

## **PHILOSOPHY BETWEEN RELIGION AND SCIENCE**

### **Abstract**

Philosophical concerns are evidenced from the beginning of human literature, which have no obvious connection to philosophy's mainstream epistemological and metaphysical problematic. I reject the views that the nature of philosophy is a philosophical question, and that the discipline is united by methodology, arguing that it must be united by subject matter. The origins of the discipline provide reasons to doubt the existence of a unifying subject matter, however, and scepticism about philosophy also arises from its *a priori* methodology and apparent lack of progress. In response, I argue that philosophy acquired a distinctive subject matter when the concept of transcendence was introduced into attempts to gain a systematic understanding of the world and our place within it; philosophy thereby pursues the same aim of achieving a synoptic vision of reality as religion, but resembles science in its development and employment of rigorous methodologies. Philosophy's subject matter explains why it must be pursued *a priori*, and it only appears not to have progressed when aims are neglected, and it is inappropriately assimilated to science.

### **I**

There is good reason to suppose that at least some paradigmatically philosophical questions are perennial, namely questions about the meaning of human life and what we should be doing with our finite measure of existence. Such questions have been addressed in human literature since its origins in the Epic of Gilgamesh, which recounts the personal search for meaning of King Gilgamesh, who raced against time

along the path of the Sun God in a futile quest for immortality, before finally reconciling himself to the transient rewards of mortal life (George 1999: 1-100). That such questions should arise for beings like us seems inevitable, for once we had developed the leisure and sophistication to reflect, we were destined to find ourselves in the thick of life, with no idea why we were there or what we were there for. Any historicist thesis claiming that these questions are simply the product of our particular, contingent past, must contend with the endless renewability of the conditions that generate the questions, given that new people are born every day who may one day break free of the presupposed meaning provided by their upbringing, and find themselves existing, caught up in a time that carries them to death, and capable of steering their lives in different directions. Maybe we do not have to think in such a way that these questions arise, but so far as we know we always have, and unless major changes take place to our way of life the questions will remain.

Now if we ask within a contemporary context to which areas of concern these questions belong, the answer is obvious: they are the concern of religion and philosophy. Other disciplines may provide some insight into the form they take and our readiness to ask them, such as sociology and cognitive science perhaps, but the questions themselves are philosophical questions to which religions have always provided answers. Philosophy is the area of culture to which we would expect to be able to look for rational and impartial approaches, both to analysing their import and demarcating possible answers, while religion offers set answers promoted on the basis of faith and the authority of sacred texts and traditions. Let us say, then, that questions concerning human finitude and the meaning of life are paradigmatically philosophical questions, to which religions have provided the best known answers. These questions

have always been with us, and are renewed within each generation by those that feel the need to answer them.

If we look at the discipline of philosophy, however, both at its history and its current state, we find that these questions have rarely been of primary concern. Rather, the mainstream of philosophy has primarily concerned itself with apparently quite different questions which do not concern our specifically human existence and the options that face us when we find ourselves possessed of it, but rather concern existence as a whole and our ability to know it. That is, the mainstream of philosophy has concerned itself with metaphysics and epistemology. This is not the result of some recent change, but has marked the discipline from its inception; after all, the Milesian cosmologists are said to have originated philosophy with their paradigmatically metaphysical concern to discover the first principle, or *archē*, of all that exists. If we think the Epic of Gilgamesh is concerned with philosophical questions, then, we must also think that philosophical questions were being asked long before the official beginning of philosophy.

There is nothing surprising in this, for people must also have asked historical and geological questions before anything like a discipline was established in these areas, and our judgment that philosophical questions were being asked before philosophy officially began is patently consequent upon the fact that the thinkers who gave us our notion of 'philosophy' did sometimes concern themselves with these questions. This does naturally raise the question, however, of what the unifying subject matter of philosophy is, such that philosophers should concern themselves both with metaphysics, epistemology, and the mortal themes in the Epic we immediately

recognise as philosophical. And yet there is no simple, rule-of-thumb answer to this question, despite the fact that such answers are readily available for other disciplines such as history or geology; when definitional precision is required, academic quibbles can arise concerning the nature of any discipline, but with philosophy there is not even any obvious starting point. It is so far from obvious what philosophy is the study of, in fact, that philosophers have designated a sub-division of their discipline, 'metaphilosophy', to determining the nature of philosophy. Some have even said that philosophy is distinctive in that the question of the nature of philosophy is itself a philosophical question (Russell 1959: 7).

