1

The Task of Philosophy

The Nature of Philosophy as a Cognitive Enterprise

Philosophy may well be something of an acquired taste. For philosophers not only raise questions and propose answers, but they try to glimpse behind the curtain of such issues. They want to question the questions themselves and ask why they are important. And they are not just satisfied to have an answer but want to know just what it is that makes an answer correct and appropriate.

Philosophy is identified as one particular human enterprise among others by its characterizing mission of providing satisfactory answers to the "big questions" that we have regarding the world's scheme of things and our place within it. Often as not, those big questions in philosophy are *explanatory* questions, questions whose answers "explain the facts," thereby enabling us to understand why things are as they indeed are. The history of philosophy is an ongoing intellectual struggle to develop ideas that render comprehensible the seemingly endless diversity and complexity that surrounds us on all sides. The instruments of philosophizing are the ideational

resources of concepts and theories, and philosophy deploys them in a quest for understanding, in the endeavor to create an edifice of thought able to provide us with an intellectual home that affords a habitable shelter in a complicated and challenging world. As a venture in providing rationally cogent answers to our questions about large-scale issues regarding belief, evaluation, and action, philosophy is a sector of the cognitive enterprise at large. And subsidiarily— since a rational creature acts on the basis of its beliefs—philosophy also has a bearing on action, so as to implement the idea of *philosophia biou kubernētēs*—the motto of the American Phi Beta Kappa Society, which has it that philosophy is a guide to life.

Philosophy has no distinctive information sources of its own. It has its own *problems*, but the *substantive raw materials* by whose means it develops answers must ultimately come from elsewhere. It thus has no distinctive subject matter to separate it from other branches of inquiry and furnishes no novel facts but only offers insights into relationships. For *everything* is relevant to its concerns, its tasks being to provide a sort of *expositio mundi*, a traveler's guidebook to reality at large. The mission of philosophy is to ask, and to answer in a rational and disciplined way, all those great questions about life in this world that people wonder about in their reflective moments.

In the first book of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle tells us that "it is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize, wondering in the first place at obvious perplexities, and then by gradual progression raising question about the greater matters too, for example, about the origin of the universe."[1] And this characterization of the field is right on target. Philosophy strives after that systematic integration of knowledge that the sciences initially promised but have never managed to deliver because of their increasing division of labor and never-ending pursuit of specialized detail. For what philosophy endeavors (or *should* endeavor) to do is to look at the sum total of what we know and tell us what it means for us— where the moral lies ("die Moral von der Geschicht"). Dealing with being and value in general—with possibility, actuality, and worth— the concerns of philosophy are universal and all-embracing. And not only is philosophy too inclusive and all encompassing to have a restricted range of concern, but it also does not have any altogether

distinctive method. Its procedures of inquiry and reasoning are too varied and diversified, making use in this endeavor of whatever useful means come to hand for exclusivity—it takes what it needs from whatever source it can. What characterizes philosophy is thus neither a special subject matter nor a special methodology but rather—to reemphasize—its defining mission is that of coordinating the otherwise available information in the light of big questions regarding man, the world, and his place within its scheme of things. Philosophy deals largely with *how* and *whether* and *why* questions: how the world's arrangements stand in relation to us, whether things are as they seem, and why things should be as they are (for example, why it is that we should do "the ethically right" things). Ever since Socrates pestered his fellow Athenians with puzzling issues about "obvious" facts regarding truth and justice, philosophers have probed for the reason why behind the reason why.

Philosophy's question-oriented concerns address three sorts of issues in particular:

- *informative* (determining what is the case)
- *practical* (how to do things: how to achieve our aims)
- *evaluative/directive* (what to aim at)

It is the "big issues" in these three cases with which philosophy concerns itself. And it must be systematic because it must—for reasons we shall soon examine more closely—deal with the vast image of issues in an integrated, consistent, and coherent way. Philosophy is quintessentially the work of reason. The aim of the enterprise is to provide rational coherence to our thoughts and rational direction to our actions.

