

The Question 'Why Do I Do Philosophy?'

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Someone recently suggested to me - not entirely unkindly - that I should try and write something to the title 'Why do I do Philosophy?' My first assumption was that the question was in effect ambiguous, and could be answered in two quite different ways. In the first place it could be treated as asking simply 'Why do Philosophy?' and answered by means of an account of the aims, values and ends proper to philosophy. It would count as an answer to the question 'Why do I do Philosophy?' simply because I had written it and thus, given that the answer was in good faith, it would express my reasons for being engaged with philosophy. But - to vary Wittgenstein's dictum - I need not be mentioned in the answer to the question so construed, since the result would be an objective and impersonal piece of philosophising about the nature of philosophy. On the other hand, the question could be interpreted as genuinely autobiographical in intention, and the appropriate answer would be, in essence, a piece of self-analysis. I would, of course, have to describe some of my philosophical beliefs (especially about the nature and aims of philosophy itself), but I would be presenting them as 'psychic facts', as motives for me - I wouldn't be trying to persuade the reader of their correctness. So, construed in this second way, the question would be given a philosophically neutral answer.

However, a little reflection revealed that the idea of a philosophically neutral answer to the question 'Why do I do philosophy?' is a chimaera. To take a trivial instance, suppose I were to say, 'At the age of sixteen, I read the Meditations and came to think that the existence of the physical world is uncertain,' then I would have already said something philosophically controversial. Quite a few twentieth-century philosophers would want to insist that cannot be the correct description of the attitude I arrived at as a result of reading Descartes, since it suggests that I came to have doubts about the existence of the physical world, which surely I did not. The general point is this: that the exact way a person's thoughts and attitudes towards philosophical questions and ideas are described and interpreted has philosophical implications. In part, this is simply a result of the fact that the interpretation of anyone's thoughts, feelings and motives endeavours to make sense of their relation to some independently existing environment, and this cannot be done while at the same time 'bracketing' the question of the real character of that environment. For the purposes of this highly schematic view of interpretation, the realm of philosophical questions and ideas has to count as part of the subject's 'environment'. This would not matter much, from the point of view of writing a philosophically innocent piece of autobiography, if an agreed, non-controversial description of the subject-matter of philosophy were possible, as it is possible in some

disciplines. Since it is not possible - since the character, mode of existence and proper formulation of philosophical problems is itself a central focus of philosophical controversy - an 'autobiographical' account of why I am engaged with philosophy could not help saying something, however tentative and incoherent, about the character of philosophy and philosophical problems.

This is fairly obvious. What is more interesting is that the same considerations have the converse implication. Since any worked-out 'philosophical position' involves some particular view about what philosophical problems are, it thereby implies a distinctive way of interpreting what someone is doing when they are thinking about, or talking about philosophy. So the first kind of answer to the question 'Why do I do Philosophy?' - an 'impersonal and objective' statement of the aims and values etc. proper to philosophy - will still be 'personal', not just because it expresses the writer's own view, but because it implies that the writer understands and makes sense of what he/she is doing when thinking about philosophy in a particular kind of way. Thus the contrast between the two different kinds of answer to the question, the 'impersonal' answer and the autobiographical answer, is one of emphasis and literary mode of presentation - it cannot be a contrast between statements with entirely different kinds of 'propositional content'.

Within Anglo-American Philosophy especially, a whole series of factors - the 'academicisation' of the subject, its consequent allying of itself with 'scholarship' and science, the increasingly 'technical' character of much of its content, the anxiety to distance philosophy from any kind of introspectionist psychology - have brought it to pass that a highly impersonal style of expression is thought to be the appropriate one for expressing philosophical ideas. As regards the entirely academic character of modern philosophy, it's worth calling to mind the way in which new students have it emphasised to them that philosophy in the 'Western Intellectual Tradition' is entirely different in style and purpose from other traditions of religious, esoteric or self-developmental philosophy. Explaining this contrast in a general way usually involves saying something to the effect that these other traditions of philosophy are connected with 'personal experience' in a way in which most modern Western philosophy is not. It is in fact difficult to make the distinction in a way that does not exclude, e.g., Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre, but at any rate students are clearly given to understand that philosophy essays are to be written in a rigorously impersonal style.

But what exactly is the rationale for this stylistic ruling? Is it that philosophy in the 'Western Intellectual Tradition' is 'intellectual' rather than 'spiritual' or 'emotional'? That it is 'theoretical' rather than

'practical'? Concerned with what is 'objective' rather than 'subjective'? Concerned with what can be 'argued and proved' rather than with what has to be 'personally experienced'? All these distinctions are highly philosophically questionable, but since on this issue of how philosophical thinking should be done and what should be its normal style of presentation they all seem to cut the same way, their validity is not usually questioned further in this context. Anyway, one very concrete point is this: that University and Poly philosophy lecturers haven't been trained to be, aren't paid to be, and almost certainly don't want to be spiritual guides or counsellors in self-development (only 'personal tutors'). So the institutional character of academic philosophy decides the issue in advance of any theoretical (which is to say philosophical) rationale.

