SIX CRITERIA IN SEARCH OF A PHILOSOPHER

DENNIS ROHATYN

THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO

ABSTRACT. Philosophy as a "way of life" is singularly unsatisfactory as a definition of the subject. Inspired by Kant, we examine six alternative formulations: philosophy may be seen as (1) a search for the conditions governing possible experience, (2) an attempt to derive ultimate categories of ontological or else psychological analysis, (3) the discovery (or erection) of synthetic a priori truths, coupled with making the notion of "S.A.P." coherent, (4) resolving fundamental antinomies of thought, (5) finding, and/or explicating, the role of regulative principles in human enterprises, (6) "reconstructing" the domain of other disciplines, as Kant does throughout the three Critiques. We conclude with a synoptic suggestion about philosophy as self-criticism (of propositions normally accepted unthinkingly), and ponder its implications for the status of the profession.

It was Plato who first worried about how to distinguish philosophy as a genuine "science of dialectic" (Sophist 253D) from various forms of public and private charlatanry (Ibid., 268A-D). Nonetheless it is correct to say, with Rorty, that the idea of philosophy as "an autonomous discipline" is a Kantian inheritance (Rorty, 131). But what is it that we associate with this discipline? Only, as Rorty points out, the "... attempt to render all knowledge-claims commensurable" (Rorty, 357) if not in Cartesian then in some other methodologically respectable terms that are not simply borrowed or derived from (e.g., Newtonian) science. Recent attempts, including Rorty's own, to broaden philosophy's base run into problems, precisely because it is so difficult to avoid overlapping other fields. Nor can we
remain content with Kekes' defense of the philosophical right "... to construct and justify a world-view" (Kekes, 218) unless we first know what 'world-view' means, and (again) how it is independent from art, science, history, anthropology, religion, and the like.

Some years ago I suggested that philosophy should be defined in terms of the adoption of a life-style, or more precisely as the one-to-one correspondence between the profession of certain values and their incorporation in one's own practice (Rohatyn, 359-61). Over the years I have grown disenchanted with this approach, for a number of reasons: (a) historically it applies only to the "wisdom tradition"—Socrates, Plotinus, Augustine, Pascal, and perhaps Kierkegaard qualify as representatives. So it excludes too much; it leaves out theoreticians (Leibniz, Whitehead) and even those who, like Hegel, survey the possible meanings of philosophy as I am doing now. (b) as Kant observes, it imposes too high a standard both on the philosopher and on any followers—it is, as Kant puts it, "vainglorious" to suppose oneself the "lawgiver of human reason" (KdrV A839/B867). This "cosmical concept" of philosophy is at best a Platonic ideal, something to be striven for, but never actually realized. (c) it fails to distinguish philosophy from religion, or even from politics insofar as the latter may be dominated by a "cult of personality." (d) it fails to distinguish good from evil. Jim Jones, Hitler, Stalin, and Amin all qualify as persons who practiced what they preached, regrettably. While I suppose one might be able to define, e.g., what art is, without drawing the further distinction between great and no-so-great art, I am not sure that this analogy holds up (or that I want it to) in the case of philosophy. Indeed, it is even arguable that to classify something as art (or as non-art) involves a value judgment, so that the analogy breaks down as soon as it is constructed.

But if my old definition won't work, what can be put in its place? Since, as Rorty suggests, Kant is the ancestor of so much of our contemporary concern in this area, it seems proper to ask what he thought. Surprisingly, and despite the narrow professionalism seemingly licensed by the Prolegomena, Kant has a variety of answers to offer us, each of which has been influential in subsequent intellectual activity. Here is an offhanded enumeration of conceptions of philosophy, each of which is central to Kant's own enterprise, and Kantian, too, in light of later history:

1. SEARCHING FOR THE CONDITIONS (OR LOGICAL PRE-SUPPOSITIONS) GOVERNING ALL POSSIBLE EXPERIENCE

Call this foundationalism, and bear in mind Kant's caveat (A737/B765) that any results of the search have the status of empirically untestable axioms, which cannot be compared with anything (except their absence, if this is imaginable)
SIX CRITERIA IN SEARCH

and can only be the subject of thought-experiments, rather than phenomenal ones.

(2) ATTEMPTING TO PERFORM CATEGORICAL ANALYSIS (A80/B106)

like Aristotle before him and Strawson, among others, in our time. This of course is closely related to (1) but it also involves a particular conception of how the job is to be done—e.g., through language analysis, a dissection of the indispensable factors in scientific explanation, hypertheology, common sense, or else Kant's distinctive attempt to isolate the mental building-blocks of understanding, as a consequence of his Copernican revolution.

