inquiry, general criteria of criticism for assessing the soundness or at least the plausibility of our various forms and types of criticism and of our different styles of reasoning. It could show us, for example, that our specific canons of criticism, say, in literary criticism or social criticism, were mistaken. Dewey, in a wide sense of "logic," called this theory of inquiry logic. It can (and does) use the consistency criteria and implicative criteria of formal logic (logic period as we characterized it above). But, as we have seen, that is not enough to yield a philosophical
criticism that would give us a basis for a “criticism of criticisms.” Dewey made non-formal claims about method—scientific method—where “science” is broadly conceived. But this looks at least as if it would be afflicted by difficulties similar to those of epistemology discussed above.

Richard Rorty, a neo-pragmatist generally sympathetic to Dewey, argues against Dewey (and Sidney Hook as well) that such a conception of inquiry vacillates between truisms which would not give us anything sufficiently substantive to so critique forms of life and something more substantive which is also problematical. The truisms are just that, but Dewey in seeking something of more substance for his theory of inquiry falls into some of the mistakes of the epistemological tradition. Again, we have a conception of philosophy which is interesting, but would for its defence require extensive philosophical argument in some other sense of “philosophy” than that of “a criticism of criticisms.”

III

The above five conceptions of philosophy all more or less securely belong to what has been called critical philosophy: philosophy whose central aim is not to construct speculative systems of thought designed to reveal or articulate “ultimate reality” or “the ultimate nature of reality” in its interconnections, but to critically analyze the concepts and beliefs that we have or the beliefs and concepts, or conceptualizations that some philosopher, scientist or other intellectual might concoct. But there are other more speculative, more metaphysically oriented conceptions of philosophy—let us call them speculative philosophies—which conceptualize philosophy differently than any of the ways conceptualized above. They are no longer, at least in an Anglo-American-Scandinavian environment, the dominant conceptions of philosophy, but historically they have been very important and they have some able defenders today. Two, themselves rather different conceptions, will serve as examples. Jacques Maritain, a distinguished Catholic philosopher, defines philosophy as follows:

6. Philosophy is the science which by the light of reason studies the first causes or highest principles of all things—is, in other words, the science of things in their first causes, in so far as these belong to the natural order.10

It is evident at a glance how distant this conception is from the conceptions of critical philosophy. But, even more than critical philosophy, it is very problematical indeed. For starters to think of philosophy as a science is, at best, perplexing. It is certainly not an experimental science like physics or biology and it is not a formal science either like mathematics or logic. But that seems at least to exhaust all the sciences there are. Perhaps in using “science” Maritain means no more than what in German is meant by “Wissenschaft” where what is being referred to by Wissenschaft is any systematic study. On that conception, theology is a science but so is astrology or perhaps even Christian Science and that seems at least to be a reductio of so speaking of science. At least, if this is Maritain’s construal, calling philosophy a science is not very useful. Presumably he intends something more vigorous, but it is not evident what that something is. And to speak, as Maritain does, of what “by the light of reason” philosophy studies is to use a metaphor which very much needs unpacking. What is it to speak of “reason” here? Is to study something “by the light of reason” simply “to think carefully, systematically and thoroughly” about it? But if that is so why doesn’t Maritain simply say so? Speaking of “by
the light of reason.” given the tradition of the Ancients and Classical rationalism, certainly suggests something more.\textsuperscript{11} But what is this more? It suggests some kind of “rational insight” going beyond argument and the marshalling of evidence.\textsuperscript{12} But what is that? Is there such a thing? How does it differ – or does it – from feeling strongly about something or having a sense of certainty? At the very least such a conception needs careful elucidation. It appears at least only to obfuscate things. It does not help us gain a clear conception of what philosophy should be.