After all, it is clearly not just answers that we want, but answers whose tenability can plausibly be established—rationally defensible and well-substantiated answers. And in particular, this requires that we transact our question-resolving business in a way that is harmonious with and does not damage our prephilosophical connections in matters of everyday life and scientific inquiry. Philosophy's mandate is to answer questions in a manner that achieves overall rational coherence so that the answers we give to some of our questions square with those that we give to others.

Philosophy is matter of rational inquiry, a cognitive enterprise, a venture in question-resolution subject to the usual standards of rationality. In doing philosophy we are committed by the very nature of the project at hand to maintaining a commitment to the usual ground rules of cognitive and practical rationality.[2]

To be sure, we are sometimes said to be living in a post-philosophical age—an era when the practice of philosophy is no longer viable. But this is absurd. Nowadays more than ever we both desire and require the guidance of rigorous thinking about the nature of the world and our place within it. And the provision of such an intellectual orientation is philosophy's defining mission. The fact is that the impetus to philosophy lies in our very nature as rational inquirers: as beings who have questions, demand answers, and want these answers to be cogent ones. Cognitive problems arise when matters fail to meet our expectations, and the expectation of rational order is the most fundamental of them all. The fact is simply that we *must* philosophize; it is a situational imperative for a rational creature.

The Need for Philosophy: Humans as *Homo quaerens*

At the basis of the cognitive enterprise lies the fact of human curiosity rooted in the need-to-know of a weak and vulnerable creature emplaced in a difficult and often hostile environment in which it must make its evolutionary way by its wits. For we must act—our very survival depends upon it—and a rational animal must align its actions with its beliefs. We have a very real and material stake in securing viable answers to our questions as to how things stand in the world we live in.

The discomfort of unknowing is a natural human sentiment. To be ignorant of what goes on about one is unpleasant to the individual and dangerous to the species from an evolutionary point of view. As William James wisely observed:

> The utility of this emotional affect of expectation is perfectly obvious; "natural selection," in fact, was bound to bring it about sooner or later. It is of the utmost practical importance to an animal that he should have prevision of the qualities of the objects that surround him.[3]

There is good reason why we humans pursue knowledge—it is our evolutionary destiny. Humans have evolved within nature to fill the ecological niche of an intelligent being. We are neither numerous and prolific (like the ant and the termite), nor tough and aggressive (like the shark). Weak and vulnerable creatures, we are constrained to make our evolutionary way in the world by the use of brainpower. It is by knowledge and not by hard shells or sharp claws or keen teeth that we have carved out our niche in evolution's scheme of things. The demand for understanding, for a cognitive accommodation to one's environment, for "knowing one's way about," is one of the most fundamental requirements of the human condition. Our *questions* form a big part of our life's agenda, providing the impetus that gives rise to our knowledge—or putative knowledge—of the world. Our species is *Homo quaerens*. We have questions and want (nay, *need*) answers.

In situations of cognitive frustration and bafflement we cannot function effectively as the sort of creature nature has compelled us to become. Confusion and ignorance—even in such "remote" and "abstruse" matters as those with which philosophy deals—yield psychic dismay and discomfort. The old saying is perfectly true: philosophy bakes no bread. But it is also no less true that man does not live by bread alone. The physical side of our nature that impels us to eat, drink, and be merry is just one of its sides. *Homo sapiens* require nourishment for the mind as urgently as nourishment for the body. We seek knowledge not only because we wish, but because we must. For us humans, the need for information, for knowledge to nourish the mind, is every bit as critical as the need for food to nourish the body. Cognitive vacuity or dissonance is as distressing to us as hunger or pain. We want and need our cognitive commitments to comprise an intelligible story, to give a comprehensive and coherent account of things. Bafflement and ignorance—to give suspensions of judgment the somewhat harsher name they deserve—exact a substantial price from us. The quest for cognitive orientation in a difficult world represents a deeply practical requisite for us. The basic demand for information and understanding presses in upon us, and we must do (and are pragmatically justified in doing) what is needed for its satisfaction. For us, cognition is the most practical of

matters. Knowledge itself fulfills an acute practical need. And this is where philosophy comes in, in its attempt to grapple with our basic cognitive concerns.

