



Philosophy Defined

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§36. Earlier speculations being passed over we see that among the Greeks, before there had arisen any notion of Philosophy in general, those particular forms of it from which the general notion was to arise, were hypotheses respecting some universal principle which was the essence of all kinds of being. To the question — “What is that invariable existence of which these are variable states?” there were sundry answers — Water, Air, Fire. A class of suppositions of this all-embracing character having been propounded, it became Possible for Pythagoras to conceive of Philosophy in the abstract, as knowledge the most remote from practical ends; and to define it as “knowledge of immaterial and eternal things;” “the cause of the material existence of things” being, in his view, Number. Thereafter, was continued a pursuit of Philosophy as some deepest explanation of the Universe, assumed to be possible, whether actually reached in any case or not. And in the course of this pursuit, various such interpretations were given as that “One is the beginning of all things;” that “the One is God;” that “the One is Finite;” that “the One is Infinite;” that “Intelligence is the governing principle of things;” and so on. From all which it is plain that the knowledge supposed to constitute Philosophy, differed from other knowledge in its exhaustive character. After the Sceptics had shaken men’s faith in their powers of reaching such transcendent knowledge, there grew up a much-restricted conception of Philosophy. Under Socrates, and still more under the Stoics, Philosophy became little else than the doctrine of right living. Not indeed that the proper ruling of conduct, as conceived by sundry of the later Greek thinkers to constitute the subject-matter of Philosophy, answered to what was popularly understood by the proper ruling of conduct. The injunctions of Zeno were not of the same class as those which guided men in their daily observances, sacrifices, customs, all having more or less of religious sanction; but they were principles of action enunciated without reference to times, or persons, or special cases. What, then, was the constant element in these unlike ideas of Philosophy held by the ancients? Clearly this last idea agrees with the first, in implying that Philosophy seeks for wide and deep truths, as distinguished from the multitudinous detailed truths which the surfaces of things and actions present. By comparing the conceptions of Philosophy that have been current in modern times, we get a like result.

The disciples of Schelling and Fichte join the Hegelian in ridiculing the so-called Philosophy which has been current in England. Not without reason, they laugh on reading of “Philosophical instruments;” and would deny that any one of the papers in the Philosophical Transactions has the least claim to come under such a title. Retaliating on their critics, the English may, and most of them do, reject as absurd the imagined Philosophy of the German schools. They hold that whether consciousness does or does not vouch for the existence of something beyond itself, it at any rate cannot comprehend that something;

and that hence, in so far as any Philosophy professes to be an Ontology, it is false. These two views cancel one another over large parts of their areas. The English criticism on the Germans, cuts off from Philosophy all that is regarded as absolute knowledge. The German criticism on the English tacitly implies that if Philosophy is limited to the relative, it is at any rate not concerned with those aspects of the relative which are embodied in mathematical formulae, in accounts of physical researches, in chemical analyses, or in descriptions of species and reports of physiological experiments. Now what has the too-wide German conception in common with the conception current among English men of science; which, narrow and crude as it is, is not so narrow and crude as their misuse of the word philosophical indicates? The two have this in common, that neither Germans nor English apply the word to unsystematized knowledge — to knowledge quite un-coordinated with other knowledge. Even the most limited specialist would not describe as philosophical, an essay which, dealing wholly with details, manifested no perception of the bearings of those details on wider truths.

The vague idea of Philosophy thus raised may be rendered more definite by comparing what has been known in England as Natural Philosophy with that development of it called Positive Philosophy. Though, as M. Comte admits, the two consist of knowledge essentially the same in kind; yet, by having put this kind of knowledge into a more coherent form, he has given it more of that character to which the term philosophical is applied. Without saying anything about the character of his co-ordination, it must be conceded that, by the fact of its co-ordination, the body of knowledge organized by him has a better claim to the title Philosophy, than has the comparatively-unorganized body of knowledge named Natural Philosophy.

If subdivisions of Philosophy be contrasted with one another or with the whole, the same implication comes out. Moral Philosophy and Political Philosophy, agree with Philosophy at large in the comprehensiveness of their reasonings and conclusions. Though under the head Moral Philosophy, we treat of human actions as right or wrong, we do not include special directions for behaviour in school, at table, or on the Exchange; and though Political Philosophy has for its topic the conduct of men in their public relations, it does not concert itself with modes of voting or details of administration. Both of these sections of Philosophy contemplate particular instances only as illustrating truths of wide application.

§37. Thus every one of these conceptions implies belief in a possible way of knowing things more completely than they are known through simple experiences, mechanically accumulated in memory or heaped up in cyclopaedias. Though in the extent of the sphere which they have supposed Philosophy to fill, men have differed and still differ very widely; yet there is a real if unavowed agreement among them in signifying by this title a knowledge which transcends ordinary knowledge. That which remains as the common element in these conceptions of Philosophy, after the elimination of their discordant elements, is — knowledge of the highest degree of generality. We see this tacitly asserted by the simultaneous inclusion of God, Nature, and Man, within its scope; or still more distinctly by the division of Philosophy as a whole into Theological, Physical, Ethical, etc. For that which characterizes the genus of which these are species, must be something more general than that which distinguishes any one species.

