# What is Philosophy?

GRAHAM PRIEST

## 1. Introduction

'What is philosophy?'[1] is a question that every professional philosopher must ask themself sometimes. In a sense, of course, they know: they spend much time doing it. But in another sense, the answer to the question is not at all obvious. In the same way, any person knows by acquaintance what breathing is; but this does not mean that they know the nature of breathing: its mechanism and function. The nature of breathing, in this sense, is now well understood; the nature of philosophy, by contrast, is still very much an open question. One of the reasons this is so is that the nature of philosophy is itself a *philosophical* question, so uncontentious answers are not to be expected—if philosophers ever ceased disagreeing with one another our profession would be done for. (More of this anon.) Moreover, it is a *hard* philosophical question. Many great philosophers, including Plato, Hegel, and others, have suggested answers to it. But their answers would now be given little credence. In the thirty or so years that I have been doing philosophy there have been two views about the nature of philosophy which have had wide acceptance. These are the views of the later Wittgenstein and of Derrida. In the first two parts of this paper I will describe these views and explain why I find them unsatisfactory. I will then go on, in the final part of paper, to outline a view that inspires more confidence in me.

## 2. Wittgenstein

### 2.1 Wittgenstein's View of Language

Wittgenstein's views about the nature of philosophy, as put forward in the *Philosophical Investigations* derive from his view about the

---

[1]    This paper is the text of an inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Melbourne, November 2003. It was dedicated to a previous incumbent of the Boyce Gibson chair there, Len Goddard.

**Graham Priest**

nature of language. So first let me start by describing this. It is, of course, dangerous and potentially misleading to summarise any philosopher's views in a few words—especially Wittgenstein's. However, let me try.[2]

The *Investigations* starts with an attack on the kind of theory of language that Wittgenstein himself had held in the *Tractatus*— though he rarely mentions the *Tractatus* by name. There, he held that all non-logical words are names, and name objects. Propositions comprising the names correspond to facts comprising the objects. This view rejected, a quite different understanding of how language works is developed. One cannot understand language outwith the practice of its use. Every language is constituted by a *language game*, that is, a set of rules for the use of words together with related non-linguistic actions. To understand the meanings of words is to be able to follow the practice determined by those rules. (What, exactly, that amounts to is another familiar Wittgensteinian theme.) Thus, to take a simple example, suppose that I am in the habit of meeting a friend at a pre-arranged time and place, but on irregular days. When either of us wants to meet, we simply send an email to the other saying 'okay'. The meaning of 'okay' in this language game is that each should go to the usual place at the usual time the next day.

Wittgenstein is fond of a chess analogy to illustrate the view. What makes a certain chess piece the piece it is? It has nothing to do with what it is made of or its shape. These are arbitrary. What makes the piece the piece it is, is simply that it is moved in accordance with certain rules. To understand its meaning, as it were, is to be able to follow these rules. Chess pieces are like words; the rules of chess are like the practice for the use of the words; and the institution of playing chess is like the language game.

It should be noted that we need to take very seriously the thought that many of the relevant actions in a language game are non-linguistic. Thus, the language of money, for example, would make no sense outwith the economic practice of exchanging goods. Thus, language is embedded in *a form of life*, as Wittgenstein puts it. If you are not party to that form of life, there is no way that you can understand the language embedded in it. Someone who does

---

[2]    In what follows, section references are to L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968). Italics in all quotations in this paper (from Wittgenstein or anyone else) are original.

190

not understand what banks are and how they function, for example, cannot understand the meaning of 'cash a cheque'.

*2.2 Wittgenstein's View of Philosophy*

Now to the picture of philosophy that comes out of the *Investigations*. *Prima facie*, philosophical problems are hard, and usually very difficult to resolve. This is an illusion, thinks Wittgenstein. If they are difficult to resolve, this is not because they are hard; it is because they are, in a sense, meaningless. Philosophical problems arise when we take some word out of the language game which gives it life, and persist in trying to use it none the less. In such cases the words are literally meaningless, though we may not realise this.

> The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language … (Sec. 119.)

> Philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*. (Sec. 38.)