Philosophy seeks to bring rational order, system, and intelligibility to the confusing diversity of our cognitive affairs. It strives for orderly arrangements in the cognitive sphere that will enable us to find our way about in the world in an effective and satisfying way. Philosophy is indeed a venture in theorizing, but one whose rationale is eminently practical. A rational animal that has to make its evolutionary way in the world by its wits has a deep-rooted need for speculative reason.

But why pursue rationalizing philosophy at all—why accept this enterprise as an arena of appropriate human endeavor? The answer is that it is an integral and indispensable component of the larger project of rational inquiry regarding issues important to us humans. This, to be sure, simply pushes the question back: why pursue reasoned inquiry? And this question splits into two components.

The first component is: Why pursue *inquiry*? Why insist on knowing about things and understanding them? The answer is twofold. On the one hand, knowledge is its own reward. And on the other hand, knowledge is the indispensable instrument for the more efficient and effective realization of other goals. We accordingly engage in philosophical inquiry because we must; because those great intellectual issues of man and his place in the world's scheme, of the true and the beautiful and the good, of right and wrong, freedom and necessity, causality and determinism, and so on, matter greatly to us—to all of us some of the time and to some of us all of the time. We philosophize because it is important to us to have answers to our questions. After all, a philosophical work is neither a work of fiction nor a work of history. Its mission is not so much to enlighten or to inform as to persuade: to convince people of the appropriateness of a certain solution to a certain problem. What is at issue is, at bottom, an exercise in question resolution—in problem solving. Its roots are in human curiosity—in the "facts of life," that we have questions and may need to obtain cognitively satisfying answers to them.

The second component of our question is: why *reasoned* inquiry? The answer is that we are *Homo sapiens*, a *rational* animal. We do

not want just answers, but answers that can satisfy the demands of our intelligence—answers that we can in good conscience regard as appropriate, as tenable, and defensible. We are not content with information about which answers people would like to have (psychologism), nor with information about what sort of answers are available (possibility mongering). What we want is cogent guidance regarding which answers to *adopt*—which contentions are correct or, at any rate, plausible. And reason affords our prime standard in this regard.

Philosophy, then, is an inquiry that seeks to resolve problems arising from the incoherence of the matter of our extraphilosophical commitments. And to abandon philosophy is to rest content with incoherence. One can, of course, cease to do philosophy (and this is what sceptics of all persuasions have always wanted). But if one is going to philosophize at all, one has no alternative but to proceed by means of arguments and inferences, the traditional vehicles of human rationality.

Yet, why pursue such a venture in the face of the all too evident possibility of error? Why run such cognitive risks? For it is only too clear that there *are* risks here. In philosophizing, there is a gap between the individual indications at our disposal and the answers to our questions that we decide to accept. (As there also is in science—but in philosophy the gap is far wider because the questions are of a different scale.) Because of this, the positions we take have to be held tentatively, subject to expectation of an almost certain need for amendment, qualification, improvement, and modification. Philosophizing in the classical manner—exploiting the available indications of experience to answer those big questions on the agenda of traditional philosophy—is predicated on the use of reason to do the best we can to align our cognitive commitments with the substance of our experience. In this sense, philosophizing involves an act of faith: when we draw on our experience to answer our questions we have to proceed in the tentative hope that the best we can do is good enough, at any rate, for our immediate purposes.

The question of intellectual seriousness is pivotal here. Do we care? Do we *really want* answers to our questions? And are we sufficiently committed to this goal to be willing to take risks for the sake of its achievement—risks of potential error, of certain disagreement,

and of possible philistine incomprehension? For these risks are unavoidable—an ineliminable part of the philosophical venture. If we lose the sense of legitimacy and become too fainthearted to run such risks, we must pay the price of abandoning the inquiry.