If metaphilosophy were a part of philosophy, then the range of subject matters philosophy could deal with would be very limited indeed. Philosophy could not be the study of *the fundamental nature of reality*, for instance, for then metaphilosophy would study *the study of the fundamental nature of reality*, rather than *the fundamental nature of reality*, and hence would not be a philosophical inquiry. To avoid this kind of obstacle, philosophy would need to have an extremely general subject matter, as for example if it were said to be the study of concepts, since metaphilosophy could then count as philosophical in virtue of studying the concept of philosophy. However, this is too broad to capture what is distinctive about philosophy, because many concepts, such as the concept of 'offside' in football, are evidently not of philosophical interest. Parallel problems arise for any subject matter broad enough to maintain the claim that metaphilosophy is a part of philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

An alternative approach would be to abandon the view that philosophy has any distinctive subject matter, and instead conceive the discipline as united by

methodology. This would render any investigation philosophical if it employed the appropriate methodology, and hence would allow for there to be a philosophy of almost anything, from physics to sport to wine; tacitly, at least, this idea has been gaining in popularity in recent years (e.g. McGinn 2008; Smith (ed.) 2007). The problem, however, is that many different methodologies have been advocated in the history of philosophy, such as radical doubt, phenomenological description, conceptual analysis, and even experimentation, and so to alight on any of these to the exclusion of the others is bound to amount to partisanship, rather than a serious attempt to determine what is distinctive about philosophy. Moreover, even if it is true that we are able to recognise a discussion as philosophical simply in virtue of its methodology, this is surely only because we recognise the methodology from discussions in which the subject matter is philosophical; a parallel response could be made to the claim that we recognise discussions as philosophical only on account of their writing style or the authors they refer to (Rorty 1979: 391; Rorty 1982: 92).

Despite the apparent open-mindedness of claiming that the question of the nature of philosophy is itself a philosophical question, such a claim is heavily weighted in favour of a methodological answer, and yet a methodological answer will not tell us what unites the topics and concerns from which the methodologies sprang. And it is subject matter, above all, that provides a discipline with its voice; evolutionary biologists and psychologists can talk about physics, sport or wine too, but the interest of what they have to say as experts, rather than laypeople, derives from their knowledge of evolutionary biology or psychology. If philosophy also has something distinctive to say, then, it must be because of its subject matter, with the wide range of

methodologies it has employed best interpreted, as is most natural, as disagreement over how to approach that subject matter.

To determine the nature of philosophy, then, there seems no good reason why we need to engage in philosophy at the outset; metaphilosophy is not a kind of philosophy. This is all well and good if we want to keep an open mind about the nature of philosophy, and hence about what it is to engage in philosophy. Rather, to determine the nature of philosophy, all we need engage in is general reflection of the sort that occurs in all areas of life: we need to reflect upon the current practice and history of philosophy, in order to try to discover a unifying subject matter, which is the same sort of thing we would do to determine the nature of any other discipline. As soon as we engage in this kind of reflection, however, a familiar kind of scepticism begins to take hold. The claim that metaphilosophy is philosophical held an appeal, no doubt, because its explanation of why philosophy lacks any obvious subject matter serves only to add to its mystique, but the real explanation might be much simpler.

## II

A good place to begin this line of reflection is with the name of the discipline, which until relatively recently was applied indiscriminately to all areas of learning. After all, the Greek philosophers had many interests apart from those we would now consider philosophical; Aristotle is widely recognised as the founder of biology, for instance. The narrowing of the meaning of 'philosophy' occurred through the increasing specialisation of knowledge, as independent disciplines, and particularly sciences, developed to take over discussion of topics that were once the domain of more general

scholars. The topics that remained, and hence were not either taken up by a new discipline or abandoned, are those we now regard as philosophical, with the historical figures we regard as philosophers being those who made important contributions to these topics; their contributions to mathematics and science, for instance, are now chiefly of concern in the history of mathematics and science.

The fact that the topics philosophy deals with were left behind by the advance of science, raises the suspicion that they may have nothing in common except our inability, at present at least, to treat them scientifically; this would certainly explain why the subject matter of philosophy is not readily apparent. This is reminiscent of Auguste Comte's claim that 'each branch of our knowledge, passes successively through three different theoretical stages: the theological or fictitious, the metaphysical or abstract, and the scientific or positive' (Comte 1842 / 1974: 20), with philosophy corresponding to Comte's second, 'metaphysical or abstract' stage.