How can something apparently meaningful turn out meaningless? A trivial example: it makes sense to ask what time it now is in Perth, in London, and so on. So it looks as though it makes sense to ask what time it is at the South Pole. But it doesn't. Our practice of assigning times to spots on the globe does not apply to a pole since all lines of longitude run through it. Turning specifically to philosophy: some philosophers like to argue about whether our actions (or some of them anyway) are really free. Maybe our genetic structure, childhood conditioning, etc., leave us no freedom in action. But what of this word 'freedom'? What is our practice concerning its use? We say that something is not freely chosen when circumstances leave one no option, when someone has a gun to one's head, and so on. When I go into the pub and choose to have red wine rather than white, it is not like this. To talk of *real freedom*, and suppose that we mean something transcending this, is simply deceived.

> When philosophers use a word—"knowledge", "being", "object", "I", "proposition", "name"—and try to grasp the

191

*essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word actually ever used in this way in the language game which is its original home?—

What we do is bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use. (Sec. 116.)

The way to do philosophy, then, is to remind people of the language game in which a word is embedded. The philosophical problem will then evaporate.

[Philosophical problems are] not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognise those workings: *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language. (Sec. 109.)

The work of a philosopher consists in assembling reminders for particular purposes. (Sec. 127.)

It follows that there is no such thing as a substantial philosophical theory or doctrine. Such a theory could result only from a misuse of words.

If one tried to advance theses in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree with them. (Sec. 128.)

In philosophy we do not draw conclusions ... Philosophy only states what everyone admits. (Sec. 599.)

Philosophy is a method for disabusing people of all such doctrines. It is simply a kind of therapy.

The philosopher's treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness. (Sec. 255.)

What is your aim in philosophy?—To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle. (Sec. 309.)

It is clear that Wittgenstein's notion of philosophy is a very deflationary one. Nothing of any substance is going to come out of philosophy. In particular, it cannot disturb any other views.

Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can only describe it.

192

For it cannot give it any foundation either.

It leaves everything as it is. (Sec. 124.)

It is natural to suppose, as some of Wittgenstein's followers did, that a certain relativism follows. Suppose, for example, that there are two religions. They each have their own languages, language games, and forms of life. Philosophy is in no position to critique what goes on in those games; both are equally valid. Indeed, since there is nothing more to the language than the way that it is employed in each game, there is no sense in which either game can be wrong; both are "in order as they are". All language games are equal.

*2.3 A Critique*

Wittgenstein's account of philosophy is a very disappointing one. Worse, it is pretty much self-refuting. For after all, the claim that 'philosophy only states what everyone admits' *is* a pretty substantial philosophical thesis—and not one that everyone would admit. And when Wittgenstein mounts the case for his conception of philosophy in the *Investigations*, he does a lot more than assemble reminders about how words like 'philosophy' are used. He clearly mounts *arguments* to various effects, such as, for example, against the view that all non-logical words are names. So what has gone wrong?

This is not the place to discuss Wittgenstein's account of language. Though we could spend much time discussing this, let us assume it to be correct. The important point is that, even if it is right, Wittgenstein's account of philosophy does not follow. Wittgenstein simply assumes that there is only one way for a philosophical problem to arise: when some notion is pulled out of its linguistic home-game, and so becomes meaningless. This assumption is false, for at least a couple of reasons, as we may see.

Consider, for example, medical practice. It is not uncommon for a doctor to face a dilemma. For example: should they or should they not actively prolong this patient's life, when it is one of suffering and unwelcome to them? The language of ethics, 'should', 'obligation', 'wrong', is intrinsic to their deliberations, not pulled out from the practice. Yet this is certainly a philosophical issue: ethical decision-making of this kind, and the principles that inform it, go back to Ancient Greek philosophy.

193

**Graham Priest**

Or another example: time is the source of many philosophical conundrums. For example, philosophers love to discuss whether it is possible to travel backwards in time. Is this pulling "time talk" out of its language game? What game is that? For a start, it is a lot more than simply reading our watches. The way we measure time is certainly crucial, but this cannot be divorced from the physics of the devices that measure time and the theories in which these are embedded. Before we realise it, then, we are embroiled in scientific discussion of the nature of time. Indeed, both the Special and General Theories of Relativity have implications for the question I mooted. It is hard to know whether the question is, in the end, a philosophical one or a scientific one. The answer is probably 'both at the same time'. At any rate, the question does not arise because language has "gone on holiday".