Right after his talk of “by the light of reason,” Maritain speaks of philosophy as studying “the first causes or highest principles of all things”, but this, as a way of characterizing philosophy, is even more question begging than some of the other conceptions we have discussed. Perhaps there are first causes or, what is something else again, highest principles and perhaps, what is still something else again, “the highest principles of all things”, but lots of good philosophers have not thought that. A few have even thought that such conceptions are incoherent.\textsuperscript{13} It is a bad mistake to so define philosophy such that thinkers with such beliefs could not even be doing philosophy. Rather “philosophy” should be so defined as to accommodate both kinds of thinkers and then within philosophy itself arguments should be developed as to whether or not we could prove or in some way establish (either conclusively or probabilistically) that there are or are not such first causes or highest principles of all things or whether either or both of these conceptions are incoherent. We should not beg such issues in our very definition of what philosophy is.

A similar thing is true of Maritain’s “the science of things in their first causes, in so far as these belong to the natural order.” This repeats the other assumptions and introduces the conception of “the natural order.” But this just assumes what many philosophers and others as well would deny, that there is something to contrast with “the natural order,” e.g., “the supernatural order,” “the spiritual order,” “the non-natural order,” “the moral order.” Perhaps some such contrast can be coherently and even justifiably be made. But it is not evident that it can. There are philosophers who think “the natural order” is pleonastic and others who think that, whether it is pleonastic or not, that is all there is. Again we do not want to preclude such lines of thought in our very definition of philosophy.

The second example that I shall give of the speculative tradition defining philosophy comes from Maurice Cornforth, a well-known English Marxist of a preanalytical Marxist vintage. Cornforth tells us that

7. Philosophy is the attempt to understand the nature of the world and our place and destiny in it.\textsuperscript{14}

With this conception there is the problem, inherent in some of the other conceptions as well, of distinguishing philosophy from theology, religion, myth or science. We could substitute any of those things for “philosophy” in Cornforth’s definition. The various sciences attempt to understand the nature of the world as do religion and theology, at least on some conceptualizations. Some of the sciences try to show our place in the world and a few scientists, more frequently as they approach retirement, might think that some bits of science attempt to understand our destiny (assuming we have such a thing). Certainly religion, myth and theology all try to aid us in understanding our destiny. So to characterize philosophy as Cornforth does, does not distinguish it clearly from these other disciplines or activities.

Such a conceptualization does not at all help to demarcate philosophy. To say,
moreover, that only philosophy really helps us to understand the nature of things is a rather incredible claim to make in the face of the development of physics and biology. Furthermore, again such a claim needs to be argued in philosophy and not to be made as part of its very definition. Some philosophers think that if anything explains such things it is science. Others, skeptical about any claims of anyone to explain something so general as the nature of the world, let alone our place and destiny in it, will be through and through convinced that it is not the task of philosophy or indeed any other discipline to give such explanations. Some will believe that attempted explanations here can be nothing other than pseudo-explanations. Again such things as Comforth claims here should be argued for inside philosophy and not made a part of its very definition.

IV

Perhaps other definitions of philosophy which capture better the tradition of speculative philosophy can be given. Still the above two conceptions are representative of the once dominant tradition. To get a fair perspective here it should be added that defenders of such a tradition can and sometimes do accept a good bit of critical philosophy. They could believe, for example, that philosophy should involve the analytical study of concepts, indeed that that was even a necessary first step in philosophy, but they still take that study to be ancillary to speculative philosophy. The central thing, these speculative philosophers believe, is that we should seek to attain an understanding of the ultimate principles in terms of which everything, including the nature and destiny of human beings, can be explained. To satisfy our craving for explanation, we need, speculative philosophers believe, to have explanations which will give us an ultimate accounting of things. Being the sort of creatures we are our hearts and minds will not, the claim goes, rest easy until we have such ultimate explanations of ultimate reality. That is the fundamental metaphysical urge that cannot be theorized away. We are, among other things, metaphysical animals. We will push, typically, perhaps always inarticulately, towards ultimate explanations and ultimate principles which show us what ultimate reality is like.