(3) GENERATING SYNTHETIC A PRIORI TRUTHS (B19) AND EXPLAINING THEIR LOGICAL POSSIBILITY

Sellars and others have contended that this is the watershed issue on which philosophers divide, i.e., if you know where a philosopher stands on this matter you can pretty well infer his overall position, and his specific response to a number of other dilemmas. Kant took an enormous risk in positing this notion—after all, he was prepared to laugh 'analytic a posteriori' out of court, and symmetry considerations alone would dictate a similar dismissal of S.A.P. Yet Kant had to talk about this, just as Einstein and other scientists have wondered what makes it possible for mathematics to pertain to physical reality with such astounding success. Commentators who harp on Kant's alleged myopia in selecting Euclidean geometry as the bearer of the S.A.P. burden ignore the permanent interest of the propositional form that Kant bequeathed, concentrating instead on his mistaken guess about content. Of course, it is always possible that there are no S.A.P. truths (or falsehoods), though it would require an infinity of disconfirmations to establish this. If the notion is self-contradictory, then we needn't even consider any candidates to fulfill its claims, for they must be incoherent. But it seems much harder to get rid of the category of S.A.P. than of any given pretenders to the role of instantiation. Hence the attention paid to Kant's historical error is misplaced; it belongs to the arguments by which he sought to secure the validity of the S.A.P. as a conceptual gambit. And let's be frank—if S.A.P. propositions could be found, it would do a lot to restore philosophy's prestige, i.e., its age-old claim to be the queen of the sciences, one which is informative about reality but can bypass concrete experience. There is a Platonic/Cartesian dream behind this, which Kant is trying to realize even while disclaiming some of its original pretensions.

(4) RESOLVING DEEP-SEATED ANTINOMIES (405/B432 ff.)

Here again, commentators often miss the wood for the trees.
DENNIS ROHATYN

Perhaps Kant's four examples (atomicity, free will, God/first cause, beginning of time) do not all have genuine antitheses; perhaps there are logical flaws in the argumentation pro and con which permit him to draw his own agnostic conclusions, which preclude positivism's attempt to "demarcate" (as Popper would say) genuine from pseudo-problems. But if some of Kant's examples can be solved, either within experience or by defending transcendent, as opposed to transcendental, reasoning (A296/B352), it does not follow that we should discard the notion of antinomy or that other puzzles—for example, Zeno's paradoxes, might not qualify as members of this exclusive club. Zeno is a good example because, thanks to Russell, it used to be thought that Zeno's conundrums had been solved once and for all, owing to the development of the infinitesimal calculus. Now we know better, and Zeno has returned to the ranks of the insoluble. This is annoying, because it suggests that philosophy makes no progress, and cannot be sure of its own findings. But, can science? Is the (partial) restoration of the legitimacy of a Ptolemaic framework in light of relativity theory something for science to become distressed over? Kant would be chagrined if he knew that the items he classed as permanently undecidable had changed their status, but this is only because his personality made him seek final answers. Fortunately, his intellectual framework is more flexible and at the same time more stable than his dogmatic temperament. Kant, despite his rebellion against Wolff, was more like his opponents than he knew.

Back in the 1950's, due to Ryle and Wittgenstein, it was fashionable to say that philosophy consisted of (linguistic) puzzles that defied empirical solution. Now in the 1980's, due to the second renaissance in logic inspired by Kripke, it is fashionable to emphasize the open-endedness of logical systems (Godel's theorem, Church's thesis), and to stress the formal parallels between incompleteness in mathematics and related problems, such as "tag" (Minsky, Post) and "halting" (Turing) in artificial intelligence. The formalization of a theory of antinomies is capable of drawing all of these threads together into a unified theory whose implications concerning human limits (and their self-transcendence) would be far-reaching. Kant's approach is therefore far-sighted, no matter what the fate of e.g., natural theology, or subatomic particle theory; it is capable of embracing problems which promise to remain with us, even if the cast of characters changes from time to time.[1]