Philosophical problems may arise, then, within their home game. But there is another, and perhaps more profound way in which they may arise. Let us grant that the rules of the language game determine the *meanings* of the sentences employed; it does not follow that they determine their truth. Once the meaning of a claim is understood, its truth is normally a substantial *further* issue. Consider a scientific "language game", for example. In the 17th century, scientists played the language game of phlogiston: they knew when to use the word, when to say the substance was given off, when to say they had it in a bottle. For all that, it turned out that the phlogiston theory was incorrect, and had to be ditched. Lavoisier and other chemists mounted a critique of the whole "language game". Of course, the critique was a scientific one, not a philosophical one. But the critique of a language game can be philosophical too.

Consider the language of a religion (Christian, Islam, Homeric, etc.; it doesn't matter here.) There are well defined practices for using the word 'god' in these religions, and definite forms of life in which these are embedded. But you don't have to play the game to understand the language; you just have to know how to. And you may well hold that many of the claims made about god in the language are simply false. One is not, presumably, going to establish this with a scientific argument; but one may well hope to do so with a philosophical critique. One may argue, for example, that the Christian views concerning the omnipotence and benevolence of God are simply refuted by the amount and nature of the suffering in the world. One might disagree, of course, about the cogency of that particular argument. But the important point here is that critiques of this kind are clearly possible. And they are a standard,

194

and well established, part of philosophy. Philosophy, then, may be deployed in, as we might put it, the critique of a whole language game.

Whether the sorts of situations I have just described give rise to all substantial philosophical problems—I doubt it—we need not go into here. They suffice to show that, and why, Wittgenstein's pessimistic account of the nature of philosophy is wrong.

## 3. Derrida

### 3.1 Derrida on the Nature of Language

So much for Wittgenstein's view of philosophy. Let us now turn to Derrida's (though this attribution must be made with some care, as I will explain). Like Wittgenstein's, this view also spins off a certain picture concerning the nature of language, so let us start with that.[3]

Derrida vehemently rejects the view that the things that we say (and write) have a determinate meaning. The words we use do not latch on to anything non-linguistic, such as Fregean senses, Tractarian objects, or anything else, which would serve to tie down meaning. Thus, for example, it might be thought that the intentions that I have when I utter something give my words a determinate sense. Suppose I say 'I have just seen the cricket'. This could mean different things—a game? an insect? What did I intend? If I examine my intentions, they were to the effect that I wanted to convey the fact that I had just seen men dressed in white playing a certain game. But 'I have just seen men dressed in white playing a certain game' is just more words—maybe "internal words", but words none the less. Quite generally, whenever we try to trace back meaning into something non-linguistic that determines meaning, we always come up empty. We never break out of language itself. As Derrida puts it (*op. cit.*, p. 158):

> … reading … cannot legitimately transgress the text towards something other than it, towards a referent (a reality that is

---

[3] The *locus classicus* for his view is J. Derrida*, Of Grammatology*, trans. G. Spivak, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press,1976). The similarities between Wittgenstein and Derrida do not end here. Some of them are pursued in ch. 14 of G. Priest*, Beyond the Limits of Thought*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

195

**Graham Priest**

> metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or towards a signifier outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside language, that is to say, in the sense that we here give to that word, outside of writing in general ... [T]he methodological considerations that we risk applying here ... are closely dependent on the general proposition that we have elaborated above; as regards the absence of the referent or the transcendental signified. *There is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside-text; *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*].

Anything non-linguistic that might serve to give utterances determinate meaning, Derrida calls a *presence*. What he is therefore against is, as he puts it, the metaphysics of presence. By deploying a method that he calls deconstruction—the nature of which we do not need to go into here—he argues against any metaphysics of presence.

But clearly, language is meaningful in some sense, so how, then, does it work? Derrida gives us an answer. The structuralists got it partly right. Words become meaningful by the contrasts—or differences—that they display with respect to each other. Thus, 'red' gets meaning by being contrasted with 'blue', 'green', etc. But they didn't go far enough. Meaning can also be generated by back references—or deferrals—to other utterances. Thus, the words 'gay' and 'straight', with their contemporary sexual meanings, mean differently from how they did thirty years ago. But they could not have come to have their present meanings had they not spun off those old meanings. Derrida coins the neologism *différance* for this amalgam of inter-linguistic contrasts and cross-references. These are what constitute the meaningfulness of language. Meaning is constituted by, as he puts it, the "play of *différance*".

