

What Is Philosophy?

The subject-matter of philosophy. When we set out to study philosophy we enter the fascinating realm of the theoretically thinking mind, of wisdom that has been accumulated over the centuries. The oldest definition of philosophy is attributed by legend to the famous Pythagoras. Too modest to wish to be called wise, he said that he was not a wise man, but only a lover of wisdom—a philosopher (from the Greek "philos"—loving and "sophia"—wisdom). From time immemorial philosophy in the true sense has been understood as a desire for the highest knowledge and wisdom, as distinct from everyday and other forms of applied knowledge, and also from religious or mythological forms of thinking. The thinkers of ancient times sought an understanding of the world that would replace the obsolete picture produced by myth and legend. Philosophical thought has traditionally been distinguished by its orientation on understanding the foundations of existence at the limits of our mental powers, the mechanisms of human cognitive activity, the essence not only of the phenomena of nature but also of social life, man and culture. This has always had very great practical as well as theoretical significance; it is essential for an understanding of the meaning and goals of life. Philosophy's aim from the beginning has been to give a general understanding of the universe that could provide a basis for the understanding of life, something on which to build a rational art of the existence of man and society.

Consideration of the subject-matter of philosophy involves an investigation of the place this sphere of knowledge occupies in the system of culture as a whole, alongside science, art, politics, religion, morality, and so on. This investigation presupposes two approaches. According to one approach, in ancient times all man's knowledge of the world and himself was considered to be wisdom and was called philosophy. Subsequently, as this knowledge became differentiated and was broken down into separate disciplines, one science after another developed out of philosophy regarded as the totality of human knowledge. In this way mathematics, physics, medicine and other sciences appeared. Philosophy is thus regarded as the mother of all the sciences. This idea was aptly expressed by Descartes, who compared philosophy to a tree with metaphysics as its roots, physics as its trunk and all the other sciences comprised in the three main disciplines of medicine, mechanics and ethics as its branches. This broad notion of philosophy, not only in ancient times but even in the last century, led to its being identified with theoretical mechanics, biology and other sciences. We know, for example, that Newton's main work was called *Philosophiae naturalis principia mathematica*, while Linnaeus' book bore the title *Philosophia botanica*. Lamarck called his work *Philosophie zoologique*, and Laplace, *Essai philosophique sur les probabilités*. This is one approach to the subject-matter of philosophy. The other and, in our view, the more reliable, is that in the historically early stages of the development of culture within the framework of general, only slightly differentiated knowledge, spontaneous notions of the specific subject of philosophical knowledge as such took shape. At first, these were natural philosophical views oriented on nature, on the universe, on the origin and ultimate destination of all things. The ancient thinkers were keenly interested in cosmogonic problems. This afterwards came to be called ontology—the study of the nature of being. Later they turned to the problems of cognition and this gave rise to the theory of knowledge, epistemology, and to logic. The philosophical disciplines proper comprise ethics—the study of moral problems, and aesthetics—the study of the aesthetic attitude to reality and of artistic creativity. Until recent times the psychological questions involved in understanding the essence of mental activity, consciousness and the individual personality were treated as philosophical problems. In short, philosophy has for centuries been interested in the problems of human existence, of man's value orientations, his spiritual world with all its various planes, and also his socio-political and religious positions. Year after year, century after century philosophy has steadily absorbed, in a generalised form, not only the achievements of science and art but the overall experience of all humanity, the wisdom comprised in the thought and life of nations, and has passed all this on from generation to generation.