In doing this we should start by characterizing our presupposed concepts and beliefs accurately and clearly in a manner that shows their connections. We should then seek to ascertain which of these presupposed beliefs and presuppositions are true and, as well, determine which of the true beliefs or presuppositions are the more fundamental and, with respect to the more fundamental ones, define the concepts embedded in them and, using these defined concepts, try, using beliefs expressive of them, to derive other true beliefs from the more fundamental ones. Some of our concepts may be so fundamental, say, goodness or truth, that we will have to take them as primitive. But, whether this is so or not, we should seek to articulate our most fundamental concepts and the ultimate presuppositions containing them and to see how they hang together. This may give us a picture of ultimate reality: the point where a quest for explanation must come to an end where we have something that on reflection we recognize to be self-evident.

This conception of the classical tradition of metaphysical or speculative philosophy is a tall order. Not many people any more think that anything like this can be achieved or that we should even try to achieve it. We could not, of course, prove an ultimate principle for if we could prove it it would not be ultimate, nor can we give grounds for ultimate explanations for again if we could give grounds for them they would not be ultimate explanations. But somehow we should just be able to see—to intuit—that certain explanations are ultimate and certain principles are true ultimate principles. We will just,
the claim goes, intuitively apprehend them to be true – self-evidently true – if we will be genuinely and carefully reflective.\(^9\)

The problems here are myriad. Perhaps there are very general propositions which are self-evidently true such as “Red things are colored”; “Puppies are young dogs”; “All objects have extension”; “Every event has a cause” (as distinct from “Every effect has a cause”). All or some of these may be self-evident and true, but, even if they are, they are not very substantive and it is also not so evident why we should regard them as ultimate or fundamental and try to base our understanding of reality on them. Some, as in my first two examples, are true because they are true by definition. We just mean, in the appropriate context and when not talking about seals, by “puppy” a “young dog” and something that is red is just something that we will also say is colored. We have no understanding of what it would be like for something to be red but not colored. This just reflects our conceptual practices. (I say “conceptual practices” rather than “linguistic practices” for the same thing holds for equivalent sentences in other languages.)

The other two examples are more problematic. “Every effect has a cause,” like the first two, is true by definition. All three sentences are sentences which, in the pre-Quinean analytic tradition, would have been called analytic, i.e., true in virtue of their meanings or use alone. But “Every event has a cause” is not equivalent to “Every effect has a cause” and most people would be hesitant to claim that determinism is true by definition or by stipulation and some would not think that determinism is true at all. It is, moreover, not at all clear what would count towards establishing the truth or falsity of “Every event has a cause.” Some say the phenomena of quantum mechanics refutes it. But others give quantum mechanics a reading that is compatible with determinism. What is clear enough is that “Every event has a cause,” while being a bit more substantive than “Every effect has a cause,” is not self-evident. Indeed it might not be true at all. Similar things are even more evidently true of “All objects have extension.” Some think it is plainly false because of mathematical objects and other universals or, alternatively, because of intentional objects. Others would refuse to give numbers or redness or humanity or the State such a Platonistic reading. Indeed some think such talk incoherent. But some will think of “intentional objects” and they will not think of them as having extension, though they will not Platonize them either. In any event “objects have extension” is hardly true by definition or a self-evident truth.

More generally where, on the one hand, we get anything among these general truisms (or perhaps in some instances falsisms) with some substantive bite they are not self-evident and how we would establish their truth or falsity is (to put it minimally) unclear. Where, on the other, we get something that has the smack of self-evidence we get something with little content.