Notice that the non-determinacy of meaning is a consequence of this view. For any time that someone re-uses a word, they add to, and so extend, the play of *différance* around it, and so may change its meaning. In particular, the attempt to explain what someone means, say in an act of exegesis, will encounter failure. Meanings slide in the very process. A text, then, has no determinate meaning. We can give an interpretation of it, but that itself is just another text, with no determinate meaning, and is itself just as subject to interpretation.

196

### 3.2 Derrida's (or Rorty's?) Account of Philosophy

Derrida's views about language are often taken to imply a certain view about the nature of philosophy. Whether Derrida himself subscribed to this view, I hesitate to judge. He does not, as far as I am aware, express the view explicitly himself. But the view is commonly associated with Derrida (especially, I think, in university literature departments, for reasons that will become clear) and he never (again as far as I know) disassociates himself from it. One person who both subscribes to the view and attributes it to Derrida is Rorty.[4] So let us talk of him. What you are about to get, then, may not be Derrida, but Rorty's interpretation of Derrida—or better, my interpretation of Rorty's interpretation of Derrida—or perhaps better still, your interpretation of my interpretation of Rorty's interpretation of Derrida. But given Derrida's views about the nature of language, there is nothing else that you can expect to get.

It is natural to suppose that philosophy is a truth-seeking activity. Philosophers investigate topics such as justice, meaning, consciousness. And, much as they may fail in these endeavours, they try *to get it right*. There is a determinate truth about any of these things; and if we are smart (or lucky) enough, we can find it. But if Derrida is right that our language has no determinate meaning, there can be no determinate truth either. Such cannot, therefore, be the nature of philosophy.

What, then, is it? Philosophy is simply a kind of writing—or better, many such kinds: Plato's style is very different from Kant's, etc. Philosophers write texts that make reference to many things, but, perhaps most importantly, to the writings of other philosophers. Philosophy is just this network of inter-textual connections. It is not, then, a truth-seeking activity. It is more akin to literature. Philosophers, like novelists, write things that are interesting, fun, that will sell books. Truth is not in the picture. Here is how Rorty puts it (*op. cit.*, p. 91):

> [P]hilosophy started off as a confused combination of the love of wisdom and the love of argument. It began with Plato's notion that the rigor of mathematical argumentation exposed, and could be used to correct, the pretensions of politicians and poets. As

[4]   R. Rorty, 'Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida', *New Literary History* **10** (1978–9), 228–39; reprinted as ch. 6 of Rorty's *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972–1980*, (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982). Page references in what follow are to the reprint.

philosophical thought changed and grew, inseminated by this ambivalent ἔρως, it produced shoots which took root on their own. Both wisdom and argumentation became far more than Plato dreamed. Given such nineteenth century complications as the *Bildungsroman*, non-Euclidean geometry, ideological histori-ography, the literary dandy, and the political anarchist, there is no way in which one can isolate philosophy as occupying a distinctive place in culture or concerned with a distinctive subject or proceeding by some distinctive method. One cannot even seek an essence of philosophy as an academic *Fach* (because one would first have to choose the country in whose universities' catalogues one was to look). The philosophers' own scholastic little definitions of 'philosophy' are mere polemical devices—intended to exclude from the field of honor those whose pedigrees are unfamiliar. We can pick out 'the philosophers' in the contemporary intellectual world only by noting who is commenting on a certain sequence of historical figures. All that 'philosophy' as a name for a sector of culture means is 'talk of Plato, Augustine, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Fichte, Russell … and that lot'. Philosophy is best seen as a kind of writing. It is delimited, as is any literary genre, not by form or matter, but by tradition—a family romance involving, e.g., Father Parmenides, honest old Uncle Kant, and bad brother Derrida.

## 3.3 A Critique

Rorty paints a distinctive picture here, and his words can give us a certain *frisson*: forget the truth; just write and have fun. The picture of philosophy is obviously, in its way, just as deflationary as Wittgenstein's. Is it correct?

For a start, the view is motivated by Derrida's view concerning language. We might, of course, contest this; but this is not the place. Let us, for the present occasion, grant the view. The first important point to note is that if, indeed, the Derridean story about language does have consequences of this kind, they are quite general. It is not just philosophy that is not a truth-seeking activity: no linguistic enterprise is. Thus, mathematics and science, in particular, are in the same boat. This is a somewhat bitter pill to swallow:[5] science, or scientific theories, are just stories as well? But now the conclusion that philosophy is of this kind does not seem

---

[5]   Though Rorty clearly has sympathy with it, *op.cit.*, p. 90ff.