To answer the question, "What is the subject-matter of philosophy?", let us first consider the sphere of human knowledge in general. Scientists investigate the motion of celestial bodies, the world of physical and chemical phenomena, the realm of animate nature, the sphere of mental activity, the spirit or intellect and, finally, the world of social phenomena. All these things make up the subject-matter of the sciences: astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, sociology, and history. And since all our knowledge is contained in such phenomena and all the content of our knowledge is broken down into the aforementioned sciences, it would seem that there is no place there for philosophy. If a philosopher decided to study mental phenomena, a psychologist would say to him, "This is my province." If he wished to undertake an investigation of the world of animate creatures, he would encounter similar objections from the biologist. So it turns out that since the sciences have taken over the investigation of all the separate spheres of existence, there is nothing left for philosophy. Apparently it shares the fate of Shakespeare's King Lear, who in old age gave away all his possessions to his daughters and was then turned out like a beggar into the street. But if we look a little deeper, we find that there are some questions that have never formed part of the subject-matter of the separate sciences. For example, Thales set himself the task of discovering the origin of everything that exists, the first principles of such being and what it would all ultimately become. His conclusion was that everything arose from water and would return to water, that water was the foundation of all existence. Democritus asked what everything, material and spiritual, was composed of and replied that it was all composed of atoms. We should note that the questions posed by Thales and Democritus were not questions of biology or psychology. These thinkers did not ask what vegetable and animal organisms were made of, what formed the substance of the world of mental activity; they were interested in the world in general, both material and spiritual, so it is clear that philosophers must have been thinking about the first principle of the existence of the universe—celestial bodies, crystals, organisms, and mental processes. Since it concerned not any separate part of existence, but existence in general, it could not form the subject-matter of any specific science. It was the subject matter of philosophy—the science of the initial principles of the existence of the world, humanity and cognition. Admittedly in ancient times when philosophy had only just come into being, it was "omnivorous", in the sense that philosophers then took an interest in all or many fields of knowledge, and from a professional point of view. It is no accident that works on the history of philosophy, particularly as we go back into the centuries, are full of a great deal of non-philosophical facts and reflections that refer rather to specific scientific, literary, artistic or socio-political subjects. But this is another question. Today, too, the philosopher may engage in research in some specific field of knowledge, let us say, physics, and a physicist may be professionally interested in philosophy. But this does not mean that the specific problems of physics are the subject-matter of philosophy and vice versa. It was exactly the same in ancient times. Of course, this does not imply that, say, in physics or some other sphere of knowledge there has never been any philosophy. But philosophers, past and present, have always had to know the general principles of all the sciences.

To sum up then, the subject-matter of philosophical cognition is not only the universe and its most general laws as they exist in themselves, but also and more particularly the relationship between man and the universe. Thus it may be said that the basic question of philosophy, that is, the question of the relationship of thinking to being, became a part of its subject-matter at the early stages of the formation of philosophical thought.

Unlike everyday, socio-political, and artistic thinking, philosophical reasoning characteristically seeks to single out the "frontier" foundations or principles of existence and cognition, to discover the general logic of universal motion, the history of society and human life, the principles of the rational relationship between the individual and the world, which can be found only in knowledge of the laws of the life of the universe itself, for the logic of human thought and rational action can be deduced only from the logic of life in the fullest sense.

Naturally, the subject of philosophy has never remained static. It has developed historically and taken its own shape along with the development of human culture, including the culture of thought itself, its ever deeper and universal penetration into the

"pores" of existence. Moreover, at various periods one or another philosophical school or individual thinker has given preference to questions of ontology, the theory of being, or to questions of the theory of knowledge and logic, or to problems of morality, philosophical anthropology, and so on.

If we considered the history of philosophy and what this or that thinker regarded as the basic subject of philosophical reflection, the answers would be many and various. Socrates, for example, urged that philosophy should stop pondering the first principles of existence and concentrate on knowing about human affairs, particularly the problems of morality. According to Plato, the purpose of philosophy was to know the essence, the eternal and the intransient, and according to Aristotle, philosophy should understand the causes and principles of things. Francis Bacon described philosophy as the universal science, from which all other sciences grew like the branches of a tree. According to Descartes, it was the highest wisdom that could be achieved by logic; it taught the reason how to set about obtaining knowledge of as yet unknown truths. Locke and Hume saw the task of philosophy in elaborating a theory of knowledge and theory of morality. Helvetius thought the main question was the nature of human happiness, and Rousseau, social inequality and the ways of overcoming it. Hegel defined philosophy as the highest stage of theoretical thought, the self-cognition of the absolute idea, and called philosophy the epoch embodied in thought. Pisarev believed that the aim of philosophy was to solve, once and for all, the inevitable problem of the hungry and the naked. But Camus, for example, considered that the fundamental problem of philosophy was the question of whether life was worth living at all.