The above aside, talk of “ultimate reality,” “ultimate explanations” and “ultimate principles” is obscure. Do we have in mind the fundamental particles of physics when we speak of ultimate reality? If we do then that is plainly something for physics (an empirical science) to ascertain and claim, if any discipline does, and not for philosophers to pontificate on, let alone for it to be something that is taken to be a part of the very province of philosophy. But it is not only that but as well that there is an historical element involved here that would surely not be welcome to the metaphysician. What physicists took to be the fundamental particles 200 years ago is not what they take to be the fundamental particles now and it is a safe bet that what they will take to be the fundamental particles 200 years from now will be still different. There is no way of just determining, from some perspective outside of history, from some view from nowhere, from some Absolute perspective, what the fundamental particles must be. Some
metaphysicians wish a priori to determine this. But that is not something they can do. This is, ultimately, whatever its genesis, an experimental issue and there is no second-guessing physics. The philosopher cannot even say what the fundamental particles are let alone what they must be. There is, moreover, no gaining something which is self-evident here.

It is, however, doubtful that most metaphysicians have something like this in mind when they talk about ultimate reality. Some—physicalists or materialists—will say that everything is physical, leaving the concrete specification of what is physical to the scientist; mental matters (sensations, believings, thoughts) are physical processes or occurrences (perhaps brain states, perhaps grosser functions of the body as well) and numbers (so called mathematical objects) are human constructs. Metaphysicians out of the Cartesian tradition will say that besides physical things and processes there are, as a distinct kind of reality, mental things or processes and that neither can be reduced to the other. Other metaphysicians—they may or may not be dualists—will say that in addition to material things there are spiritual principles revealing a supernatural reality which is the ultimate reality and is the explanation and ultimate cause of all the other realities.

These metaphysical stances can and sometimes do receive a far more sophisticated articulation than what is gestured at here, but the point in this context is that in any of their formulations they are far from self-evident. It is not clear how any of them could be established or that they are even coherent. But even granted, as many now think about physicalism, that it can be coherently stated, it is far from clear what would establish it to be true or the most probably correct account we have of ultimate reality: the way things are and must be. Perhaps among sophisticated philosophers physicalism is the only metaphysical game in town if indeed there are any plausible metaphysical games in or out of town. But that judgment may say more about the contemporary Weltgeist than about anything that could be soundly argued. But that any such metaphysical claim at all—dualist, physicalist, supernaturalist—could be established is even a more fundamental problem. The attack on metaphysics has been going on for the last 200 years; it is not just a phenomena of logical empiricism and goes with, though it may not be dependent on, the rise of science as a fundamental source of explanation of the way the world is, including the human world. The metaphysician's a priori constructions carry little conviction in our Weltgeist. If we have metaphysics at all it is very likely to be metaphysics within the limits of science alone.20

Some will say that such an attitude is a scientistic attitude reflecting the dominant ideology of our time, namely, the groundless and indeed a partisan belief that what science (most particularly the hard natural sciences) cannot tell us humankind cannot know. It is this ideology, not clear thinking, not a clearly articulated critical philosophy, not the development of science or logic, that sustains, some believe, the anti-metaphysical attitude of our time. This itself is a reasonably widely held view, but people who would pounce on it as a rationale for sticking with speculative philosophy should at least take pause that such leading critics of scientism as Hilary Putnam, Richard Rorty, Stanley Cavell, and Jürgen Habermas are also rejectors of metaphysics.21

V

I want in bringing this essay to a close to give something of a rationale (a very partial rationale) for why "What is philosophy?" has itself been so variously construed and to make a suggestion about how we might possibly and plausibly set about giving some order to that chaos.

"Philosophy," as we have noted, like "science," "religion," "morality," "explanation,"
"knowledge," and "belief and unlike "rock," "tree," "human being," "bear," and "fly," is not a name of a natural kind. It has no essence or underlying structure that it must meet or be to be philosophy. There are no necessary and sufficient conditions for something being philosophical any more than there are necessary and sufficient conditions for something being scientific. What is science is what scientists do when they do what they regard as science. What is philosophical is what philosophers do when they are doing things they themselves regard as philosophical. So in saying what is philosophy or what is science, it would seem, at first blush at least, that we should go completely descriptivist: what is philosophical is what philosophers do. They, of course, do many different things so philosophy is a many varied splendor just as is science.