198

quite so shocking. Even if scientific theories are not truth-seeking (despite the way that they appear to their practitioners), it remains the case that there are standards of objectivity and applicability that work in those areas, and that are not applicable to fiction. An aeroplane built according to the principles of modern aerodynamics flies. One designed according to the principles of Aristotelian dynamics would not. Disagree at the risk of life and limb. If philosophical conclusions and results are in the same ballpark, things are not so bad.

The next thing to note is that, in any case, the conclusion that language is not truth-seeking does not follow from a Derridean theory of meaning. If Derrida is right, there is no determinate meaning, and so no determinate truth. But it does not follow that there is no truth. After all, even Derrida thinks that words are meaningful—and explains how this is so. And if they are meaningful, there is, presumably, a corresponding notion of truthfulness. Sentences may come to be true, or cease to be true, as they change their meanings; but they can express truths none the less. Of course, it could be replied that it does not follow from this that all discourses are truth-seeking. Maybe physics and mathematics are truth-seeking; obviously fiction is not. (Though I fear that this sells at least certain sorts of fiction short.) Maybe philosophy is more like fiction than physics. But why suppose so? *Prima facie*, philosophers do appear, unlike novelists, to be trying to tell it like it is. When Aquinas tells us about the properties of God in the *Summa Theologica*, he is engaged in a very different enterprise from that in which Terry Pratchett is engaged when he tells us about the properties of the gods in Discworld. And for at least some philosophical issues, it seems impossible to separate them cleanly from scientific issues, as I observed in connection with time, when discussing Wittgenstein.

Indeed, Rorty's view that philosophy is not truth-seeking would seem to be quite self-refuting. When he tells us, doing philosophy, that '[Philosophy] is delimited, as is any literary genre ... by its tradition', he seems to be telling it like it is. Unlike the novelist, who does not, for a moment, expect us to believe what they say, Rorty *does* want us to believe him and come to share his view. If we don't, then we are mistaken. Similarly, when Derrida tells us (in the above quote) that 'reading ... cannot legitimately transgress the text towards ... a referent', he is telling us how he thinks language works; he wants to disabuse us of a mistaken view.

Anyone who, it seems, tries to persuade us of something in good faith, and who is not simply playing with us, is presupposing an

199

**Graham Priest**

appropriate notion of truth. They have it right; we have it wrong. Are Derrida and Rorty playing with us? I doubt it; but if they are, we have no reason to take them seriously, any more than I have to take seriously the things that you tell me if you are amusing me with riddles—'As I was going to St. Ives, I met a man with seven wives …' This is, in fact, just a special case of a well-known bind that was first observed as long ago as Plato's *Theaetetus* (171a4-c7). Someone who claims that there is no appropriate notion of truth to which assertion must answer can say anything they like. There is therefore no reason to believe them. They have argued themselves out of the game.[6]

The Derrida/Rorty account of philosophy is, then, no more adequate then Wittgenstein's. I am not naive enough to suppose that one might not attempt replies of various kinds to the objections that I have been putting to both Wittgenstein and Derrida. But for the present, anyway, it is time to move on.


## 4. Philosophy as Critique

The two accounts of philosophy that we have been looking at have a crucial feature in common. Both are self-refuting, since the way they do philosophy conflicts with the way that they say philosophy is. This would obviously seem to be a serious problem. Anyone who gives an account of philosophy, and so engages in philosophy, should at least do so in a way that is not at odds with the way they claim philosophy to be. Let us see if we can find an account of philosophy that, at least, does not face this problem.[7]

---

[6]   The point is argued at greater length by J. Passmore, in ch. 4 of *Philosophical Reasoning*, (London: Duckworth, 1970).

[7]   The two account of philosophy we have looked at have another feature in common, too: each depends on another substantial philosophical theory—about meaning in both cases. This feature is not uncommon in accounts of philosophy: Plato's account of philosophy depended on his theory of forms, Hegel's depends on his theory of *Geist*, and so on. Maybe one cannot escape this dependence sometimes, but it is clearly better if an account of philosophy does not depend on another substantial philosophical theory: such a dependence makes the account unhappily hostage to fortune. The account of philosophy to be described in this section will not have this problem either.