Philosophy might thus be understood as an *a priori*, speculative stage of inquiry, which offers an improvement on mythological or religious explanations, but which is destined for eventual replacement by a properly regimented programme of empirical research. Such a view is supported by recent history, with both psychology and cognitive science originating in *a priori* theorising before becoming established, and then leaving behind the founding assumptions of their philosophical originators.

This view of philosophy as *a priori* speculation about topics we are unable to treat scientifically at present, a breeding ground for proto-sciences with no real area of expertise to call its own, is a common one, but there are two problems with it. The first is that the traditional core of metaphysical and epistemological problems do not

form the kind of disparate list this view would lead you to expect. Rather, questions about appearance and reality, representation and knowledge, and so on, do seem to form a cohesive subject matter. This impression of unity is reinforced by the fact that philosophers from the Greeks onwards have grouped their treatments of these topics together within unified texts; the core topics were not generally extracted and pieced together from general works giving equal prominence to scientific and mathematical matters. And the second problem is that when we consider the traditional problems themselves, it is hard to see how they could be dealt with apart from through *a priori* reflection; in recent years, some philosophers have found a role for experimentation in philosophy (Knobe and Nichols (eds.) 2008), but even if empirical data can be relevant in philosophy, there still seems no prospect of empirically determining whether we have free will or can know the world as it is in itself, for instance. This seems a matter of principle, rather than the result of a temporary shortfall in science.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that there is something distinctive about the subject matter of philosophy that has prevented philosophical questions from being investigated scientifically. If this is right, however, then another strand of Comte's positivism suggests itself (op. cit.: 24 & ff.), namely scepticism about the legitimacy of philosophical problems. Much of the impetus for this kind of scepticism results from the combination of the subject matter of philosophy, which typically involves factual matters such as the nature of perception or time, and its *a priori* methodology, which typically involves a lone philosopher simply reflecting on the matter.<sup>2</sup> Attempts to work out how the world works through reflection alone, however, have seemed suspicious ever since the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, in which quantitative, mathematical approaches replaced the use



of *a priori* reasoning framed within imprecise natural language; this contrast between the *a priori* reflections of philosophers, and the empirical methodology of science, is highlighted by certain conspicuous attempts, now immediately recognisable as misguided, that philosophers made to practise natural science *a priori*, as for example in Descartes' *The World* (1633 / 1985: 79-108) and in later works of *Naturphilosophie*, such as Schelling's *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1803 / 1988).

Given that the ascendancy of empirical methodology led to an exponential growth in human knowledge, any suggestion that it is distinctive of philosophical problems that they cannot be dealt with scientifically as a matter of principle, naturally generates suspicion about their cogency; perhaps the paring down of 'philosophical' concerns that delivered the contemporary discipline really amounted to a steady hiving off, the remainder from which are pseudo-problems. This suspicion is heightened by the notorious lack of progress in philosophy: for an ancient discipline contributed to by some of the most celebrated thinkers of all time, philosophy has apparently enjoyed an astonishing lack of success. All the main problems, such as the problem of free will, the mind-body problem, and the problem of universals, remain unresolved and controversial, and most of the principal positions taken on these problems in mediaeval and ancient times survive within contemporary debates in clearly recognisable form. Thus unlike science, which builds on what came before and then forgets it, the history of philosophy seems inseparable from its current practice, such that leading philosophers do still defend positions that are explicitly Platonic, Aristotelian or Kantian. Moreover, it is not just that none of the central problems of philosophy have been solved, for few if any historically important positions have been definitively disproved; the belief that the mind is a separate substance which controls