However, there is one philosophical factor which seems to insist on the appropriateness of an impersonal mode of presentation for philosophical thinking. Its basis is one of the dominant and perennial distinctions drawn within Western Philosophy - that between particular and universal.

When philosophers have philosophical thoughts and beliefs, or make philosophical assertions, the thought- or speech-act (X's believing or asserting) is particular, while what the philosopher thinks or asserts - the content, proposition, Fregean thought, or meaning - is universal. The former is an event in space and time, located at a particular point in the causal nexus, while the latter is a general characteristic which may be exemplified in any number of different thought-acts or speech acts, located in quite different parts of the spatial/temporal/causal framework. Therefore it seems that the particular and peculiar features and circumstances and X's thinking the philosophical thought that p do not enter into the content of the thought. (There are enormous problems with this when the content of the thought involves essential reference to a named or demonstrated particular, but I'm trying to summarise the general sweep of the idea. In any case, the content of a philosophical thought is traditionally supposed to be entirely universal.) So to this extent it seems that, in thinking philosophically, the philosopher should keep in quite separate mental compartments (a) awareness of the content of his/her philosophical thoughts, beliefs, etc., and (b) awareness of the particular circumstances in which s/he thinks those thoughts. Therefore what the philosopher should assert, talk about as a philosopher - put in papers, essays, etc. - should be the philosophical content of the thoughts being expressed, not anything to do with the nature, circumstances or experiential content of the thought-acts being expressed.

Now I have made the point that philosophers are required to think about the nature and circumstances of their philosophical thinking whenever they turn to the question of the nature of the philosophical thinking itself. At that point philosophical thinking must involve self-reflection and self-interpretation, because the question arises whether one is prepared to understand and interpret oneself and one's philosophical thinking, and also that of others, in a particular way. Does not this imply that we should expect to find one genre of philosophical writing which is autobiographical and self-reflective in style? (Descartes' Discourse on the Method is just about the only major work I can think of in the accepted canon which is in that style.) The reason why we do not lies in the character of the oldest and most powerful view of the nature of philosophical knowledge, which has imparted its peculiar momentum to later and more prosaic accounts: the Platonic one. According to this view, in philosophical understanding one comes to, or rather recovers, a direct apprehension, not mediated by the experience of time-bound particulars, of something universal and eternal - the Form or Idea. So the particular circumstances and experiences which provide the occasion for the individual

coming to have a piece of philosophical knowledge are strictly speaking irrelevant to understanding the essential nature of that act of knowing, which in fact lifts the individual free of time, into the realm of the eternal. Schopenhauer, who holds a modified version of the Platonic view, puts the point very well (he is in fact speaking of aesthetic contemplation, which grasps intuitively what philosophy adumbrates conceptually):

The knowing individual as such and the particular thing known by him are always in a particular place, at a particular time, and are links in the chain of causes and effects. The pure subject of knowledge and its correlative, the idea, have passed out of all these forms.... Time, place, the individual that knows, and the individual that is known, have no meaning for them.

(The World as Will and Representation, trans. E. Payne, Vol. 1, p. 179)

So, according to this kind of view, the meaning of what you achieve in philosophical knowledge is not to be understood or interpreted in relation to the 'hermeneutic circle' of the rest of your life and experience, except in the negative sense that the whole point of that knowledge is that it lifts you free of the circle of the rest of your life and experience.



Now if the Platonic Forms, as the proper objects of philosophical-thinking, have shrunk to something more mundane - for instance, concepts, or intentional objects, or meanings - these things are still universal, transpersonal and (at least relatively) timeless. And by the time that someone has sufficient grasp of their language to be doing philosophy, it can be assumed that they have an immediate access to these things which is (again, relatively) independent of the particular experiences and circumstances of their lives, and which is available for explicit articulation in philosophical theory. So these things are the after-images of Plato's Forms in this respect too, that self-conscious theoretical reflection on them can be conducted in an impersonal way, in abstraction from the details of an individual's life and experience.

But there is, of course, this difference. Whereas contemplation of the Forms realises your eternal nature - and who wouldn't (given you believe the story in the first place) want to do that? - analysis of concepts or meanings only brings conceptual clarity, and it's by no means certain whether that is something particularly worth having. On the other hand, the idea that there is a distinctive realm of fixed philosophical (e.g. 'conceptual' or 'necessary') truth awaiting discovery is quite as controversial and dubious now as it was for Plato's contemporaries.