200

*4.1 Critique Unchained*

Let us start afresh. When Wittgenstein and Derrida philosophise about meaning they both do so critically. They both argue, object, critique. It is, indeed, unusual to find any philosopher in whose writings critical discussion does not play an important role. Similarly, there are none of us who teach philosophy who would, I presume, teach it without trying to encourage a critical attitude in his or her students. Learning philosophy is not simply learning a bunch of facts; it is learning how critically to evaluate people's ideas, including—perhaps especially—both one's own views and those of one's teachers. A simple acceptance might be fine in learning a religion, but not in learning philosophy. Whatever philosophy is, then, we might expect a critical attitude to be a central part of the story.

It cannot be the whole story, though. Such a critical attitude ought, one would hope, to play a role in most intellectual endeavours. Mathematicians scrutinise the proofs of their colleagues and students for mistakes. Experimental scientists construct elaborate experiments to see whether the theories of their theoretical colleagues stand up to the test. Historians test the accounts of their colleagues against primary sources, and so on. What distinguishes the role of criticism in philosophy is, I think, precisely that there is nothing that may not be challenged. *Anything* is a fit topic for critical scrutiny and potential rejection, including, of course, the views of other philosophers and the criticisms that they, in their turn, may come up with: that there is an external world, that there are moral values, that people other than me have minds; even the efficacy of critical reasoning itself. Naturally, these are all somewhat extreme cases of criticism, and I am not suggesting that all philosophy targets such views. It certainly does not. I cite these examples simply to illustrate that there is nothing that is sacrosanct, no criticism that is beyond the pale. This is not, of course, to say that particular philosophers *will* criticise anything. Later Medieval philosophers, for example, did not criticise the claim that God exists. But they could have done so:– had they done so, they would still have been philosophers, though not, perhaps, unexcommunicated.

It is exactly here, it seems to me, that philosophy is to be distinguished from other intellectual inquiries. In religion one is explicitly not allowed to question certain things. In history, one is not allowed to question the view that other historians have minds. And in science one may be expected to be critical of novel ideas and

201

**Graham Priest**

results, but one is not encouraged to question well entrenched and established parts of the scientific corpus. As Kuhn argued so well, a certain dogmatism is essential to both the teaching of science and to its progress.[8] Of course, entrenched parts of the corpus do fall from time to time. But this is exactly one of those points where the lines between science and philosophy blur. Just because a scientist engages in critiques that go beyond the bounds of what is normally permitted, they are engaging in philosophy. As Kuhn, probably the most influential philosopher of science of the 20th Century, himself puts it:

> It is, I think, particularly in periods of acknowledged crisis that scientists have turned to philosophical analysis as a device for unlocking the riddles of their field. Scientists have not generally needed or wanted to be philosophers. Indeed, normal science usually holds creative philosophy at arm's length ... [But it] is no accident that the emergence of Newtonian physics in the seventeenth century and of relativity and quantum mechanics in the twentieth should have been both preceded and accompanied by fundamental philosophical analyses of the contemporary research tradition. (P. 88.)

> The proliferation of competing articulations, the willingness to try anything, the expression of explicit discontent, the recourse to philosophy and to debate over fundamentals, all these are symptoms of a transition from normal to extraordinary research. (P. 91.)

I suggest, then, that philosophy is precisely that intellectual inquiry in which *anything* is open to critical challenge and scrutiny. This, at least, explains many of its salient features.

- Philosophy is subversive. Time and again, philosophers have shot at religions, political systems, public mores. They do this because they are prepared to challenge things which everybody else takes for granted, or whose rejection most people do not countenance.

---

[8]   T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, first edition 1962, second edition 1970). Page references in what follow are to this. '[S]cience students accept theories on the authority of the teacher and the text, not because of evidence. What alternatives have they, or what competence?' (p. 80); '[A scientific education] is a narrow and rigid education, probably more so than any other except perhaps in orthodox theology' (p. 166).