the body is one of the most unpopular theories in contemporary philosophy, for instance, but it still has its distinguished defenders, and any sensible bookmaker would keep the odds on a twenty-first century renaissance of Cartesian dualism low.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, each new generation of philosophers claims to have solved problems, but there are always counterclaims, and the next generation always seems dissatisfied. This lack of steady progress does not necessarily indicate that the problems are illusory or insoluble, for it may simply be that the kind of methodology required for work on the problems to proceed as an *a priori* science has yet to be developed, or has only been developed relatively recently; this latter kind of claim has been made regularly ever since Kant (e.g. Russell 1945 / 1991: chapter XXXI; Dummett 1978: 454 & ff.; Williamson 2007: 278-292). However, another reason to think that the problem is with the problems, which is particularly hard to ignore, is that the most powerful voices to raise suspicions about philosophical problems have been philosophers. Arguably the two most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, Wittgenstein and Heidegger, fall squarely into this camp. Thus Wittgenstein was famously disdainful of philosophy, regarding it as a form of intellectual disease he needed to free himself of to pursue a better, more ordinary life, while Heidegger came to think that 'the development of philosophy into the independent sciences ... is the legitimate completion of philosophy' (Heidegger 1972: 58), and tried to develop a kind of openness, or *Gelassenheit*, that would allow new ways of thinking to arise. The end of philosophy themes that emerge in these iconic figures are not isolated, but rather symptomatic of philosophy's long developing suicidal tendencies, which became a focus of twentieth century movements such as logical positivism, ordinary language philosophy, pragmatism and deconstruction.

In light of the fact that problems requiring us to take a stance on the nature of the world through *a priori* reflection are naturally viewed with suspicion within our intellectual culture, that philosophy has apparently failed to make progress, and that one of the most persistent trends in philosophy's history is the suspicion that its problems are illusory, there is plenty of reason for scepticism about philosophy. Nevertheless, institutionally at least, the discipline is healthier today than ever before, with the metaphilosophical optimists able to thrive alongside the pessimists; constructive metaphysics has enjoyed a renaissance, thereby reinvigorating pessimism to the effect that metaphysical disputes are 'merely verbal' (e.g. Hirsch 2009), with a new form of pessimism on the rise in which scientific findings are adduced to challenge traditional philosophical methods and assumptions (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson 1999). And all the while, there are philosophers who continue to regard their subject as a fledgling science, others who regard it as a form of literature (Rorty 1982: chapter 6; Derrida 1987), others who think it deals with insoluble mysteries (McGinn 1993), and there are even those who would explain the activities of philosophers in terms of psychoanalysis or sociology (e.g. Hanly and Lazerowitz (eds.) 1970; Kusch (ed.) 2000).

Amid all of these competing agendas and self-images, it is no easy matter to discern a unifying subject matter of philosophical inquiry, but if we want to persevere with the question 'what is philosophy?', we should keep the following in mind:

- (1) Questions concerning the meaning of human existence are paradigmatically philosophical.

- (2) The history of philosophy has primarily been concerned with questions of metaphysics and epistemology.
- (3) Philosophy was not conceived as a discipline, but rather deals with problems left behind by the development of independent sciences.
- (4) The problems that remain seem to form a unified subject matter.
- (5) These problems seem to only be amenable to *a priori* reflection.
- (6) Philosophy has apparently made little progress with these problems; in combination with (5), this generates metaphilosophical scepticism.

Why should we persevere with the question? One reason is that we need to know what philosophy is to assess scepticism about its problems. But another equally important reason is that we already implicitly know enough about philosophy, from acquaintance with the concerns and aspirations of the great philosophers of the past, to know that if our culture is to contain any areas of self-conscious practice, philosophy must be surely one of them. For it would be absurd if philosophers, of all people, were simply engaging with inherited puzzles without knowing why they were doing so, and more absurd still if the reasons were always as inconsequential as that the puzzles are interesting, as stamp collecting is to many, or that addressing certain questions is a prerequisite for career advancement.<sup>4</sup> Ideally, at least, a philosopher should be somebody with a clear grasp of their aims in thinking and writing, and a substantive justification to offer for them.

### III

The remainder of this paper will outline an answer designed to address the points listed above; there is no space for a detailed defence.<sup>5</sup> The leading idea is that philosophy begins in, and remains rooted in, questions about why human beings exist and what we should be doing with our lives. It was in trying to answer these questions that the concept of transcendence became central to our thinking about the world, and the employment of this concept produced what eventually became the core epistemological and metaphysical subject matter of a distinctive discipline. The concept of transcendence allows us to think of the familiar world we perceive as a potentially misleading appearance of a more fundamental reality. This concept, familiar from its employment within some of the best known philosophical theories, particularly in Plato's distinction between the perceived and ideal world, and Kant's distinction between empirical reality and things-in-themselves, is an essential ingredient in formulating many of the traditional problems of philosophy, and remains in the background of recent debates even where the aim is to extricate it from our thinking.