And so if one is asked, 'Why do you do philosophy?' - especially if one still operates by and large from within the Analytical tradition, and it is from that position that I write - the main tendency of the tradition is that you should present what you are doing as a technical speciality, akin to mathematics or micro-biology, and that you should therefore explain philosophy's special subject-matter, its objectives, its distinctive methods and

techniques - and then, in that context, explain why you personally find it engaging and exciting, and why it seems to you useful and important.

The rest of this paper is about the fact that I cannot give an answer of this kind without feeling that what I say is hollow, and that my personal engagement with philosophy is with its problematic character.

II

People don't often ask me this question directly. When I feel called upon to explain myself, it's more usually in response to some question about the nature of Philosophy itself. Someone says to you, 'Tell me, I've never really understood, what exactly is Philosophy?' The question is apparently asked in good faith, but an undertone of irritated puzzlement already present in the voice tells you that the questioner knows in advance they're not going to get a straight answer, and that they think you're someone who's being paid to teach a bogus subject.

In this type of situation, I usually assume that what I have to do is to take a central philosophical question, explain why I think it's important, and at the same time make clear that it is an important problem for me. But, however articulate I manage to be, and however relaxed I manage to sound, I always feel a bit of a sham, as if I'm putting up a front. It's not just that I sense that my questioner - who is evidently one of those intelligent people who are from birth immune to philosophy - is not being convinced, though that is an essential component of my discomfort. Rather the problem is this: to make a convincing presentation I have to give a clear formulation of my chosen problem. I cannot afford to dwell too much on legitimate questions which can be raised about the formulation. Least of all can I introduce the possibility that a rigorous critique of the formulation, and all alternative formulations, might resolve the question by 'dissolving' it. - After all, the task which the situation has set for me is to lead my questioner to see the philosophical problem as a real problem, not to confirm his/her inveterate suspicion that there is no problem. But this means that I cannot be honest about the way in which philosophical problems are important problems for me, since for me the problematic character of philosophical questions as questions is part of their essence.

It's not that I am in fact a convinced Wittgensteinian who finds it difficult to come clean on social occasions. Nor is that I'm unsure whether the Wittgensteinian view of philosophical problems as being generated by 'language on holiday' is 'right' or not. I'm not referring to philosophical positions, beliefs or strategies and my commitment or uncertainty with respect to them at all, but rather to something more everyday but also more difficult to talk about precisely - the way in which my thinking and feeling with respect to philosophical questions seems so acutely susceptible to mood-like fluctuations.

Of course, engagement in any kind of intellectual activity is subject to alterations of mood. But those characteristics for which philosophy is notorious - the lack of agreement on any substantive issue, the disagreement about what the important problems are, or how they should properly be formulated, the disagreement about methods and aims, the all-importance of fine discriminations of meaning taken together with the fact that such discriminations can only be drawn by means of terms equally open to multiple interpretation, the importance and difficulty of fixing the exact dialectical context of any given philosophical pronouncement - render 'thinking' about philosophy subject to subtle and profound modulations of a kind which we usually associate with feeling and emotion. To say that philosophical thinking is peculiarly affected by changes in mood is perhaps to put the point wrongly. It's rather than one's perspective on, one's understanding of, a given philosophical idea can be

subject to variations which in their incalculability are like changes in feeling or mood. The same philosophical doctrine can seem crystal-clear and profoundly important one week, virtually incomprehensible the following week, and then clear again but flat and trivial the week after that. Explaining the 'Private Language Argument' to one seminar you find that it encapsulates issues crucial to Epistemology, then at another class it comes to seem arbitrary and barmy.

Perhaps my experience is somewhat untypical. I am one of the most non-committal of people, and, as is therefore not surprising, I have not published anything. I do not have publicly staked-out 'positions' by which to re-orientate myself when I find that my thinking on a certain issue has drifted to an unfamiliar perspective. I make definite judgements when lecturing, of course (I try not to be too infuriating as a teacher), but these are put forward as 'something that can be clearly stated in relation to the debate as it stands' rather than as 'what I really think'. So I have adopted the role of a 'flaneur' within the city of philosophy, and perhaps the sense of the continual shiftingness of philosophical thought bears upon me more insistently than others who are, so to speak, regularly employed articulating and defending specific philosophical positions. All the same, the experience I describe is surely familiar to everyone who is involved with philosophy. It is part of the 'average everydayness' of doing philosophy.