This of course can be done. But to abandon the quest for answers in a *reasoned* way is impossible. For in the final analysis there is no alternative to philosophizing as long as we remain in the province of reason. We adopt some controversial position or other, no matter which way we turn—no matter how elaborately we try to avoid philosophical controversy—it will come back to haunt us. The salient point was already well put by Aristotle: "[Even if we join those who believe that philosophizing is not possible] in this case too we are obliged to inquire how it is possible for there to be no Philosophy; and then, in inquiring, we philosophize, for rational inquiry is the essence of Philosophy."[4] To those who are prepared simply to abandon philosophy, to withdraw from the whole project of trying to make sense of things, we can have nothing to say. (How can one reason with those who deny the point and propriety of reasoning?) But with those who *argue* for its abandonment we can do something—once we have enrolled them in the community as fellow theorists with a position of their own. F. H. Bradley hit the nail on the head: "The man who is ready to prove that metaphysical knowledge is impossible . . . is a brother metaphysician with a rival theory of first principles."[5] One can abandon philosophy, but one cannot *advocate* its abandonment through rational argumentation without philosophizing.

The question, "should we philosophize?" accordingly receives a straightforward answer: the impetus to philosophize lies in our very nature as rational inquirers. We must philosophize; it is a situational imperative for a rational creature such as ourselves.

Rationality is the Instrument of Philosophy

The ancients saw man as "the rational animal," set apart from other creatures by capacities for speech and deliberation. Under the precedent of Greek philosophy, Western thinkers have generally deemed the use of thought for the guidance of our proceedings to be at once the glory and the duty of *Homo sapiens*.

Rationality consists in the intelligent pursuit of appropriate ends. It calls for the appropriate use of reason to resolve choices in the best possible way. To behave rationally is to make use of one's intelligence to figure out the best thing to do in the circumstances. It is a matter of the recognizably effective pursuit of appropriately appreciated benefits. Rationality thus has a crucially economic dimension, seeing that the impetus to economize is an inherent part of intelligent comportment. Rationality is a matter of deliberately doing the best one can with the means at one's disposal—of striving for the best results that one can expect to achieve within the range of one's resources—specifically including one's intellectual resources. Optimization in what one thinks, does, and values is the crux of rationality. Costs and benefits are the pivotal factors. Be it in matters of belief, action, or evaluation, rationality demands a deliberate endeavor to optimize benefits relative to the expenditure of available resources. Reason requires the cultivation of intelligently adopted objectives in intelligent ways.

Rationality is not an inevitable feature of conscious organic life. Here on earth, at least, it is our specifically human instrumentality, a matter of our particular evolutionary heritage. Rational intelligence—the use of our brains to guide action by figuring out what is the apparent best—is the survival instrument of our species, in much the same way that other creatures have managed to ensure their survival by being prolific, or tough, or well sheltered. It is a means to adaptive efficiency, enabling us—sometimes at least—to adjust our environment to our needs and wants rather than conversely.

The maintenance of rational coherence and consistency is a key task of philosophy. But is such consistency itself not simply a mere ornament, a dispensable luxury, the hobgoblin of little minds? Rousseau wrote to one of his correspondents that he did not wish to be shackled by narrow-minded consistency—he proposed to write whatever seemed sensible at the time. In a writer of belles lettres, this sort of flexibility may seem refreshingly open-minded. But such an approach is not available to a philosopher. Philosophy in its very nature is a venture of systematization and rationalization—of rendering matters intelligible and accessible to rational thought. Its concern

is for the rational order and systemic coherence of our commitments. The commitment to rational coherence is a part of what makes philosophy the enterprise it is.

But why not embrace contradiction in a spirit of openness rather than flee from it?[6] The answer is that rejecting inconsistencies is the only road to comprehension and understanding. To the extent that we do not resolve an issue in one definite way to the exclusion of others, we do not resolve it at all. Only a coherent, alternative-excluding resolution is a resolution at all. Moreover, intelligence has, for us, an evolutionary dimension, and only a consistent and coherent mode of action can provide for evolutionary efficacy.