Now the concept of transcendence is evidently not implicated in all and only philosophical debates, and neither do all such debates bear upon the perennial mortal concerns. However, if we understand the concept of philosophy as a prototype concept, that is, as a structured representation which encodes a statistical analysis of the features that items in the extension of the concept tend to possess (c.f. Laurence and Margolis 1999: 27 & ff.), then we need only claim that prototypical philosophical concerns relate either to concerns about the meaning of life, broadly construed, or to

concerns raised by employing the concept of transcendence, with other concerns counting as philosophical in virtue of their association, whether for conceptual or historical reasons, with these prototypes. Philosophy cannot be said to have one thing in common, then, as was to be expected given the long and complex history of the subject, but rather embraces 'a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing' (Wittgenstein 1953: 32) which centre on these two kinds of prototypical concern. Nevertheless, once the connection between these two kinds of concern is understood, we have more than enough unity to speak of a distinctive subject matter of philosophy.

Connections between concerns about the meaning of life and hypotheses of a transcendent reality are not only found within philosophy, since they are a mainstay of religious belief. A good part of the reason for this seems to be rooted in our standard patterns of explanation, since in seeking to explain puzzling phenomena, we typically invoke a context of meaning into which the phenomena can be placed. Thus if we encounter somebody systematically raising and lowering their arm, for instance, we instinctively seek to explain this behaviour by placing it into a social context which makes its purpose, such as signalling to a taxiing aircraft, explicit. In trying to understand human life as a whole, then, it is only to be expected that we should have sought to employ the same form of teleological explanation that usually serves us so well within the social context provided by human life, and that this should have led us to look beyond that context to a further, transcendent context. As such, religions have typically hypothesised transcendent contexts of meaning supplied by supernatural gods, which can then be appealed to in answering practical concerns about how we ought to act.

If we start out with the religious conviction that there must be a meaning of life, our patterns of explanation provide a natural route to transcendence. However philosophers have provided many other, ostensibly more rational routes. Perhaps the first came when Parmenides argued that the concept of non-existence must be purged from our understanding to generate a new and more adequate understanding of reality as timeless and unchanging. The implication of this argument was that the changing world we observe is merely apparent, and that reality transcends perception and can be apprehended only by reason. Plato reached a similar conclusion by arguing that to account for the generality of conceptual thought, the particular objects and events we perceive must be transcended by a reality of universals; again reflection had purportedly revealed that reality transcends appearance. What these arguments and many others that followed had in common, was the idea that reflection on some feature of the world can show the need to abandon, refine, or simply recognise the superficiality of our ordinary, perception-based conception of the world, and to rethink the nature of reality employing the concept of transcendence.

Whatever we make of such arguments, it should be clear that the question of whether or not reality transcends the perceptual world is directly relevant to questions concerning the meaning of life, just as religions have always supposed. This is because if reality does transcend the perceived world, it can provide a context of meaning more widely encompassing than our social contexts, and capable of determining the significance of human life. Moreover, even if there is no such wider context of meaning, important consequences might still be thought to follow if we conclude that human life has no significance despite the seriousness with which we

typically take it; this is an inference that existentialists such as Sartre and Camus explored. Thus whether there is a transcendent context of meaning or not, major consequences seem to follow for our understanding of the meaning of human life.

In Plato, the connection between transcendence and the meaning of life is explicit and pivotal. This is most conspicuous in his claim that the philosopher kings' knowledge of transcendent reality allows them to know how we ought to live, but Plato also uses his metaphysics of transcendent universals to explain 'why the creator made this world of generation' (Timaeus 29d-e / Plato 1961: 1162), with the explanation centring on the creator's desire to copy his transcendent goodness. The philosophical tradition, however, was ultimately to strip away these concerns to develop a purely ontological interest in properties. This is an issue still worked on today, and yet although descendents of Plato's views remain at the centre of debates, Platonic realism is now usually dissociated from the metaphysics of transcendence (e.g. Armstrong 1980), and most participants to contemporary debates would never suppose them to have any bearing upon how we ought to live. Rather, such debates have long since taken on the aspect of disinterested scientific inquiry, with the motivation for continuing them rarely arising as an issue.

