Philosophy: In defense of the narrow conception

In >Philosophy< I gave an outline of the subject on about sixty pages. It may seem preposterous to give the present version of philosophy in so limited a space in view of the 2500 years of its history and the many volumes Plato and Aristotle, Thomas of Aquino, Descartes, Kant and Wittgenstein have filled.

In my proposal I invested a narrow conception by beginning with the clarification of the concept of philosophy. First, I hold that methodically philosophy was >reflective conceptual clarification< from the start, even if in its beginnings and for significant periods of its development it has materially been framed metaphysically. Secondly, I replaced this metaphysical framing by borrowing from Wittgenstein: The material object of philosophy I take to be an overview over the basic concepts of our understanding. Thirdly, I restricted the responsibility of philosophy centrally to the fundamental concepts of every-day-understanding, part of which has traditionally been called analysis of categories.

Even if the narrow conception is clear, it certainly is in need of a defense by reasons. These are divers in nature, but in the main historical.

I.

The beginnings of wisdom concerning the nature of philosophy lies in taking a wider look around. Where does the need for conceptual clarification come from? – should be the first question.

We humans are (having become) by second nature[1] persons – language having animals, as already Aristotle has said.[2] The language we alone, among living beings, are in possession of is propositional and as such complex. The elements of this complexity – words – we learnt to explain by meaning-explanation[3] in cases of misunderstanding. These meaning-explanations are the starting points of reflective clarification as soon as conflicting explanations have to be

---

1 Cicero was the first to speak of >second nature< (>altera natura<) with respect to the many habits humans develop. *De Finibus* V, 25, 74: „Consuetudine quasi alteram quandam naturam effici“.
2 *Politics 1253 a 14* sqq.
3 The decisive insight in this respect is owed to Wittgenstein, who equated >meaning< and >meaning-explanation<: „The meaning of a word is what an explanation of its meaning explains.“ (*Philosophical Investigations* para. 560). – The German philosopher Ernst Tugendhat, my postgraduate teacher, called this clarification *the* principle of Analytical (linguistic) Philosophy.

dealt with. In the everyday discourses they remain of short range only, for there their purpose remains simply to restore understanding by dissolving misunderstanding.

By enabling the speakers of it to meaning-explanations a natural language develops into an *universal* medium of expression and representaion in factual as well as >fiat<ive[4] respects as soon as *all* expressions in the language have come into the reach of meaning-explanations.

The multicentricity of language use in combination with the autonomy of its many speakers as explanators of their (>speaker's<) meaning – of what they intended to say – inevitably makes for an unsurveyability of language use and provides the generic motive for philosophy.

As much as we like to think of philosophies as the products of exceptional powerful individual minds, philosophy fulfills a function in social discourse, prefigured in our form of life – to keep language use and common understanding transparent for the speakers and surveyable for the community. Of course, drawn to fulfill this function will be persons of a special reflective bent.

II.

It is propositions that are right or wrong, not concepts. Concepts are useful and illuminating, expressibly adequate or not. This, too, is valid for a concept of philosophy. Speaking of a >narrow concept(ion)< implies that there are (may be) wider conceptions. I see three of them.

First, one can call any discussion of principles of some field of understanding or action philosophy. In this loose sense even the car-factory BMW has a >philosophy<, which is said to promotind the >joy to ride<. Or, the philosophy of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra is excellence in musical interpretation.

Second, one can call philosophy the field of study reflecting on the understanding, especially in relation to the sciences, be it as metaphysics and >queen of sciences<, be it, as Locke had it, as their >underlabourer<.

In the second sense of >philosophy< the clarification of concepts already is in play methodically. In the reflection on the beginnings of some science their basic concepts tend to

---

4 Anthony Kenny contrasted statements of fact and >fiats< (from Latin fiat= it may/should happen) and classfied as >fiats< all >practical< uses of language not int the grammatical indicative (wish, command etc.). (*Freedom, Will, & Power*)

be a focus of exposition.

The clarifying reflection on concepts, as Kant called it: their >logical treatment<[5], becomes an aim in itself in the third conception. It started with Plato's >What is …?< – questions and directed the research in Aristitotle's logical and metaphysical investigations, which had an overwhelming influence on the philosophy in the European middle ages up to Descartes' scholastic background.

The narrow conception I proposed reorients this third conception to the fundamental concepts of every-day-understanding. Why?

<center>III.</center>

The main reasons lie in the historical development of philosophy in its relations to mythology and science.

In its beginnings philosophy was not firmly differentiated from mythology in its aspiration to explaining everything. Parmenides, for instance, was brought to his insight into the unity of being by having been illuminated by a goddess and her help in an ascension to the heavens. And Plato told several myths of origins. Aristotle was the first to turn philosophy definitely away from mythology to >science<, which for him terminated in metaphysical explanation of the world as a whole. Through dogmatization his designs reigned untill the beginnings of modern times.

Intellectually these are distinguished by the developments of sciences in the modern sense of putting theoretically informed hypotheses to empirical tests of falsification/verification. The sciences develop their own concepts and define their ranges of application to the empirical. As intellectual enterprises progressing by reasoning, they were in need of conceptual clarity which they fended for widely themselves. This greatly reduced the responsibility of philosophy and left it with its sole subject in post-Wittgensteinian times: the clarification of concepts, which everyday understanding and the sciences alike presuppose.

That this is a genuine responsibility can be seen from the fact, that even physics pragmatically presupposes everyday understanding with its central concept of a >person< at least for the explanation of what is *done* when hypotheses are formed and tested. Physics is not universal, because it is not self-applicable. Not >matter in motion<, the general subject of

---

5   >logische Behandlung der Begriffe in der Philosophie überhaupt<: CPR B 91 / A 66.

physics, produces it, but persons do.

The narrow conception of philosophy as the clarification of the fundamental concepts of everyday-understanding self-consciously accepts the result of the outlined historical developments as setting itself its central task.