The presence of an inconsistency in framing an answer to a question is self-destructive. To respond "yes *and* no" is in effect to offer no response at all; answers that do not *exclude* manage to achieve no useful *inclusions* either. Only where some possibilities are denied is anything asserted: "All determination is negation" (*omnis affirmatio est negatio*). A logically inconsistent theory of something is thereby self-defeating—not just because it affirms an impossibility but because it provides no information on the matter at issue. An inconsistent "position" is no position at all. Keeping on good terms with *all* the possibilities requires that we embrace none. But the point of having a position at all is to have some answer to some question or other. If we fail to resolve the problem in favor of one possibility or another, we do not have an answer. To whatever extent we fail to resolve the issue in favor of one alternative or another, we also fail to arrive at some answer to the question. Ubiquitous yea-saying is socially accommodating but informatively unhelpful. (Compare Aristotle's defense of the law of noncontradiction in Book Gamma of the *Metaphysics*.) As long as and to the extent that inconsistencies remain, our goal of securing information or achieving understanding is defeated.

To be sure, while we ever strive to *improve* our knowledge, we never manage to *perfect* it. The stage for our present deliberations is itself set by a trio of individually plausible but collectively incompatible theses represented by the inconsistent triad:

1. Reality is knowable. (Thought can adequately characterize reality—not fully, to be sure, but at any rate in essentials.)

2. Our knowledge of reality is consistent; it constitutes a logically "coherent whole." Rational inquiry can in principle depict reality adequately in a coherent system of true propositions.

3. Experience shows that our ventures at devising knowledge of reality eventually run into inconsistency as we work out their ramifications and implications more fully.

Such an aporetic cluster of inconsistent plausibilities comes to be resolved by abandoning one of the theses involved.

Now denial of thesis 3 is not a promising option here, since, to all appearances, this simply represents a "fact of life" regarding the situation in philosophy. Rejecting 2 also has its problems. Perhaps it is conceivable (just barely) that reality will, whenever offered a choice of alternatives, decide to have it both ways and accept inconsistency—a prospect envisaged by thinkers from the days of Nicholas of Cusa to contemporary neo-Hegelians. This is a theory that we might, in the end, feel compelled to adopt. But clearly only as a last resort, "at the end of the day"—and thus effectively never. In philosophy, we want to make sense of things. A theory that says they just cannot be made sense of coherently and consistently may well have various merits, but it is nevertheless decisively flawed. Its defect is not just a lack of rationality but a lack of utility as well. For such a theory simply aborts the aim of the cognitive enterprise—it impedes any prospect of gathering information.

And so, denying thesis 1 affords the most readily available option. We must concede that philosophical thought can at best make a rough and imperfect approximation of adequacy—that reality refuses cognitive domestication, so that our best cognitive efforts represent a valiant but never totally satisfactory attempt to "get it right." Such a position is not a radical scepticism that denies the availability of any and all useful information about reality, but a mitigated scepticism that insists that thought at best affords rough information about reality—not by way of definitive and indefeasible *epistêmê*, but by way of a "rational belief" that is inevitably imperfect and defective (its rationality notwithstanding). An element of tentativeness should always attend our philosophical theories—we can never rest assured

that they will not need to be revamped and shored up by our successors (quite to the contrary, we can count on it!).

As this line of thought indicates, two basic goals set the scene for philosophical inquiry: (i) the urge to know, to secure answers to our questions, to enhance our cognitive resources, to enlarge our information, to extend the range of accepted theses, to fill up an intellectual vacuum. But this in the nature of the case—given the character of its "data"—inexorably leads to over-commitment, to informational overcrowding, to inconsistency. And now comes (ii), the urge to rationality: to have a coherent theory, to keep our commitments consistent and harmoniously coordinated. The first impetus is expansive and ampliative, the second contractive and eliminative. Both point in the direction of systematization, with its characteristic concern for comprehensiveness and harmonization.