Other traditional concerns opened by Plato's account of transcendence have developed along similar lines. Thus concerns about representation were introduced when Plato supplied a model of the relationship between illusory appearance and transcendent reality, by claiming that the former copies the latter; this raised familiar epistemological worries about how we can know we are representing the world accurately. Similarly, it was Plato's transcendent metaphysics that set up the



traditional opposition between materialists who 'define reality as the same thing as body', and idealists who hold that 'true reality consists in certain intelligible and bodiless forms' (Sophist 246a-b / Plato 1961: 990). Another clear descendent of Plato's metaphysics is mind-body dualism (c.f. Robinson 1991; Rorty 1979: chapter 1), which remains at the root of debates about the nature of consciousness and the efficacy of psychological properties.<sup>6</sup> In all of these cases, there are good reasons to think that our paradigmatic philosophical concerns originate in Plato's employment of the concept of transcendence. However the debates we have inherited typically no longer make any connection to the humanistic concerns Plato wore on his sleeve.

Although concerns about transcendence and the meaning of life have been marginalized, especially in twentieth century philosophy's drive to naturalism and emulation of scientific or mathematical inquiry, it is these concerns which provide the unifying core to the subject matter of philosophy. According to the present account, attempts to answer questions about the meaning of life led to the discovery of theoretical motivations to introduce the concept of transcendence into our thinking, and this innovation generated epistemological and metaphysical problems that combined with the original questions to become definitive of a new branch of inquiry. Thus for Plato, with whom the core moral, epistemological and metaphysical concerns of philosophy come together for the first time, the concept of transcendence provides the key to determining how we ought to live through the injunction that we contemplate the forms; the broader view that moral truths are determined in a transcendent world was subsequently to dominate the history of Western moral thinking through the agency of organised religion. But Plato also found other reasons for conceiving reality as something that transcends the perceived world, and there

have been many more suggestions since, such as to account for freedom in a world governed by deterministic laws, or to avoid attributing the supposed contradictions in our dynamic conception of time to reality itself. Once introduced, however, the concept of transcendence brings in its wake a whole host of problems concerning knowledge, representation, truth, and the ontological status of appearance and reality. Thus when a natural set of concerns about the meaning of life combined with an innovation that led us to see the need for, but problematic consequences of, a new way of thinking, it was then that philosophy had acquired its subject matter.

Although philosophy was not conceived as a discipline, then, human inquiry acquired a distinctive set of concerns at an early stage in its development, when the concept of transcendence was introduced into our attempts to gain a systematic understanding of the world. These concerns, along with many others that have grown out of them, are those we now classify as philosophical. On this account, philosophy occupies a conceptual territory somewhere between religion and science, although not in the way Comte envisaged, namely as a transitional stage between the two. Rather, philosophy shares some of its aims with religion and some of its methodology with science, while pursuing an agenda that bears directly on both. Philosophy is closely related to religion, in that it begins in the same kind of questions, and is rooted in the same natural human desire for an overall, synoptic vision of the world and our place within it. But philosophy is also closely related to science, since it seeks a rational, disinterested view of reality, no matter how discomfoting this may be, and has developed a variety of rigorous methodologies to achieve these ends. What it owes its distinctiveness to, however, is the fact that it pursues the concerns it shares with religion, mortal concerns which science cannot directly address, in as scientific a

manner as possible, and it also asks other questions, of the metaphysical and epistemological kind introduced by the concept of transcendence, that bear upon both the truth of religious belief and the status of our scientific understanding.

#### IV

Since concerns relating to transcendence were largely unaffected by the advent of the independent empirical sciences in the early modern period, they remained a part of the traditional body of learning that had no name apart from 'philosophy'.<sup>7</sup> Thus although empirical science rapidly achieved more success in satisfying our interest in the workings of nature than *a priori* speculation had ever managed, certain issues were left behind, namely those relating to transcendence, and in combination with moral theory, which empirical science had also left largely untouched, this came to comprise the core subject matter of the discipline of philosophy.

Looked at in this way, the origins of philosophy no longer provide any reason to doubt the unity of its subject matter, and the name 'philosophy' even seems apt, given the centrality of this subject matter to many of the best known Greek philosophers, with whom the name will always be indelibly linked. Moreover the organic process by which this subject matter came to be the concern of an independent discipline goes some way towards explaining why the nature of philosophy should have become a controversial topic, given that the discipline was not inaugurated by anything like a conscious decision, but rather emerged from a tradition of addressing a group of problems whose connection had long since been obscured by the wide variety of directions the tradition had led, often explicitly away from the unifying factor of

transcendence. With this account of the subject matter and origins of philosophy, then, we can begin to see how the development of empirical science from *a priori* speculation might have left behind a unified discipline whose unity was not apparent. What is perhaps more significant, however, is the light it sheds on the two most persistent sources of scepticism about the discipline, namely its *a priori* method and apparent lack of progress.