Now I am not trying to suggest that this day-to-day experience of the fluid and shifting character of philosophical thought implies some kind of scepticism or relativism about philosophical truth, so that we are all somehow temporary sceptics for those moments that this aspect of philosophy comes to the fore. The experience is entirely compatible with, and describable and interpretable in terms of, any account of philosophy from the Platonic Theory of Recollection to the Positivist theory of philosophy as the 'logical analysis of language'. But it does all the same lay open the possibility of scepticism or relativism of some kind or another about philosophy.

So my point is a simple and obvious one: that the problematic character of philosophical questions and philosophical inquiry is not a consequence of the fact that there exist well-articulated sceptical attacks on the claims of philosophy or the possibility of philosophical knowledge. Rather it has its basis in the day-to-day experience of people who think about philosophical questions. One doesn't have to appeal to some puritanical theory of knowledge or theory of meaning, or to conventionalism or pragmatism, or to a rejection of 'logocentrism' to think the thought 'there is no definite "true" answer to these questions'. That is simply one possible response to what happens when one thinks about philosophy, which, so to speak, lies available along with 'this is exciting - you think something new every moment' and 'this is difficult - I must get myself a method'.

Some philosophers find philosophical statements of scepticism or relativism about philosophical truth straightforwardly irritating, since it seems obvious to them that the 'tu quoque' response is sufficient to eliminate any kind of attempt to undermine philosophy from within. And I think they are quite right in this: attempts to protect relativism from this criticism by basing it in some body of theory supposedly distinct from philosophy - e.g. 'theory of meaning' or 'theory of ideology' certainly look fairly thin, and if 'there is no philosophical truth' is stated as a philosophical truth it is merely a slightly round-about way of asserting 'what I am now saying is not true'. But to make this entirely valid point and then to think that one has dismissed scepticism about philosophical truth as something worth any consideration is to mistake the true force and basis of such scepticism, and also to fail to see its intimate relation to the 'very being' of philosophy. To use a temporal metaphor: to dismiss scepticism about

philosophy in this way is to think of it as a perversion of philosophical thinking which comes along after philosophy has got under way, rather than as something which comes into being with philosophy, as its shadow-side or dark twin.

Certainly when stated and defended as a philosophical truth, such scepticism is self-defeating, but it doesn't have to express itself in the attempted assertion of a truth at all. It can simply appear as a refusal to take seriously speech-acts or thought-acts of a certain kind. The best characterisation of such a manifestation of anti-philosophical scepticism comes at the end of the Tractatus, at 6.53:

The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science - i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy - and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person - he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy - this method would be the only strictly correct one.

Of course, everything depends here on how the anti-philosopher is supposed to 'demonstrate' that a certain sign lacks meaning. If they are meant to prove this by invoking the Tractatus theory of meaning, then we once more have philosophical scepticism of the self-defeating kind, since Wittgenstein makes clear that his own theory of meaning involves the illegitimate attempt to picture logical form, and thus to say what cannot be said. But 'nachweisen' can simply be read 'show' or 'indicate', and so perhaps the anti-philosopher simply screws up their nose, or makes an obscene noise when the trainee attempts to say something metaphysical. One actually meets people like this at parties. (They are even more unnerving than the type who ask you what philosophy is.) When you try to raise a query of a philosophical kind about the subject under discussion, they reply with the 'familiar, slightly frozen, polite stare' that Williams encountered when he asked what 'culture' meant, or, worse still, they laugh in your face. This type of scepticism about philosophy - the kind we encounter every day - remains entirely consistent as long as it does not allow itself to be tempted onto the terrain of philosophy in order to defend itself.

This does not mean that such an everyday anti-philosopher cannot say anything in defence, or at least explanation, of their attitude. For example, they can say something like this, without sliding irretrievably into philosophy:

Look, as far as I can see, philosophers discuss three kinds of question. (i) Questions (like the existence of the 'external world') where there is in fact no disagreement among ordinary people and where the answer seems obvious. (ii) Questions (like the mind-body problem) where ordinary people disagree, but where philosophers also disagree, so that they are unable to demonstrate any special ability to resolve the question. (iii) Questions apparently only raised by philosophers, where no-one has been able to show me that it would make any difference to anything of value to me how they are answered. About all three types of question there is apparently complete disagreement among philosophers. There are evidently fashions in philosophy, so that whole groups of philosophers agree on a programme or a method and move in the same direction at once. It then appears, temporally and locally, that progress is being made to an agreed set of conclusions to a range of questions. But thereafter there is a revolution, or a simple change of fashion, and everything is called into question again. So on questions of kind (ii) and (iii) I

have no reason to suppose that any of the methods of philosophy provide a way of coming to find the answers - or even that there are answers waiting to be discovered. On questions of kind (i), I think that the agreed, commonsense answers are correct, but don't see any need for the elaborate proofs and recherche 'justifications' which philosophers construct, and about which they in any case disagree.