Philosophy as Truth Estimation

As a venture in rational inquiry, philosophy seeks for the best available, the "rationally optimal," answers to our information-in-hand-transcending questions about how matters stand in the world. And experience-based conjecture—theorizing, if you will—is the most promising available instrument for question resolution in the face of imperfect information. It is a tool for use by finite intelligences, providing them not with the best *possible* answer (in some rarified sense of this term), but with the best *available* answer, the putative best that one can manage to secure in the actually existing conditions in which we do and must conduct our epistemic labors.

In philosophy, as elsewhere throughout the domain of estimation, one confronts an inevitable risk of error. This risk takes two forms. On the one hand, we face errors of commission in possibly accepting what is false. On the other hand, we face errors of omission by failing to accept what is true. Like any other cognitive enterprise, philosophy has to navigate the difficult passage between ignorance and mistakes.

Two equally unacceptable extremes offer themselves at this stage. That first is to accept nothing, to fall into pervasive scepticism. Here we achieve a total exemption from errors of commission—but un-

fortunately do so at the expense of endless errors of omission. The other extreme is to fall into pervasive gullibility, to accept pretty much everything that is put before us. Here we achieve a total exemption from errors of omission—but unfortunately do so at the expense of maximal errors of commission. In philosophy, as in other branches of rational inquiry, we must strive for the best available middle way—the best available balance. Though we realize that there are no guarantees, we do desire and require reasonable estimates.

The need for such an estimative approach is easy to see. After all, we humans live in a world not of our making where we have to do the best we can with the limited means at our disposal. We must recognize that there is no prospect of assessing the truth—or presumptive truth—of claims (be they philosophical or scientific) independently of the use of our imperfect mechanisms of inquiry and systematization. And here it is *estimation* that affords the best means for doing the job. We are not—and presumably will never be—in a position to stake totally secure claims to the definitive truth regarding those great issues of philosophical interest. But we certainly can—and indeed must—do the best we can to achieve a reasonable *estimate* of the truth. We can and do *aim* at the truth in our inquiries, even in circumstances where we cannot make foolproof pretensions to its attainment, and where we have no alternative but to settle for the *best available estimate* of the truth of the matter—that estimate for which the best case can be made, according to the appropriate standards of rational cogency.

Yet despite those guarding qualifications about feasibility and practicability, the "best available" answer at issue here is intended in a rather strong sense. We want not just an "answer" of some sort, but a viable and acceptable answer—one whose tenability we are willing to commit ourselves to. The rational conjecture at issue is not to be a product of *mere guesswork,* but one of *responsible estimation* in a strict sense of the term. It is not *just* an estimate of the true answer that we want, but an estimate that is sensible and defensible: *tenable*, in short. We may need to resort to more information than is actually given, but we do not want to make it up "out of thin air." The provision of reasonable warrant for rational assurance is the object of

the enterprise. Rational inquiry is a matter of doing no more—but also no less—than the best we can manage to realize in its prevailing epistemic circumstances. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the rationally indicated answer does in fact afford our most promising estimate of the true answer—that for whose acceptance as true the optimal overall case be constructed in the circumstances at hand.

Now with regard to those "big issues" that constitute the agenda of philosophy, the systematization of otherwise available information is the best policy. And *systematization* in the context of the available background information is nothing other than the process for making out this rationally best case. It is thus rational conjecture as based on and emerging from systematic considerations that is the key method of philosophical inquiry, affording our best hope for obtaining cogent answers to the questions that confront us in this domain. Let us consider more closely just what is involved here.

The Data of Philosophy

In philosophizing we strive for rational coherence in achieving answers to our questions. But how is one to proceed in this venture? It is clear that here, as in other branches of inquiry, we begin with data.