What justifies the *a priori* method of philosophy is simply that its central subject matter cannot in principle be investigated empirically. This is because any empirical investigation of a phenomenon will be neutral on the question of whether that phenomenon exists in a transcendent context, and neutral also on the moral status of that phenomenon. Thus when science uses experiential testing to develop accurate descriptions of the physical universe, it does so indifferently to the metaphysical status of what it is investigating, that is, whether it is investigating relations between subjective ideas, sense-data, the nature of mind stuff (cf. Eddington 1928), material substances, events, processes, or property-instantiations. Scientific discourses can be read in line with any of these interpretations and more, depending on how we answer metaphysical and epistemological questions. These questions can only be answered by *a priori* reasoning employing concepts derived from a tradition of thought that places the world into the context of transcendence, thereby conceptualising the world in light of possibilities such as that the particulars we perceive are transcended by universals, or that perceptions are transcended by a mind-independent reality.

What we are effectively doing when we engage in *a priori* reasoning about this subject matter, is trying to determine how to make maximal sense of the world using

philosophical concepts. Thus Berkley's immaterialist interpretation of science in terms of inert ideas and God's omniscience was not rejected because of its incompatibility with any particular scientific discovery, but because of doubts about its internal consistency allied to qualms about its theoretical extravagance; in principle, no doubt, we could find a way to understand current scientific theories in Berkleyan terms, but most philosophers agree that this is not the best way to employ concepts such as 'matter', 'idea' and 'causation' to make sense of the world. Other philosophical concerns display a similar imperviousness to empirical results. So, for instance, a detailed description of the interaction that takes place between brain and world in typical cases of perception would remain neutral on the question of whether that interaction is best conceptualised as knowledge, and the development of a 'hedonistic calculus' would not thereby determine what is the most theoretically satisfactory way to conceptually relate pleasure to moral worth. Empirical results often influence philosophical debates, especially when new phenomena are discovered that must be accounted for, but they can only be a factor, interpretable in different ways, within an *a priori* deliberation about how to maximise conceptual coherence and theoretical elegance.

A good example of philosophy's rootedness in this kind of *a priori* conceptual deliberation is provided by the mind-brain identity theory, one of the more important attempts made by twentieth century philosophy to bring itself into closer allegiance with science. U.T. Place, who originated the theory, thought of the claim that sensations are brain processes as an empirical hypothesis, on a par with the hypothesis that 'lightning is a motion of electrical charges' (Place 1956). J.J.C. Smart, however, pointed out that it is only in the context of deciding which physical process to identify

sensations with, such as a brain, heart, or liver process, that the hypothesis can be considered empirical, since when the competing hypotheses are metaphysical, there may not be any distinguishing predictions; a certain type of brain state may be co-instantiated with pain either because pain is a kind of brain state, or because there is a psychophysical law connecting non-physical and physical states. Smart concluded that so long as the competing hypotheses were 'equally consistent with the facts', they were not differing empirical hypotheses, but rather differing interpretations of the facts, such as the differing interpretations of fossil evidence offered by evolutionary and creationist accounts, with such matters being decidable only by appeal to 'the principles of parsimony and simplicity' (Smart 1959: 156).<sup>8</sup> What Smart realised, we might say, is that metaphysical accounts deal with a subject matter that cannot in principle be investigated empirically, and so the accounts can only be decided between on the basis of *a priori* deliberation about their competing theoretical merits.

If we turn now to the question of why philosophy has apparently made so little progress, two things should immediately be noted, both of which suggest that this source of scepticism only arises through an inappropriate comparison to science or mathematics. Firstly, the idea that philosophy might accumulate definitive results, thereby allowing an interested party to consult a textbook to discover not the views of some philosopher or another, but rather the *facts* that, for instance, free will is compatible with determinism, or mental properties are functional properties, seems on the face of it absurd, and is not even obviously desirable. Secondly, if philosophy is compared to an intellectual endeavour other than science or mathematics, such as art, for instance, then the fact that generation after generation take up the same old problems in new ways, without reaching lasting consensus on either solutions or

methods, does not necessarily suggest that no progress is being made. After all, artists have represented the same kinds of subjects, such as people and landscapes, throughout history, with each generation developing new styles of representation, and with competing schools often showing little sympathy with approaches other than their own, which is a phenomenon with evident parallels in philosophy. None of this suggests, however, that there are not better and worse representations of landscapes, or that progress has not been made in the history of art.