(5) REGULATIVE PRINCIPLES (A619/B647)

are another Kantian watchword, derived from his awareness, disclosed in (1), that axioms can only serve as postulates or assumptions, never as self-certifying propositions in the style (e.g.) of the cogito. Hence the choice of (or between) regulative principles must be made on the basis of
use: explanatory elegance, economy, fruitfulness (heuristic value) in leading to new findings or data, and so on. Regulative principles are not limited to science, but pervade every discipline and method. Pragmatism gets its inspiration from these considerations, and even the word owes its origin to Kant's account of belief as the ability to bet on or predict an event (A824/B852). Regulative principles are a concession to the inability, in principle, to arrive at absolute or guaranteed truths—they offer us a substitute for speculation, in the form of explicit and testable rules, which makes foundationalism unnecessary. Kant did not emphasize this side of thought sufficiently, or he would not have found it necessary to answer Hume's polemic concerning causality in such detail; for one can agree with Hume that conclusive justifications of induction are impossible in principle, yet continue to offer (and be content with) "relative" standards, which is exactly what probability theorists from Reichenbach onwards have done. Kant's boast that he could solve all philosophical problems by 1800 got in the way of some of his own insights, and perhaps gave Hume's ghost the last laugh.

Philosophy on this account would attempt to set out a rigorous definition of 'regulative principle' and to unify, if possible, the appearance of this concept in other domains. This in turn leads us to another Kantian view of the role of philosophy, one which is omnipresent in contemporary academic curricula and owes its inspiration to the three Critiques, but is not, so far as I know, explicitly avowed anywhere in the Kantian corpus. We may call it

(6) PHILOSOPHY AS LOGICAL RECONSTRUCTION

(The term is Hempel's, but the intent is far broader.) Philosophy is, to use a British catch-word, a "second-order" discipline, one which watches and examines what "first-order" activities (art, science, politics, etc.) are, and then attempts to answer the underlying question 'what is X' with respect to any of them, as well as to find possible ideas, themes, techniques or presuppositions (besides the laws of logic) that they may have in common. "Doing philosophy" presumably involves studying what others do--hence philosophy is, unflatteringly enough, considered "parasitic" on (all) other subjects. The queen of the sciences has become a handmaiden, in this conception, but her task is still noble, insofar as she makes important conceptual discoveries about X which, for one or another reason, practitioners of X are prevented from making themselves.

I am less impressed with this reading of philosophy's legitimate role than with some of the others already itemized, although it does have a distinguished history--much of Aristotle's work can be looked at in this way... but beware of the Stagirite's remark that "the mode of existence and essence of the separable it is the business of the pri-
mary type of philosophy to define" (Physics 194b12), which reaffirms the primacy of abstract ontology. What distresses me about this view is not merely that it might encourage us to ignore the temporal development of a given field (that would be hard to do nowadays, in light of Kuhn, Feyerabend, Hanson, et al), or that it tends to isolate subject-matters in airtight compartments (Habermas, Apel, and the Frankfurt school are sufficient contemporary safeguards against this tendency). Those errors, if errors they be, can be corrected and are not intrinsic to this description of philosophy's mission. Rather, what upsets me is that for all its apparent modesty, accentuated by self-deprecatory language, the thrust of (6) is to preclude practitioners from asking these questions themselves, within the context of their own research/creativity. How many times have philosophy professors said to us—or have we said to our students—as soon as you ask 'what is X,' you're doing philosophy'? By this criterion, Bohr, Dali and Pilate are all philosophers. Conversely, (6) insinuates that a first-order player of the game is insufficiently reflective or thoughtful to ask second-order questions, at least not while they're engaged in the act (this may be true of sex, or for Quine's cycling mathematician, but I can't see it as true for anything else, unless we begin to split terminological hairs). Perhaps mine is merely a subjective impression, unrelated to the cardinal tenets of (6), but I cannot help but feel that it attempts to segregate other enterprises from philosophy in a manner that is ultimately arbitrary, and fear-induced (philosophy will lose whatever small but precious claims to autonomy it still possesses). I am not worried about treating art or history as finished products—it requires supplementation by eschatology or Hegelian metaphysics to achieve that. Rather, it is the metaphilosophy which I hold to be dubious, misconceived, and insulting to parties on all sides of the ledger. But there is no question that Kant's efforts to do philosophy in this manner were sincere and well-motivated: he saw himself, not as discovering moral truths but as systematizing them and explaining why we have the 'intuitions' we have about right and wrong, as ordinary people. He saw the difference between genius and mere talent, and the way in which art uses matter to convey an immaterial message about human dignity ('sublimity'), and attempted to formalize this, in keeping with his own insights about freedom and universalizability. And he saw physics standing on its own feet, depending on unclarified notions such as 'matter' and 'causality' but quite able to function in the absence of any final determination of the meaning of these allegedly indispensable terms. But Kant's philosophy is one thing, his criterion for doing it quite another. We cannot reproduce the first in the context of the second, without identifying philosophy with Kant's particular doctrines. As soon as we detach ourselves from Kant's own impressive commitments, the thesis embodied in (6) becomes vague wherever it is not arch, and thus begins to crumble.
SIX CRITERIA IN SEARCH