However, it should also be noted that "philosophy" and "science" are also used eulogistically.21 There are disputes among people who regard themselves as scientists about what disciplines are really scientific. Some physicists and logician-mathematicians (to say nothing of traditionalist analytic philosophers) wish to rule psychology, sociology, and anthropology from the scientific domain or to rule out at least large parts of those disciplines (pseudo-disciplines). Moreover, there is disagreement among scientists about which putative scientists are really scientists. Some will deny that accolade to Freud, Skinner, Marx, Pareto, and Piaget. Philosophers have similar difficulties with what is philosophy. Some logicians do not regard moral and political philosophy as really philosophy and some moral and political philosophers return the compliment. Whether Montaigne, Pascal, Vico, Herder, Kierkegaard, Newman, Nietzsche, or even (in some quarters) Hegel are really philosophers is a matter of dispute, though not whether Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Kant are. The latter group, it is pervasively believed, are securely a part of the canon. But we have to be careful even here. For a long time Hegel would have been securely a part of the canon and in some quarters Marx would be too. But some now would deny that canonical status to Hegel. And some, including some who think very highly of Marx indeed, would deny that he was a philosopher or say that philosophy was only a marginal concern of his: a concern principally of his youth. Nietzsche is perhaps the most instructive example. For Continental philosophers as different as Heidegger, Habermas, Gadamer, Foucault, and Derrida, Nietzsche is securely a part of the canon as he is for such Anglo-American mavericks as Danto, Taylor, MacIntyre, Rorty, and Nehamas. Indeed some think of him as a very central figure in the Western tradition. But even such astute and non-parti pris Anglo-American philosophers as Isaiah Berlin, Iris Murdoch, Stuart Hampshire, and Anthony Quinton in their 1955 discussion, "Philosophy and Belief," all agreed that Nietzsche plainly was not a philosopher at all but, as important as he was, was a sage going Weltanschauungish.24

So, as with scientists on science, so with philosophers on philosophy, if we try to go purely descriptive, we will see that this is hardly possible for there is disagreement about who are the philosophers and who are not. The canon shifts. If it is replied that the canon shifts but not completely so, then it should in turn be replied that if we take only the most ubiquitously certain members we would constrain our conception of philosophy far more than most people who get paid for teaching something that is called "philosophy" in the university curriculum would desire or be willing to accept. It is a hot matter of dispute whether Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Emerson, Newman, or Marx are really philosophers. And it is equally a matter of dispute, though the dispute is less torrid (fewer people care), whether Church, Gödel, Brouwer, Schefer, Montague, or Foucault (to take a very different example) are really philosophers, though some of them taught in philosophy departments. The dispute over cases like these (particularly the former cases) tends to
be hot for it touches nerves about what philosophy really is or should be.

Indeed, for the most part, even the securest part of the canon is not entirely safe. Some might argue that Plato is really more of a sage than a philosopher. He should, in a way he standardly is not, be classified with Nietzsche or perhaps Hegel as a sage (in Hegel’s case an obscure and pompous sage) who told big tales of a Weltschmähungswitsch nature and not with Aristotle and Descartes who are plainly philosophers. And some might even say that Hobbes and Hume, as important as they are, should not be classified as philosophers but as social scientists with Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson. To go contemporary, really partisan people (blinder dogmatists) would deny that Heidegger, Derrida or perhaps even Dewey are really philosophers while other partisans (equally blinkered dogmatists, though of a different sort) would deny that Frege, Gödel, Church, Montague, or perhaps even Tarski are really philosophers. They are instead, such people would claim, formal scientists concerned with the (if there is such a thing) foundations of mathematics, logic, or the semantics of formal languages. But that, some would say, is not philosophy just as others would deny that what Heidegger and Derrida do is philosophy.

I think partisanship pushed to such extremes is absurd. Yet it is also true that some think that what Heidegger did or what Frege did is the really most crucial move in contemporary philosophy: a central turning point, while others think of the curse of Heidegger or the curse of Frege. That is, they think of one or another of these philosophers (usually not both, though I could understand a pragmatist thinking that) as taking philosophy down the garden path.