Confronted with this, we philosophers would try to get our Voice of Common Sense to recognise that they are making a host of philosophical assumptions which need philosophical defence. Why, for example, make the assumption that agreement is a sign that there is knowledge of some truth? The answer would be something of this kind: 'It's just commonsense. It's a rough and ready principle everyone follows. Of course, we sometimes find that people have, by accident or conspiracy, agreed something that turns out false, but only because something subsequently emerges which people agree about which shows that. You follow the principle as well, so stop creating difficulties.' At this point, the sceptic refuses to argue the point any more, rather in the manner of various Socrates' interlocutors. Since the category of 'the philosophical' is constructed with philosophy on the basis of some kind of theory of knowledge, or metaphysic, of meaning, our sceptic doesn't operate any such abstract category, and so cannot be required to admit that 'they are already doing philosophy'. Thus if they say things that we, in terms of our abstract category, class as 'philosophical', this does not mean that they have tacitly conceded that there exists a domain of philosophical truth. As far as they are concerned, there is an assortment of agreed commonsensical truths, maxims and principles on the one hand, and on the other a series of 'fishy' ideas, theories and questions, typically discussed by people calling themselves 'philosophers', about which there isn't agreement and which the sceptic therefore thinks not worth arguing about. Now we may well succeed - it may prove very easy - in provoking the sceptic to say something which s/he thinks is obvious and commonsense, but which we can subsequently show wouldn't be agreed by all persons-in-the-street, and is in fact a controversial move in a familiar philosophical debate. But the sceptic can just respond: 'That just shows how insidious philosophy is - now you've got me on the slippery slope', withdrawing whatever it was they said and retreating to what they think is agreed commonsense.

So scepticism about philosophy is a consistent and reasoned attitude to the attempt to argue or reason about certain questions. It may be called a 'philosophy' in the sense that it is a general way, or style, of thinking, speaking and living which involves a certain attitude to philosophical questions, but it is not a philosophical 'position' in any sense that makes it radically self-defeating, since its essence is a refusal to admit the category of philosophical truth or knowledge, and thus - quite consistently - to refuse to allow that it presents itself as making a philosophical statement. It is an attitude we encounter all the time, not just among people who are, temperamentally or by policy, anti-philosophical on every occasion, but also from people who adopt it as a strategy, or as a sort of mood, at some times and not at others. It is an attitude adopted within philosophy, when some philosophers decide that one part of philosophy is legitimate (e.g. theory of meaning) and another part (e.g. metaphysics) is not.

Since such scepticism is a response to the perennial and incorrigible failure to reach agreement within philosophical debate - the fact that it seems to be possible to argue all points all ways on - we also find the basis of this scepticism within ourselves when we think philosophically. After all, the fact that we find continual changes in our philosophical thinking, that new perspectives are always presenting themselves, is simply

the manifestation in our philosophical thinking of the open-ended and inconclusive character of public philosophical debate.

III

That the idea that there is philosophical truth and the possibility of knowing that truth is set up in the face of scepticism about such truth is shown in the two most powerful historical articulations of this conception - in Plato and Descartes.

It seems agreed that when Socrates and Plato insisted that there were fixed truths about the nature of justice, virtue, beauty etc., and that these truths could be apprehended by the mind as a result of intellectual investigation, they were asserting this against a kind of relativism which took the view that such values were the product of social agreement and convention, that the way these 'things' were conceived may vary, as conventions vary, from society to society, and therefore that, where such divergences were found, with respect (say) to justice, it was futile to insist that one of the conceptions must be right. It is not at all clear whether any of the Sophist teachers, to whom this view is collectively ascribed, held this with respect to all truth. It seems entirely likely that they took their sociological account of the origin of morality to be a general natural fact (not itself produced by agreement) and that their relativism applied specifically to those moral and political values which particularly interested Plato and Socrates. So it looks as if the sceptical resistance to their project which Socrates and Plato encountered was not by and large a scepticism of an intellectually perverse or paradoxical kind, but the enlightened cosmopolitanism generated by a group of itinerant freelance teachers who set themselves the modest objective of teaching their pupils to speak and argue convincingly about politics and morality. And in the dialogues themselves, the chief opposition Plato's Socrates has to confront is a scepticism as to whether reasoning and argument can achieve what Socrates claims it can achieve, fixed truths about the nature of justice, virtue etc., valid for all occasions and societies, and quite different from anything people are at first inclined to say or accept - a scepticism which expresses itself most intractably, not in any abstract assertion of relativism, but in a refusal to take Socrates' process of argument seriously. At a certain point in the *Phaedo*, Socrates caricatures this kind of attitude, and represents it as embodying a kind of metaphysical position:

... that when one believes that an argument is true without reference to the art of logic, and then a little later decides rightly or wrongly that it is false, and the same thing happens again and again - you know how it is, especially with those who spend their time in arguing both sides; they end by believing that they are wiser than anyone else, because they alone have discovered that there is nothing stable or dependable either in facts or in arguments, and that everything fluctuates just like the water in a tidal channel, and never stays at any point for any time.