Neither individually nor collectively do we humans begin our cognitive quest empty handed, equipped with only a blank tablet. Be it as single individuals or as entire generations, we always begin with a diversified cognitive heritage, falling heir to the great mass of information and misinformation of our predecessors—one must extend it. What William James called our "funded experience" of the world's ways—of its nature and our place within it—constitute the *data* at philosophy's disposal in its endeavor to accomplish its question-resolving work. These specifically include:

- Common-sense beliefs, common knowledge, and what have been "the ordinary convictions of the plain man" since time immemorial;
- The facts (or purported facts) afforded by the science of the day; the views of well-informed "experts" and "authorities";
- The lessons we derive from our dealings with the world in everyday life;

- The received opinions that constitute the worldview of the day; views that accord with the "spirit of the times" and the ambient convictions of one's cultural context;
- Tradition, inherited lore, and ancestral wisdom (including religious tradition);
- The "teachings of history," as best we can discern them.

There is no clear limit to the scope of philosophy's potentially useful data. The lessons of human experience in all of its cognitive dimensions afford the materials of philosophy. No plausible source of information about how matters stand in the world fails to bring grist to the mill. The whole range of the (purportedly) established "facts of experience" furnishes the extra-philosophical inputs for our philosophizing—the potentially usable materials, as it were, for our philosophical reflections.

And all of these data have much to be said for them: common sense, tradition, general belief, and plausible prior theorizing—the sum total of the different sectors of "our experience." They all merit consideration: all exert some degree of cognitive pressure in having a claim upon us. Yet, while those data deserve respect, they do not deserve acceptance. And they certainly do not constitute established knowledge. There is nothing sacred and sacrosanct about them. For, taken as a whole, the data are too much for tenability—collectively they generally run into conflicts and contradictions. The long and short of it is that the data of philosophy constitute a plethora of fact (or purported fact) so ample as to threaten to sink any ship that carries so heavy a cargo. The constraint they put upon us is thus not peremptory and absolute—they do not represent certainties to which we must cling to at all costs. Even the plainest of "plain facts" can be questioned, as indeed some of them must be, since in the aggregate they are collectively inconsistent.

And this is the condition of philosophy's data in general. For the philosopher, nothing is absolutely sacred. The difficulty is—and always has been—that the data of philosophy afford an embarrassment of riches. They engender a situation of cognitive over-commitment within which inconsistencies arise. For they are not only manifold and diversified but invariably yield discordant results. Taken alto-

gether in their grand totality, the data are inconsistent. And here philosophy finds its work cut out for it.

In philosophy, we cannot accept all those "givens" as certified facts that must be endorsed wholly and unqualifiedly. Every datum is defeasible. Anything might, in the final analysis, have to be abandoned, whatever its source: science, common sense, common knowledge, the whole lot. Those data are not truths but only plausibilities. Nothing about them is immune to criticism and possible rejection; everything is potentially at risk. One recent theorist writes: "No philosophical, or any other, theory can provide a view which violates common sense and remain logically consistent. For the truth of common sense is assumed by all theories. . . . This necessity to conform to common sense establishes a constraint upon the interpretations philosophical theories can offer."[7] But this is very problematic. The landscape of philosophical history is littered with theories that tread common sense underfoot. There are no sacred cows in philosophy—common sense least of all. As philosophy goes about its work of rendering our beliefs coherent, something to which we are deeply attached will have to give, and we can never say at the outset where the blow will or will not fall. Systemic considerations may in the end lead to difficulties at any point.

For these data do indeed all have some degree of merit and, given our cognitive situation, it would be very convenient if they turned out to be true. Philosophy cannot simply turn its back on these data without further ado. Its methodology must be one of damage control and salvage. For as regards those data, it should always be our goal to save as much as we coherently can.

Metaphilosophical Issues

To this point, the tenor of the discussion has been to offer a series of assertions along the lines of: this is what philosophy is; this is what philosophy does; this is how philosophizing works. But what justifies this way of talking? What reason is there to think that matters indeed stand as claimed?