The subject-matter of philosophy acquired its fullest and richest exposition in the system of Marxist philosophy, in dialectical materialism, which does not stand aside from the main channel of development of human philosophical thought but synthesises all its greatest achievements. Dialectical materialism is the creative development of the worldwide history of philosophical thought on the basis of generalisation of social practice, science, art and culture as a whole. It is the study of the universal connections and laws of the motion and development of natural, social, and spiritual reality, of the forms and methods of cognising the world, of man and his existence in the world. This philosophy aims at evolving an integral system of views of the world and man's place in it, of the relationship between consciousness and matter, the spiritual and the material. It investigates man's cognitive and value-defining, moral, aesthetic and religious, and also socio political relationship to the events of natural and social life. Moreover, it is oriented on the highest principles of humanism.

Historical materialism is an inseparable component of Marxist philosophy, which is also a field for the development of ethics and aesthetics and philosophy's cognition of itself in its historical development.

Philosophy is thus a unity of world-view and methodology. No specific science, no art, no socio-political or any other such theory can perform the highest role of creating a world-view and methodology. This is an ancient and specifically philosophical historical mission, the fulfilment of which presupposes possession not simply of an overall view of the world, of the relationships between man and the universe, but of an extremely generalised, integral system of universal concepts, that is to say, principles, categories, and laws revealing man's place in the world and his relation to the world. World-view and methodology are not parts but functions of philosophy.

The specific nature of philosophical cognition. Philosophical cognition of reality is as ancient as the socially developed and rationally thinking human being himself. This is understandable enough, for the very fact of man's existence in remotest times presupposes a fairly well developed curiosity, an ability to state and solve not just the purely practical questions of everyday life but also problems involving a view of the world. The original form of world-view was mythology, the imaginal and basically fantastic, generalised reflection of phenomena in which a certain general idea is thought of in personified, symbolical,

sensuously concrete, plastically vivid and hyper trophied form, as in the fairy-tale. But whereas the fairy-tale is accepted as pure invention, the myth is regarded as something real. Mythological images were credited with superhuman and generally supernatural properties and the relationships of the deified elements were understood by analogy with human relationships. Thus the goddess Demeter generalised everything connected with field work, the harvest and fertility. Beauty—male and female—was personified and generalised in the plastic images of Eros and the sumptuous Aphrodite. Wisdom in its general form was personified by the goddess Pallas Athena.

The whole essence of the mythological consciousness consists in generalised images being thought of substantially, that is, as something animately material, corporeal. The mythological consciousness, which was characteristic of all peoples of the world at the tribal stage, was syncretic, it synthesised all spiritual culture—the first gleams of science, the artistic understanding of existence, and religious and philosophical views.

The foundation of this consciousness was laid by the Orient, which throughout its subsequent history was to be characterised by this all-embracing, intuitively integral and often exceptionally penetrating thought, which attained the highest peaks of wisdom. World civilisation was cradled in the Orient, but its European branch stems from ancient Greece, where the history of European philosophy began.

Philosophy arose in the epoch of the formation of the slave society possessing a state and legal framework. It grew out of mythology and in conflict with it, and this was reflected in the development of rational, theoretical thought resting on a system of concepts in contrast to mythology as a system of images. The starting point of philosophical thought was spontaneous materialism, as expressed in such assertions as, "everything is from water" or "everything is from air", or from earth, fire, atoms, that is to say, from certain material or energetic first principles of existence. This idea of primeval sensuously reliable essences may look childishly naive from the standpoint of modern knowledge, but from the historical point of view it is very profound. Here we have the first attempt to discredit the gods as the creators of existence. This natural philosophical standpoint contains the notion that everything arises not as a result of miraculous creation out of nothing but through the natural transformation of one form of matter into another.