Socrates presents the attitude he's describing as one of great perversity, analogous to misanthropy, but after all the basis of it - the view that on any question forceful and persuasive arguments can always be constructed on both sides, and therefore that one should not take argument too seriously - is one that many people take to be simple commonsense.

It is an effect of the dialogue form, and surely an effect Plato fully envisaged, that the Socratic-Platonic conception of philosophical truth and knowledge is articulated in dramatic opposition, not just to theoretical statements of scepticism, but to every variety of conversational and dialectical expression of the sceptical attitude against which the idea of philosophy is being defined.

It might at first appear that the same kind of point cannot be made in relation to Descartes, since in his great set-piece presentation of his philosophical programme in the *Meditations*, he elaborates his structure of philosophical knowledge, not in opposition to the type of 'everyday' anti-philosophical scepticism I have been discussing, but by means of a theoretically-based scepticism which already presupposes something resembling the Platonic conception of philosophical knowledge, since it involves the determination to accept only whatever can be apprehended as completely certain. However, it is clear that Descartes is quite as aware as Plato of the force of anti-philosophical scepticism, but it makes its appearance, not in the mouth of a real or artificial opponent who is to be refuted, but in Descartes' own attitude to the bulk of pre-existing philosophy. Thus, his first words about philosophy in Part One of the *Discourse on the Method* are these: 'I knew ... that philosophy gives the means by which one can speak plausibly on all matters and win the admiration of the less learned' (trans. Sutcliffe, Penguin, p. 30). There then follows, a couple of pages later, this famous passage:

I shall say nothing about philosophy, except that, seeing that it has been cultivated by the very best minds which have ever existed over several centuries and that, nevertheless, not one of its problems is not subject to disagreement, and consequently is uncertain, I was not presumptuous enough to hope to succeed in it any better than others; and seeing how many different opinions are sustained by learned men about one item, without its being possible for more than one ever to be true, I took to be tantamount to false everything which was merely probable.

As for the other sciences, in so far as they borrow their principles from philosophy, I considered that nothing solid could have been built on such shifting foundations; and neither the honour nor the material gain held out by them was sufficient to induce me to study them.

(*ibid.*, p. 32)

The concluding sentence expresses Descartes' conviction of the importance of philosophical truth, but his attitude to actual existing philosophy is exactly that of the 'practical man of common sense', with whom he explicitly identifies himself against the speculative philosopher:

For it seemed to me that I might find much more truth in the reasonings which each one makes in matters that affect him closely, the result of which must be detrimental to him if his judgement is faulty, than from the speculations of a man of letters in his study which produce no concrete effect and which are of no other consequence to him except perhaps that the further away they are from common sense, the more vanity he will derive from them, because he will have had to use that much more skill and subtlety in order to try to make them seem dialectically possible.

(*ibid.*, p. 33)

So the aim of Descartes' philosophical programme was not

simply to arrive at complete certainty by overcoming the methodological, philosophically sophisticated sceptical arguments of Med. I, but thereby to satisfy the anti-philosophical scepticism of 'practical good sense', whose force he felt to the full.

IV

Perhaps I am wrong to suggest that all philosophers at some moments, or in some moods, or in some contexts, feel stirrings of scepticism about philosophy. Maybe a number of philosophers have established enough fixed points in their thinking to experience the protean character of philosophical thought and debate as simply a testament to its difficulty, and are therefore able to maintain a settled and unforced confidence that there is truth to be established here.

It also seems likely that there are other philosophers whose position is that of a calm and sober, if qualified, acceptance of the sceptical attitude. Here is one way this might come about. One accepts, along with the sceptic, that on any given philosophical question there may be a number of possible positions, all equally capable of coherent and internally consistent articulation and defence, so that there is nothing 'ultimately' to show that one is right and all the others wrong. They would therefore not endorse Descartes' insistence that where there are 'many diverse opinions learned men may maintain on a single question ... it is impossible for more than one to be true'. However, they would recognise that, in some cases at least, it makes a difference to how one lives and acts which philosophical position one takes up. Thus in some contexts - in politics, for instance, or in the more problematic areas of science - conflicting philosophical positions are seen to be competing ideologies, which rationalise divergent paths of individual and collective action. So, though the sceptic may be right to expect that no one of these different positions can be shown, from the neutral standpoint of disinterested philosophical reason, to be the 'true' one - since each may be articulated consistently in its own terms - s/he is wrong to dismiss philosophical thought and debate as pointless. Even though, if one is clear-headed, one chooses one's philosophical position on the basis of interest, and political or moral commitment, all the same philosophical discourse is one of the terrains on which these competing ideologies fight it out, so there is every pragmatic reason to engage in it and take it seriously.