202

- Learning philosophy is something that many students find unsettling. This is because (unfortunately), much of the (at least contemporary Western) education system tells students what they are supposed to think—or at least, if they are allowed to criticise, where it is permissible to criticise from. When students start to learn philosophy they may well feel that they have had the rug pulled from under them.
- Philosophy is of universal import. Concerning any field of inquiry, one may ask pertinent philosophical questions. One does this when one challenges things that the inquiry itself takes for granted. This is exactly what the philosopher has licence to do.[9]

### 4.2 Philosophy: The Constructive Side

I have suggested that philosophy is precisely that subject where anything can be challenged and criticised. This may make it sound terribly negative, as though all that philosophers try to do is knock things down. That's not a terribly attractive picture. Neither is it an accurate one. For philosophy is a highly *constructive* enterprise. Philosophers are responsible for creating many new ideas, systems of thought, pictures of the world and its features. The accounts of the nature of language of both Wittgenstein and Derrida, to give one simple example, are both highly original and creative. Isn't this an aspect of philosophy that I have entirely ignored?

I don't think so. This kind of creativity is not something over and above the critical spirit. It is required by it in its most thoroughgoing form. Superficial criticism is easy. We all know how easy it is to be a "knocker". And just because of this, any view on any matter of substance is likely to have its problems. The criticisms of a view bite hardest when they are embedded in a well-developed rival view. The problems can then no longer be sidelined, but must be admitted as significant. It is therefore no accident that both Wittgenstein and Derrida developed accounts of language quite different from the views they were criticising. This is precisely what made their criticisms so powerful. Similarly, Aristotle did not simply criticise Plato; he developed a rival

---

[9] A fourth salient feature is the fact that philosophers make a habit in seminars and conferences of attacking the views put forward by the speaker, in a way that would be considered unseemly in other disciplines. Criticism is the life-blood of the discipline.

**Graham Priest**

metaphysical system. And Locke did not simply criticise autocratic government; he developed the theory of the liberal state.

Philosophers of science realised the need for a constructive aspect of criticism a long time ago. In science, too, all substantial theories face problems and anomalies. The only way to know which problems are significant is to look at those which have the backing of some other theory. Here, for example, is another well-respected philosopher of science, Laudan:[10]

> [Many philosophers] point out that almost every [scientific] theory in history has had some anomalies or refuting instances; indeed, no one has ever been able to point to a single major theory which did not exhibit some anomalies. (P. 27.)

> Whether a given "phenomenon" is a genuine problem, how important it is, how heavily it counts against a theory if it fails to solve it; these are all very complex questions, but a good first approximation to an answer is this: *unsolved problems generally count as genuine problems only when they are no longer unsolved*. Until solved by some theory in a domain they are generally only "potential" problems rather than actual ones. (P. 18.)

> [For example, what] ... transformed the polyp from an idle curiosity into a threatening anomaly for vitalistic biology was the presence of an alternative theory ... which could count the polyp as a solved problem. (P. 21.)

Criticism is therefore at its most powerful only when it has the backing of some rival theory.[11]

[10] L. Laudan*, Progress and its Problems: Towards a Theory of Scientific Growth*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977). Laudan's concern is empirical science, but he is aware that his points have a more general significance. Thus (p. 13): 'I shall show ... that the view that I am espousing can be applied, with only a few qualifications, to *all* intellectual disciplines'.

[11] See also Kuhn: 'As has repeatedly been emphasized before, no theory ever solves all the puzzles with which it is confronted at a given time; nor are the solutions already achieved often perfect. On the contrary, it is just the incompleteness and imperfection of the existing data-theory fit that, at any time, define many of the puzzles that characterize normal science. In any event, if failure to fit were ground for theory rejection, all theories ought to be rejected at all times ...' (P. 146.) '[A]nomalous experience is important in science because it invokes competitors for an existing paradigm [*sc.*, theory]. But falsification, though it surely occurs, does not happen with, or simply because of, the emergence of an anomaly

Not only is developing an alternative view the best way of giving one's criticisms force, the articulation of an alternative view is itself a way of uncovering problems, and therefore criticisms, that might never have come to light otherwise. Again, well-known philosophers of science have been here already. Here is Feyerabend:[12]

> Theories should not be changed unless there are pressing reasons for doing so. The only pressing reason for changing a theory is disagreement with facts. Discussion of incompatible facts will therefore lead to progress. Discussion of incompatible hypotheses will not. Hence, it is sound procedure to increase the number of facts. It is not sound procedure to increase the number of … [alternative hypotheses].