Philosophy was at first interested in the same problems as mythology: the secrets of the universe, the origin of the world, the nature of the soul and how it was related to the body, how man got to know the world, what was goodness, truth and beauty. Philosophy, however, took a different approach to these problems. Whereas the mythological consciousness tended to see any form of action in terms of fantasy images of supernatural forces, philosophy evolved such a concept as Logos, the idea of a universal cosmic reason as the law, that is, the real logic of things and events, the regulating principle of all existence. The categories of "dao", "karma", and so on, reflected an analogous principle in the systems of Oriental philosophy. Although philosophy contested with mythology from the outset, it was for a long time, and in some systems of idealism it still remains, a prisoner of the mythological forms of thought.

In its early stages philosophy was guided mainly by nature and emerged as natural philosophy seeking to understand the world as a unified whole. The turning point in the history, for example, of Greek philosophy was the philosophy of Socrates, who centred his theory on the problems of man, on the moral foundations of life, on analysis of the general concepts of truth, goodness and beauty.

As we have said, the task of philosophy is to elucidate the universal principles of existence and thought in their development. But in what way can such cognition take place? An astronomer studies the celestial bodies, a biologist, living organisms. Both are guided by experience, observation and experiment. But how is the philosopher to study his subject? The most natural

assumption is that in order to know the material and spiritual world in its general principles, in man's relation to the world, the philosopher must use his synthesising mental power to digest the data that are provided by each science separately and culture as a whole, that is to say, the total experience of life, his own personal life and that of society.

But if we allow that the task of philosophy is to know the general principles of existence and thought and that the building of such a system involves summarising the entire history of scientific, artistic and everyday knowledge, we are immediately confronted with a number of objections which are usually raised against philosophy and to which we shall try to reply in the most general outline. The first objection is as follows: If you maintain that philosophy summarises the history of human knowledge, you are saying that it sets itself an impossible task. But why? Because the human mind is historically and individually limited. It cannot embrace all knowledge. This could be done in the times of, say, Democritus or Aristotle, but now with the enormous specialisation of the sciences no man, however gifted, even if he studied the sciences for 24 hours a day and had a superhuman memory, could assimilate enough science to feel at home in any sphere of knowledge, let alone summarise the history of the development of all culture and foresee its future destiny. Who then would dare to claim the title of philosopher?! To this we can offer the following answer. When we say that to build a system of philosophical knowledge one must summarise all human experience, this does not imply that a philosopher must know all the sciences, all literature and art in all their professional detail, as the specialist in any given field of knowledge, or some narrow branch of that field, knows it. To work out a system of philosophical knowledge it is enough to have a serious grasp of the basic principles of the separate sciences. And such an understanding is quite within the scope of the creative mind with a capacity for broad synthesising. History tells us that the outstanding philosophers were thoroughly acquainted with the basic principles of the science and culture of their day. Even if they lacked a knowledge of some of the details, for which they were often reproached by the professionals in this or that field, this had no serious significance for the integrity and depth of their philosophical schemes. Take, for example, Kant or Hegel. They kept abreast of the scientific achievements of their day, although they were criticised for incorrect formulations of certain propositions of individual sciences. These brilliant thinkers, and many others besides them, nourished generations of scientists and cultural workers with their profound views of the world and ideas on methodology.

A scientist of such encyclopaedic knowledge as Darwin was able on the basis of his massive accumulation of facts to evolve the famous law of natural selection and discover the driving forces of development of living organisms, but this does not, of course, rule out the possibility that there were some facts and propositions in biology with which he was not acquainted. And yet Darwin was a genius. What then can one say of the average research scientist, especially with the kind of differentiation of biology which we have today and which has turned it into a whole complex of sciences?!