What must be the shape here given to this conception? Though persistently conscious of a Power manifested to us, we have abandoned as futile the attempt to learn anything respecting that Power, and so have shut out Philosophy from much of the domain supposed

to belong to it. The domain left is that occupied by Science. Science concert itself with the co-existences and sequences among phenomena; grouping these at first into generalizations of a simple or low order, and rising gradually to higher and more extended generalizations. But if so, where remains any subject-matter for Philosophy?

The reply is — Philosophy may still properly be the title retained for knowledge of the highest generality. Science means merely the family of the Sciences — stands for nothing more than the sum of knowledge formed of their contributions; and ignores the knowledge constituted by the fusion of these contributions into a whole. As usage has defined it, Science consists of truths existing more or less separated, and does not recognize these truths as entirely integrated. An illustration will make the difference clear.

If we ascribe the flow of a river to the same force which causes the fall of a stone, we make a statement that belongs to a certain division of Science. If, to explain how gravitation produces this movement in a direction almost horizontal, we cite the law that fluids subject to mechanical forces exert re-active forces which are equal in all directions, we formulate a wider truth, containing the scientific interpretations of many other phenomena; as those presented by the fountain, the hydraulic press, the steam-engine, the air-pump. And when this proposition, extending only to the dynamics of fluids, is merged in a proposition of general dynamics, comprehending the laws of movement of solids as well as of fluids, there is reached a yet higher truth; but still a truth that comes wholly within the realm of Science. Again, looking around at Birds and Mammals, suppose we say that air-breathing animals are hot-blooded; and that then, remembering how Reptiles, which also breathe air, are not much warmer than their media, we say, more truly, that animals (bulks being equal) have temperatures proportionate to the quantities of air they breathe; and that then, calling to mind certain large fish, as the tunny, which maintain a heat considerably above that of the water they swim in, we further correct the generalization by saying that the temperature varies as the rate of oxygenation of the blood; and that then, modifying the statement to meet other criticisms, we finally assert the relation to be between the amount of heat and the amount of molecular change — supposing we do all this, we state scientific truths that are successively wider and more complete, but truths which, to the last, remain purely scientific. Once more if, guided by mercantile experiences, we reach the conclusions that prices rise when the demand exceeds the supply; that commodities flow from places where they are abundant to places where they are scarce; that the industries of different localities are determined in their kinds mainly by the facilities which the localities afford for them; and if, studying these generalizations of political economy, we trace them all to the truth that each man seeks satisfaction for his desires in ways costing the smallest efforts — such social phenomena being resultants of individual actions so guided; we are still dealing with the propositions of Science only.

How, then, is Philosophy constituted? It is constituted by carrying a stage further the process indicated. So long as these truths are known only apart and regarded as independent, even the most general of them cannot without laxity of speech be called philosophical. But when, having been severally reduced to a mechanical axiom, a principle of molecular physics, and a law of social action, they are contemplated together as corollaries of some ultimate truth, then we rise to the kind of knowledge which constitutes Philosophy proper.

The truths of Philosophy thus bear the same relation to the highest scientific truths, that each of these bears to lower scientific truths. As each widest generalization of Science comprehends and consolidates the narrower generalizations of its own division; so the

generalizations of Philosophy comprehend and consolidate the widest generalizations of Science. It is therefore a knowledge the extreme opposite in kind to that which experience first accumulates. It is the final product of that process which begins with a mere colligation of crude observations, goes on establishing propositions that are broader and more separated from particular cases, and ends in universal propositions. Or to bring the definition to its simplest and clearest form: — Knowledge of the lowest kind is un-unified knowledge; Science is partially-unified knowledge; Philosophy is completely-unified knowledge.

§38. Such, at least, is the meaning we must here give to the word Philosophy, if we employ it at all. In so defining it, we accept that which is common to the various conceptions of it current among both ancients and moderns — rejecting those elements in which these conceptions disagree. In short, we are simply giving precision to that application of the word which has been gradually establishing itself.

Two forms of Philosophy as thus understood, may be distinguished and dealt with separately. On the one hand, the things contemplated may be the universal truths: all particular truths referred to being used simply for proof or elucidation of these universal truths. On the other hand, setting out with the universal truths, the things contemplated may be the particular truths as interpreted by them. In both cases we deal with the universal truths; but in the one case they are passive and in the other case active — in the one case they form the products of exploration and in the other case the instruments of exploration. These divisions we may appropriately call General Philosophy and Special Philosophy respectively.

The remainder of this volume will be devoted to General Philosophy. Special Philosophy, divided into parts determined by the natures of the phenomena treated, will be the subject-matter of subsequent volumes.

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