(I may have made it sound as if one could only adopt this latter semi-sceptical or relativist stance in relation to philosophy on the basis of some well-worked theory of 'philosophy as ideology'. I do not mean to suggest that. My intention in the above was rather to give one possible spelling out of the way some philosophers feel about their engagement with philosophy. Put to them all the problems about the nature and status of philosophical truth and they would be likely to respond, somewhat impatiently: 'Look I don't know why you're carrying on about this. Just because we take philosophy seriously and argue things out, that doesn't mean that we have to have some naive belief in there being "ultimate true answers" to these questions, lying side by side by side in an inaccessible Platonic heaven. The point is simply that it matters what we say on these issues, it matters that we spell out the positions we adopt as clearly and consistently as possible, and it matters that we expose the unclarity and contradictions in the positions we have decided against.')

But - to return now to my starting point - I, at any rate, am unable to set the question of the status of philosophy and philosophical truth aside in either of these ways. I experience the everyday fact of the endlessly shifting character of my philosophical thinking as bringing this question continuously before me, so that, like the Kantian 'I' that accompanies all representations, this question itself always accompanies my thinking about other

specific philosophical questions. So, for me, philosophy is essentially that way of thinking that is 'tormented by questions which bring itself in question' (Philosophical Investigations, I, 133).

At this point I can imagine someone saying: 'Right, you've shown how the problem about the very status and validity of philosophy is a problem for you personally. Well, I think that is exactly what you have demonstrated, but in a different sense than you intend. What you say has the ring of doubt or insecurity of an obsessional kind. After all, the majority of subjects have parallel questions about their validity or value. The Person at the Party is often just as dismissive of sociology, or psychology or economics. Meanwhile there are attacks from other directions on the value or worth even of the "hard sciences". To have made a professional commitment to philosophy as you have, and yet to have internalised the voices antagonistic to it to the degree you describe surely suggests that you have allowed profound insecurities of a fundamentally psychological and personal kind to get projected onto your engagement with philosophy and to disrupt it.'

Well, in a sense this is correct. I can, in retrospect, identify aspects of myself as I was before I became engaged in philosophy, which can explain the centrality I have assigned to the question of the status of philosophy, as well as my inability to resolve the question. In brief:

(i) I have always been a slow thinker, slow to pick up what people are saying, and especially slow to pick up new terminologies and ways of talking. I used to comfort myself with the thought that I saw deep problems and ambiguities in what was being said which others, with more facile intelligences, glossed over. But I also suspected that this was just an excuse, a way of avoiding the recognition that I was slow- (if not dim-) witted.

(ii) I have a natural wish to agree with people, and a dislike of having to admit that I disagree. I have always tried to justify this attitude with the belief that there is usually a good amount of truth in most of what most people say, and that most disagreement gets generated because (a) people don't clearly express the truth they have in mind, (b) people confuse and misinterpret what each other are saying in order to maximise disagreement, (c) the resulting bad feeling increases the confusion and fuels the will to find disagreement. Thus, faced with a heated argument, I would adopt a detached and neutral stance, rationalised by the view that clear, thorough and dispassionate thinking would reveal that there was a lot of truth on both sides.

(iii) I was brought up in a Baptist Church, and was led to expect that a moment of future revelation (the conversion experience) would make the meaning of things clear to me. Pending this definitive clarification of matters, which of course I couldn't effect in my own will (not that I wanted to) since it depended on God's grace, it seemed wise to leave decision of various crucial general issues in abeyance.

It is easy to see how these features of my teenage self should have led me into philosophy. It could promise me the prospect of that definitive clarification of obscurities and confusions which I had always presented myself to myself as awaiting, and this could pave the way, at some indeterminate point in the future, to cool and dispassionate decisions about pressing and heated issues. This latter 'ultimate clarification' of commitments could clearly serve as a rational substitute for the religious revelation I had previously both projected and feared - though I had less to fear from the substitute since it would be subject to my rational control.