Let us consider how philosophical cognition differs from the form of knowledge that is considered to be scientific. Most people know that there are differences of opinion in all sciences. But in each of them, despite contradictory views and opinions, there is a relative consensus on most propositions and particularly the basic principles of the given discipline. It is a different matter with philosophy, which for centuries has been divided by numerous completely incompatible and contradictory points of view. Can one speak of the scientific nature of philosophical cognition with such fundamental differences of approach to the same problem?! Moreover, philosophers constantly argue about things that have long since been proved and decided. Since ancient times this has been used as an argument against considering philosophy a science at all. Sometimes it is claimed that human reason can absorb only partial knowledge obtained through experience, observation and experiment, that our reason can be relied upon, say, in mathematics and in the concrete sciences, but that it becomes totally unreliable as soon as it goes beyond the bounds of experience and plunges into the deep waters of eternal and universal problems—the underlying basis of existence, the knowability of the world, good and evil, man's essential nature and destination, free will, and so on.

In defining the specific nature of philosophical cognition and contrasting it with scientific knowledge many contemporary Western scientists assume that philosophy does not stand up to genuine scientific testing of its principles by means of experiment, let alone its ability to make effective forecasts. It is also suggested that the task of the philosopher, unlike that of the scientist, is not to consider problems but only mysteries; philosophy should concern itself with the mysterious and give people the opportunity to live in the sphere of the mysterious, to fill their hearts with a sense of the sacramental, the unknowable. Hence the conclusion that philosophy is not a science, that what distinguishes it from science is in fact its very essence. By entering the field of what is fundamentally unknowable philosophy supposedly discards scientific method and seeks other, irrational, emotional-intuitive roads to the truth and in the final analysis resorts like religion to faith in the supernatural or adopts an intermediate position between science and religion. "Philosophy, as I shall understand the word, is something intermediate between theology and science. Like theology, it consists of speculations on matters as to which definite knowledge has, so far, been unascertainable; but like science, it appeals to human reason rather than to authority; whether that of tradition or that of revelation. All *definite* knowledge—so I should contend—belongs to science. But between theology and science there is a No Man's Land, exposed to attack from both sides; this No Man's Land is philosophy." [1] These words belong to the eminent British philosopher Bertrand Russell, who was widely versed both in philosophy and in the specialised sciences, and was both a writer and active in public affairs. He could have been given the following answer. There are various philosophical theories, some of which are indeed close to religion and provide its theoretical foundation. These are the idealist philosophical doctrines. But there are also philosophical systems that are built on scientific principles, that generalise the achievements of sciences and are themselves scientific both in their theoretical principles and in their method. Dialectical materialism is precisely such a philosophical system. The concept of scientificity can also be applied to other philosophical systems to the extent that they have a rational, objective content which truly reflects material and spiritual reality and the trends of its development. It should be said that the measure of scientificity varies in philosophy. The content of this or that philosophical theory, despite some errors, may contain much that is scientific in so far as it is theoretically and practically provable and rests on scientific discovery, on overall human experience, and in so far as it has beneficially influenced the formation of people's spiritual world, their world-view, has tended to evolve heuristic methods of cognising the world and helped nations to transform nature and social reality in the interests of mankind and society. Consequently the question should not be stated in the abstract. Is philosophy scientific or unscientific in general? When speaking of the scientific nature of philosophical cognition and its varying degrees of scientificity it should be stressed that philosophy is not simply a science but a different science, distinct from the concrete sciences, an extremely generalised and, moreover, higher, universally synthetic form of theoretical knowledge of the world—knowledge of the world at its key points, in its relationship to man and the relationship of man to the world. And it is this distinction that constitutes the specific nature of philosophical knowledge as such, while keeping it in a generally scientific framework.