The reason it is absurd to suppose that philosophy might accumulate a track-record of definitive solutions, I want to end by suggesting, is that these are problems each new generation must think through for themselves, thereby making them relevant to the specifics of their own intellectual environment; to some extent, at least, philosophical opinion seems a matter of individual intellectual conscience, such that excessive conformity in these matters would evidence intellectual stagnation within a culture. In short, you simply cannot be told the answers in philosophy, any more than you can in religion or aesthetics. Rather, addressing these kinds of questions requires a degree of personal reflection; in philosophy, we must personally deliberate over how best to employ traditional philosophical concepts to represent the empirical facts about the world, guided by options developed in the history of the discipline, in order to be said to have philosophical views. Philosophy does not make progress by eliminating these options until only one remains, but rather by exploring their implications, removing their weaknesses, investigating their compatibility with newly discovered empirical facts, developing new methods of argumentative support, and even occasionally working out new options. Thus if Cartesian dualism really does make a comeback, this can be expected to be a new form of the theory that overcomes previous

conceptual problems, and takes into account developments in the science of consciousness; this would constitute progress in our understanding of a dualist representation of the world.

That philosophical theories need to be continually thought through and refreshed, and can never be accepted as a body of knowledge, indicates something distinctive about the aims of philosophy, rather than providing a reason to suspect either the propriety of the questions or the point of trying to solve them. Except in the case of some moral and political philosophy, as well as the more applied branches of philosophy of science, the aim of philosophical inquiry is rarely practical; nobody is in practical need of a theory of truth or an answer to the sceptic. Rather, the only aim of engaging with the traditional problems of philosophy is to achieve an overall understanding of reality and our place within it, of a kind not available within the necessarily more fragmented perspectives offered by individual natural and social sciences. To this extent, the aims of philosophy resemble those of religion, and it is rooted in the same kinds of human need. Science is a quite different endeavour, since it has the ability to leave old problems behind, aided by technological developments that lead to the discovery of new phenomena to be explained. But if philosophy were to leave any of its traditional problems behind, we would have simply lost a tried and tested vehicle for leading us into the most general thoughts about reality. Luckily, with philosophical opinions and methodologies as diverse as ever, there is little chance of these intellectual resources drying up anytime soon.

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## **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Could philosophy be said to study 'the fundamental nature of x', where x could be anything? Well, it is far from clear that philosophy studies the fundamental nature of football, for instance, or that physics and biology are not the places to look for the fundamental nature of physical and biological phenomena. Perhaps it will be replied that 'fundamental' must be understood in terms of maximally general ontological typing (objects, events, etc.) or the issue of mind-dependence vs. independence. But metaphilosophy cannot be said to study the fundamental nature of philosophy in these senses. Thanks to a referee for this objection.

<sup>2</sup> As John Cottingham has noted, although philosophers have to come to think of themselves as 'researchers', the average philosopher's research methods amount to 'reading some books and thinking about some ideas' (Cottingham 2009: 234).

<sup>3</sup> Dissatisfaction with physicalism is already on the rise; see for instance Koons and Bealer (eds.) 2010.

<sup>4</sup> This not to say that valuable work in philosophy is impossible without philosophical self-consciousness, only that philosophy, as a paradigm of self-conscious human reflection, would be absurd if at least some of its practitioners did not attain, or at least aspire to, such self-consciousness.

<sup>5</sup> The detailed defence will be provided in a monograph currently in preparation, entitled *Nihilism and Transcendence: the meaning of life and the nature of philosophy*.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Tye, for instance, has recently been calling for 'all vestiges of Cartesianism' to be 'eliminated from the materialist worldview' (Tye 2009: 199); according to the kind of account of the origins of Cartesian mind-body dualism I am

assuming here, defended in different ways by Robinson and Rorty (cited in main text), Cartesianism is itself a vestige of Platonism.

<sup>7</sup> The new science nevertheless had many indirect effects on these concerns, such as to make materialism seem more attractive, for instance.

<sup>8</sup> Place did defend his conception of the identity theory as an empirical hypothesis (Place 1960), but to consider this response would take us too far afield.