Here we have six criteria in search of a philosopher. Is there a way of bringing these ideas together, or must we be content with Jamesian pluralism even at this level of analysis? My own thinking is that we can build bridges by relying on a simple, almost hackneyed, Socratic expedient: let us recall that in philosophy we make it our business to criticize (and uncover) propositions whose truth we ordinarily take for granted, the correct analysis of which (to echo G.E. Moore) eludes us, yet is necessary if we are to give a coherent account of whatever reality or experience is. That is what is immediately impressive about Descartes, or Berkeley, or a Platonic dialogue, and what astonishes students (and ourselves, both as novices and continually thereafter). As philosophers, we live on the edge of fear constantly—fear that our conceptual framework will break down. It makes no difference whether we are "revisionists" or "descriptivists" a la Strawson, for we are too well schooled in the opposition point of view, in the insecurity of what lies at the frontiers of knowledge, to be overconfident. This lesson Kant first taught us—that the claims we make have an irredeemable tentativeness about them, despite all our efforts (including the erection of S.A.P.'s and tables of categories) to escape. The fallibilism of Peirce and Popper is just an echo of such self-reference, and the Entscheidungsproblem offers the surprising but negligible comfort of the realization that nobody outside philosophy is immune from uncertainty, either. (Collingwood arrived at the same conclusion, culturally).

Moreover, becoming aware of what you used to accept tacitly and unthinkingly gives a sense of vividness to (1) the search for presuppositions of experience, and (4) the frustration of this search in the realm of the paradoxical, which the 20th century has brought to the foreground both in art and in logic (Hofstadter, passim). Regulative principles (5) already incorporate a sense of provisionality, as we pointed out earlier: they respond to the challenge posed by the demise of the apodictic by framing a new standard of diminished cognitive expectations, to paraphrase former Governor Brown. This can itself be debated—any Husserlian, Hartshornian, or inductive vindicationist would challenge such restrictions—but my remarks in the preceding paragraph indicate that such challenges simply form an on-going part of philosophy's internal dialogue. We hardly need to remind ourselves of Chapter II of On Liberty to realize that no individual possesses the whole truth in this, as in any other arena of conflict, and consequently that our fear of being exposed as mistaken can at best be diminished, but never curtailed.

I began this paper by citing Plato. He was worried, not just about being exposed as wrong, but as a fraud. Is the philosopher a fraud, no better than the cult leader or TV evangelist? Plato, Kant and I would say no. In the absence (let us suppose) of philosophic knowledge (Rohatyn
DENNIS ROHATYN

TDP, 17ffj, we can still justify this denial by pointing out that we are worried about it; the charlatan, typically, is not. This kind of reflexive awareness is what the proponent of (6) may have in mind: to do philosophy is to worry about the legitimacy and propriety of what you are doing, whereas the "technician" and the cheat alike are devoid of Angst. This may be a bogus form of self-flattery; but then, what else do we have to hang on to except (as Ionesco observes in Rhinoceros) our professional membership cards? If there is any merit in the foregoing discussion, perhaps "paying our dues" emotionally will always be enough.

FOOTNOTE

1. For this reason, the present paper is mum with respect to the "problems" account of philosophy which dominates our current textbooks. For the problems may change, i.e., what is identified as a "timeless" or perennial problem today may be solved tomorrow--and reintroduced the day, or century, after that. One needs to define either what a distinctively philosophical problem is (e.g., one not soluble by empirical methods), and then defend that against objections, or else compile (as Kant evidently thought possible) a complete list of such problems and then infer their common characteristics, if not exhaustively, then at least with sufficient discrimination of their essence to isolate them as a class once and for all, and so, fend off adversaries and counter-examples. This, as Rorty suggests, is what is involved in the endeavor to make philosophy an academic Fach.

REFERENCES*


* References to Kant's 1st Critique are in standard form, irrespective of edition or language.