Philosophical cognition—and this is its specific feature—is not directly aimed at producing empirical research programmes and does not experiment with the help of technical apparatus. In fact, the idea of the infinite nature of space and time, the admissibility of human free will, the nature of consciousness or conscience as ideal phenomena—can such things be tested by means of experiment? It is often claimed that philosophy possesses only one means of obtaining the truth—pure speculation or speculative thought. The extreme expression of this point of view was Plato's advice that in order to understand the essence of things we should close our ears and eyes and sink into reflection. This detachment from sensuous impressions is permissible and may even be extremely effective but only on the basis of experience that has already been acquired by perceptive observation and profound thought.

Philosophical cognition presupposes the development of a synthesising power of the mind. This fruitful gift is a characteristic in some degree not only of the real philosophers, the professionals, but also of thinkers in various other fields of knowledge and

creative work who are usually given the general title of "thinker". These are exceptional people with deeply generalising and penetrating minds. Such, for example, were Leonardo da Vinci, Galileo, Descartes, Leibnitz, Lomonosov, Goethe, Sechenov, Leo Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Einstein. Even if one has favourable natural gifts, the ability to think philosophically requires long and persistent study, perhaps even more than any other science. Why is this so? Because the truly philosophical mind is formed on the basis of a vast experience of life, a mature personality with a broad horizon, a profound and comprehensive knowledge of science and art, whereas in other fields in which encyclopaedic knowledge is not so essential, highly gifted people often achieve striking scientific results in early youth, especially, for example, in mathematics.

True philosophical cognition is then the scientific cognition of the world. It theoretically substantiates, proves its principles and with equal thoroughness refutes other, untenable positions. And in this respect it differs substantially, for example, from religious consciousness, based on faith and revelation.

The thinking of, for example, the physicist, the biologist or the mathematician has its own specific nature dictated by the nature of his subject. The specific nature of philosophical cognition is likewise determined by the special features of its own subject. This specific nature, however, does not put philosophical cognition outside the realm of science, as long as it keeps to the plane of rational theoretically and factually provable argument. By the very nature of their professional thinking the major philosophers have always been theoreticians with versatile minds, developed, of course, to different degrees, depending on a multiplicity of natural, psychological and social factors.

Philosophical cognition as a historically evolved means of knowing the world requires not only a well-practised style of integral, systemic thinking based on the whole history of culture. It also requires a certain level of both innate and educated, or self-educated, mental abilities and a special, universally oriented frame of mind, including its emotional aspect, in which a person is immersed during creative inspiration or meditation on what constitutes the subject-matter of this special field of human knowledge, which has generalised the experience of scientific and social revolutions, and of gigantic socio-political movements—the whole vast "laboratory" known as world history. Philosophical cognition draws its principles from reality itself both directly and through the prism of the whole culture, of everything amassed by the people, by scientists, artists, politicians, teachers, doctors, and technologists. Today, without a profound, encyclopaedic grasp of human culture as a whole, it is impossible to make an effective investigation of socially significant philosophical problems. But for this encyclopaedic knowledge is not enough. There must also be a special gift for integrative thinking, which must be developed by uniting natural-scientific, mathematical and technical knowledge with knowledge of the humanities, art, history and philosophy. Amid this virtually unencompassable ocean of knowledge stands philosophical culture, which plays a tremendous role in forming man's intellectual world, raising him to the level of an independently thinking individual, to civic self-consciousness. The philosophical dimension of the human mind cannot be ignored.

In the modern world, very great significance belongs to the axiological function of philosophical knowledge—the correlation or comparison of the aims and means of cognition and action with humanitarian ideals, their social, ethical appraisal. A narrow "scientism" in the interpretation of philosophy, that is to say, restriction of its field of generalisation by reliance mainly on natural-scientific experiment, drastically reduces a person's actual relationship to reality to a cognitive, and narrowly cognitive at that, relationship. But this does not correspond to the actual state of affairs or to the interests of man himself and society. Philosophical cognition steers a course composed of many vectors, and interacts with all forms of culture.

Notes

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Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy and Its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present* Day, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1962, p. 13.