The above considerations were designed to show how impossible it is to simply go descriptivist about what is philosophy. Philosophers deeply differ about their subject and, for most of them, it is important to them what is thought here as can be seen from the fights, or near fights, which typically break out in philosophy departments when it comes to hiring a new member. More than competence, field, or (what presumably is a no-no but in reality is not) personality is typically at issue.

Going purely prescriptive will not solve things either. “Rule out Hegel, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Derrida: banish them to the literature departments” or “Rule out Frege, Tarski, Montague, and Church: banish them to the mathematics or linguistics departments” does not solve anything either except practically. (Practically because it is important that all of these people get studied in universities. In what departments they are studied is less important.)

Where prescriptions are given reasons need to be given for them if they are not to be purely arbitrary and the giving of reasons will turn on beliefs about what is really important or desirable in philosophy or about what can reasonably be done in philosophy, given what we know now or can reasonably believe and what our situation is. It seems that philosophy isn’t essentially anything, there being no thoroughly uncontestable answers to what the function or functions of philosophy is. (Indeed it may not even have a function.) So what is essential to argue is (a) about what really is (if anything) important and desirable about philosophy (“philosophy” unavoidably construed in some determinate way or other) and (b) what can be done in philosophy, given our situation and what we can know now or can reasonably believe. Perhaps there are and can be no tolerably objective answers to those two questions. But that cannot be reasonably accepted a priori or taken as something which is just plainly so.

Perhaps, given this state of affairs, some rational reconstruction of philosophy is possible and desirable. To employ a method of rational reconstruction is neither simply to prescribe nor simply to describe. A rational reconstruction of philosophy will not apply
to everything which has previously gone under the name of philosophy. Rational reconstructions are in part prescriptive but not arbitrarily so and they will leave intact considerable segments of what (now speaking descriptively) had previously been widely regarded as philosophy. The rational reconstructionist will argue that unless some prescriptive restrictions are made one will not be able to demarcate philosophy from other forms of inquiry or reflective activities or articulations of Weltanschauung. In demarcating philosophy more precisely, say, from science, literature, religion, or pure sagery, the rational reconstructor calls attention to differences. But in rationally reconstructing she will at least keep the most central figures of the canon: Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, and Hegel and she will try to show what (if indeed there is any determinate thing) about them that makes us quite unequivocally classify all of them as philosophers. With this in hand, we will be in a somewhat better position to know, with respect to disputed figures, e.g., Kierkegaard, Herder, Smith, Ferguson, Nietzsche, Marx, Thales, whom to include and whom to exclude from the canon.

There will, of course, be dispute about when a reconstruction is rational, for how rationality is to be conceived is itself a deeply contested notion. Moreover, answering these questions of rational reconstruction seems at least to require some plausible answer to our previous questions (a) and (b): to wit, answers to questions about what (if anything) is really important about philosophy and what can be done in philosophy, given our situation and what we can know now or can reasonably believe. (The two cannot, of course, be answered independently of each other.) Perhaps there is no consensus or even a reasonable basis for a consensus here. If that is so, then the prospects for a rational reconstruction of philosophy are bleak.25

Notes


11 Hans Reichenbach, *The Rise of Scientific Philosophy*, 3, 11, 70, 78, and 304. His conception should be contrasted with that of the Frankfurt School and particularly that of Max Horkheimer.


19 Ibid.


I have tried to do something to show how very difficult it is to achieve a rational consensus concerning philosophy in my “Can there be Justified Philosophical Beliefs?” *Iyyun* 40 (July 1991), 235-70. I have tried to show where our rational reconstruction should take us in my *After the Demise of the Tradition* and in my *Transforming Philosophy: A Metaphilosophical Inquiry* (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1995). See also my “On Transforming Philosophy,” *Soundings* LXXIII, no. 4 (Winter 1990), 575-93.