However, it's also easy to see how these factors of my 'personality structure' explain why philosophy should remain so acutely questionable for me. I have always

been half-aware of the dubious motives which led me to posit the ideal of the 'definitive clarification', and to set up the ideal of myself as the 'detached and dispassionate clarifier' - fear that I was slow-witted and stupid, fear of conflict and of decisions in situations of conflict, fear of decisions which involve any leap of commitment, a tendency to postpone such decisions till a future point when circumstances will have rendered the decision obvious, straightforward and risk- and conflict-free. Aware of the operation of these motives, I therefore had reasons to suspect that the process of 'dispassionate clarification' I had idealised, and the future moment of complete clarification I had projected might be my own fictions. It was inevitable, then, that I should transfer this guilty suspicion to philosophy's claim to provide access to a realm of clear, fixed, necessary and therefore definitive truth, once I had latched onto philosophy as embodying my pre-existing ideal. If it was possible that I, before encountering philosophy as an academic subject, had set up the idea of definitive intellectual clarification on the basis of a variety of dubious motives, was it not possible that, throughout history, a far vaster coalescence of comparable motives had conspired to erect the myth of philosophical truth?

Now I think this is a perfectly good, if sketchy, explanation of why I am so concerned with the question of the status of philosophy, and cannot let the issue go. One can say, if one chooses, that the explanation shows why I am 'obsessed with', 'fixated on' the problem. To put it like that is to add the assertion that my concern with the problem is excessive, or mistaken or unjustified - but the explanation does not back up the assertion. To say that the personality structure I have described is in some sense mildly 'neurotic' would be perfectly acceptable, given that one was thereby saying that such a person would be very ill-adapted to a lot of roles or functions in life - roles which require the ability to take quick and difficult decisions and so on. Perhaps it's a bad personality structure even for a professional philosopher, if it's part of that role to produce a respectable quantity of research. But if there is a problem about the nature and status of philosophy, mine may be an excellent personality structure for the purpose of thinking that problem through. That is to say, it may be that my personality and experience give me at once a strong motivation to engage in philosophy, together with a very vivid sense of the possibility that the claim of Western philosophy to be able to decide important 'problems of living' by means of a style of intellectual investigation which aspires to the clarity and certainty of mathematics is a kind of fraud, involving a manoeuvre, first effected by the Pythagoreans, by which philosophic certainty is substituted, as a source of conviction and 'right living', for religious ecstasy.

But the real point is, not that I am in a particularly good position to 'think through' the problem of the nature and status of philosophy, but rather than the problem is my position whether I like it or not, and thus I have to think through it if I am going to think through any philosophical questions at all. When trying in the past to write about 'other' philosophical questions, I found I was unable to finish anything, not really because I couldn't reach a conclusion - since I could often see conclusions

which were very arguable in relation to the various issues - but because what I was writing felt false and I sooner or later ground to a halt. I now see that the reason for this was that, to write my paper, I had adopted a certain philosophical approach and method, which implied a certain kind of position about what philosophy is and what is the character of philosophical truth, when in fact this position was one I was not in. Trying to write about the philosophical issue in question from that assumed 'pro-tem' stance was like standing on one hill and trying to draw a picture of how the landscape looks from another hill a couple of miles away.

By contrast, working out, in the kind of way just sketched, the way in which the problem of the status of philosophy is a problem for me, also begins to bring out the way in which other problems - some of them quite 'technical' in character - are also problems for me. To take just one example, referring back to the features of myself described on p. ??? above: feature (i) locates a concrete context in which I am 'naturally' concerned about philosophical questions about the nature of meaning, of what is involved in the understanding of meaning, of what it is for meaning to be clear as opposed to unclear, about whether there is always a definite answer to the question 'Exactly what does he/she mean?' and so on. Also, the locating of these philosophical concerns in relation to this personal context of anxiety highlights a relation between those 'technical' philosophical issues and the question of the status and pretensions of philosophy and shows how all these questions have to be answered together.

This brings me to a final point about the relation of the 'personal' to the impersonal in philosophy, which will have to serve as my conclusion. In listing, at the beginning of my paper, various factors which seem to insist on the 'impersonal' character of philosophical thinking and discourse, there was one important factor I neglected to mention. Though most philosophers would acknowledge that all philosophical questions are linked in with one another in myriad ways, philosophers cannot talk to each other about everything all together at once. In order for debate to be possible, philosophy is divided up into 'problems', 'questions' and 'topics'. The increasingly professional - either 'scientific' and 'technical', or 'scholarly' - character of the subject accentuates this cutting up of philosophy into separate topics. And certain conceptions of what philosophy does imply that this specialist narrowing of focus is not just institutionally necessary, but also the correct way to resolve the problems. For example, if solving the 'problems of knowledge' is a matter of 'analysing' the 'concept' of knowledge, then lifting this concept free and holding it under the analytic microscope is presumably the approach to adopt.

But the division of philosophy in this way into discrete topics, however it may be justified methodologically and pragmatically, increases the difficulty of spelling out to oneself how philosophical problems have an existence as problems for oneself, since what is a problem for the individual is in fact a total interconnected network of problems which become problematic in relation to an equally interconnected network of contexts.