This is a question that can, in the final analysis, be answered only *genetically*, by linking the response to and duly coordinating it with the historical facts about how philosophizing has actually been car-

ried on over the years. What philosophy is all about is not writ large in the lineaments of theory, but it is something that must be gleaned from the inspectable realities of philosophical practice. And so, while the history of physics may be largely irrelevant for physicists, the history of philosophy is unavoidably relevant for philosophers. What philosophers *should* do has to emerge from a critical analysis of what philosophers *have been* doing. The history of philosophy is not a part of philosophy, but philosophy cannot get on without it.

All the same, it is lamentable that now, more than two hundred years later, there are still philosophers whose modus operandi invites Kant's classic complaint (at the start of the introduction of the *Prolegomena*) that "there are scholarly men for whom the history of philosophy (both ancient and modern) is philosophy itself." For the fact is that philosophy and history of philosophy *address different questions*—in the former instance, what is the case about an issue, and in the latter, what someone, *X*, thought to be the case. To address the former question we must speak on our own account. A philosopher cannot be a commission agent trading in the doctrines of others; in the final analysis he or she must deal on his or her own account. There must be a shift from "*X* thinks that *A* is the answer to the question *Q*" to the position that we ourselves are prepared to endorse for substantively cogent reasons. No amount of exposition and clarification regarding the thought of *X* and of *Y* will themselves answer the question on our agenda. To do so, we must decide not what people thought or meant but what is correct with respect to the issues. And so while the history of philosophy is indeed an indispensable instrument of philosophy—in a science of concepts, ideas, problems, issues, theories, and so on—these are no more than *data* for our philosophizing. Actually to philosophize we must do more than note and consolidate such data, we must appraise and evaluate them on our own account. Philosophers must speak for themselves and conduct their business on their own account. They cannot hide themselves behind what *X* thinks or what *Y* thinks, but must in the end present a position of their own with respect to *what is to be thought*. The history of philosophy is not—and cannot be—a substitute for philosophy itself.

Nevertheless, the fact is that metaphilosophy—the study of the nature and methodology of the discipline—is also an integral com-

ponent of philosophy. Unlike the situation with chemistry or with physiology, questions about the nature of philosophy belong to the discipline itself. And so, these questions about methodology cannot really be resolved by recourse to some sort of philosophy-neutral methodology. Only at the end of the day—only when we have pursued our philosophical inquiries to an adequate stage of development—will it become possible to see, with the wisdom of a more synoptic hindsight, as it were, that the selection of a methodological starting point was in fact proper and appropriate. It is part and parcel of the coherentist nature of philosophical method that our analysis must issue in smoothly self-supportive cycles and climates. Circularity in philosophical argumentation is not necessarily vicious. On the contrary, it can and should exhibit the ultimately self-sustaining nature of rational inquiry at large. Herein lies a key part of the reason why philosophy must be developed systematically—that is, as a system.

If you cannot fit your philosophical contentions into a smooth systemic unison with what you otherwise know then there is something seriously amiss with them. To be sure, this does not mean that the discussion will not, here and there, be projected into contentions that are controversial and seemingly eccentric. For sometimes the best reason for adopting a controversial and apparently strange thesis is that it contributes significantly to the systemic coordination of the familiar by serving to unify and rationalize a mass of material, much of which seems comparatively unproblematic. For example, our basic thesis that philosophy exists to make sense of the things we know is far from being a philosophical truism. But that does not preclude its ultimate appropriations.

The cardinal task of philosophy is thus to impart systemic order into the domain of relevant data; to render them consistent, compatible, and smoothly coordinated. Its commitment to instilling harmonious coherence into the manifold of our putative knowledge means that systematization is the prime and principal instrument of philosophical methodology. One might, in fact, define philosophy as the rational systematization of our thoughts on basic issues—the "basic principles" of our understanding of the world and our place within it. We become involved in philosophy in our endeavor to make sys-

temic sense of the extraphilosophical "facts"—when we try to answer those big questions by systematizing what we think we know about the world, pushing our "knowledge" to its ultimate conclusions, and combining items usually kept in convenient separation. Philosophy is the policeman of thought, as it were, the agent for maintaining law and order in our cognitive endeavors.