> And so it is—provided that *facts exist, and are available independently of whether or not one considers alternatives to the theory to be tested* … I submit that this is much too simple a picture of the actual situation. Facts and theories are much more intimately connected than … [that. There] exist facts that cannot be unearthed except with the help of alternatives to the theory to be tested, and which become unavailable as soon as such alternatives are excluded.

The dependence of facts/objections on rival theories is, according to Feyerabend, of two kinds: heuristic and conceptual:

- *Heuristic*: we would not have found the facts or thought of the objections had we not developed different theories.

This certainly happens in philosophy. Thus, for example, it is not clear how, or in what way, a Tractarian view of language can handle the meanings of utterances other than statements, e.g., questions, commands. But I don't think that it occurred to anyone even to think of this question until use-theories of the kind proposed by Wittgenstein, in which such language features prominently, were developed.

- *Conceptual*: without the resources that a new theory provides, we cannot even make sense of the objection.

---

or falsifying instance. Instead, it is a subsequent and separate process that might equally well be called a verification, since it consists in the triumph of a new paradigm over the old one.' (P. 147.)

[12] P. Feyerabend, *Against Method*, (London: New Left Books, 1975), 38f.

**Graham Priest**

This, too, happens in philosophy, I think. To take a small example from my own work:[13] orthodox accounts of the paradoxes of self-reference, such as the Liar Paradox, take the contradictions to which certain arguments lead to be a sign that something is wrong with them. I (and others) have criticised this view: what the paradoxes in fact show is that the contradictions in question are actually true. Such a criticism makes sense only if contradictions can be isolated, and do not spread ubiquitously, as they do according to orthodox logical theory. Even to make the criticism intelligible, therefore, it was necessary to have first a logical theory (a paraconsistent logic) which showed how it is possible to quarantine the contradictions into points of singularity. Or to put the point better: the criticism was made conceptually possible only by the prior development of paraconsistent logics.

For several reasons, then, effective criticism requires the creation of novel theories. To define philosophy in terms of its critical spirit is not, then, to miss its constructive side; it is to require it. It should, of course, be said, that not all philosophers go in for criticism and construction in equal proportions. Some—perhaps Russell—do; some—such as Nietzsche—are more knockers-down than standers-up; and some of the great system-builders—perhaps, Spinoza—are more standers-up than knockers-down. As ever with work, there may be a certain division of labour—just as there are theoreticians and experimentalists in physics. Moreover, some philosophers may well be more interested, subjectively, in constructing their own system of thought than in using it to criticise others—just as some theoretical physicists may be more interested, subjectively, in developing the mathematics of their own theory than in putting it to the test. So it can look as though creating systems of thought is an independent part of the philosophical enterprise. But if the argument I have just given is right, it is not. Objectively, its existence is a corollary of the critical nature of philosophy.

## 5 Conclusion

The account of philosophy I have given here attempts do define it neither by its subject matter, nor by its method, but by its spirit:—

---

[13] E.g., G. Priest, *In Contradiction*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1987). Second (extended) edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

unbridled criticism. This does not mean that philosophers are perpetually at each other's throats. As with all human affairs, the development and refinement of criticisms, counter-criticisms, etc., can be pursued communally. Nor does it mean that philosophers are unpleasant people who enjoy attacking each other personally. It is, in fact, quite common for a couple of philosophers to argue hammer-and-tongs with each other in a seminar, and then go down to the pub afterwards, the best of friends—just as it is not uncommon for members of rival football teams to go drinking with each other after the game—with the exception that the drinking philosophers are as likely as not to resume their philosophical arguments in the pub, whilst the footballers are unlikely to resume their game there.

It does mean, however, that one should expect philosophers to challenge, question, object. This is why philosophy is so absolutely essential to any university worth the name, and any society worth having. We all need to be challenged out of our mistakes, stupidities, complacencies—especially when it is our own intellectual blinkers that prevent us from seeing them as such. This is the preeminent role of philosophy.

How good is the view of philosophy I have outlined? It strikes me as much more plausible than either of the views that I described in the first sections of the paper—or of any other of which I am aware. It is, at least, not self-refuting: the methodology of my discussion accords exactly with the account of philosophy provided. I have criticised some views about the nature of philosophy, and have developed a rival view, which is not subject to the same objections. I have no doubt that philosophers who are interested in the matter are likely to want to challenge the view and raise other objections. But that—if I am right—is exactly what you should expect.

*University of Melbourne and University of St. Andrews*