Why is There Something Called Philosophy Rather than Nothing?

STEPHEN MULHALL

My title is intended to invoke at least two primary reference points or associations. The first, and most obvious, is a question that is very often assumed to be exemplary of the kind of bewildering puzzles that philosophers are distinctively preoccupied with – the question 'why is there something rather than nothing?' The second is perhaps less easy to identify. A set of lectures delivered by Heidegger in the short period between his restoration to the academic life after the Second World War and his final retirement from it was published under the title 'Wass Heisst Denken?' Its English translation was given the title 'What is Called Thinking?'; and if that title does not explicitly carry the same layers of significance evident in the German original, the concept of a 'call' at least keeps open the possibility of recovering many of them. For when Heidegger asks 'what is called thinking?', he means to imply, first, that not everything which gets called thinking really merits that honorific label; second, that it is therefore worth thinking about what form of human activity or passivity would really call for the use of that term; third, that this in turn will involve thinking about what, in our present and conceivable forms of inhabiting the world, really calls out for or provokes such a thoughtful response; and fourth (since he deliberately raises this question immediately upon his temporary re-inhabitation of a university post) that we will thereby find ourselves thinking about whether, and if so how and why, genuine thoughtfulness can find a home in the university, and thereby a place in the broader economy of a culture – whether anything recoverable from the venerable traditions of philosophy in the name of thinking might still be something for which any university, and any human cultural form, can see any call for.

Taking guidance from that second association, therefore, I might say that the aim of this lecture is to delineate what philosophy must be like – how its practitioners must maintain it, and so maintain themselves – if it is to continue to merit its description of itself as the love of wisdom, and thereby to make a legitimate call on reflective individuals, the university and the broader culture for a meet and proper habitation. But in doing so I also want to argue that a

doi:10.1017/S1358246109990130 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy and the contributors 2009

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246109990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

human life, a university, and a culture that lacked anything deserving of the name 'philosophy' would lack something fundamental to their own flourishing.

Seen in the light of the first of my two intended associations, however, the vaulting ambition signalled by my second might reasonably be regarded as heading for a fall. For if the question 'why is there something rather than nothing?' really is exemplary of distinctively philosophical preoccupations (and of course, both theologians and scientists might have something to say about that proprietary claim), then it might seem – and has so seemed even to many philosophers – that so-called lovers of wisdom have a disabling predilection for emptiness.

It is easy to see the sense of the question 'Why is there something rather than nothing in that laundry basket?', and so it is possible to conceive of an intelligible and informative answer to it (e.g. 'Because I failed to do the washing this morning'), because this question, along with an indefinite range of analogous ones, asks for an explanation of a particular situation or arrangement within a broader context of other objects, processes and forms of understanding. We know what the difference is between a laundry basket's being full of dirty clothes and its being empty; and we also know how the basket fits into the broader economy of human houses, with clothes typically migrating from wardrobes to bodies to laundry baskets to washing machines to ironing boards to wardrobes. Hence when the question is asked, we know that what is needed is an explanation of matters being one specific way rather than another with respect to the interior of the basket (as opposed, say, to the interior of the wardrobe or the washing machine), and we know what specific kinds of event or process would bring about one such state of affairs rather than another; so we can locate – in the broader context within which the basket sits – candidate causes for its being the specific way it is, and we can test the credentials of these candidates in familiar ways (e.g. by accusing one's spouse of wanton neglect). And this indicates that the possibility of answering such a question presupposes two things at the very least: first, that what we are being asked to account for is (roughly speaking) matters being one specifiable way rather than another with respect to a particular corner of the universe, and second, that as a result we can identify equally specific, but independent, features of the broader context whose being one way rather than another might account for the way things are in this particular corner.

The problem with the question 'why is there something rather than nothing?' is that, although it is patently modelled on such familiar explanatory inquiries, it is formulated in such a way as to remove

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246109990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the conditions which make it possible even in principle to answer questions of that kind, and so seems to deprive us of any reason to regard it as asking an intelligible question of that kind in the first place. For if what now has to be explained is not the presence of dirty shirts (as opposed to their absence) in the laundry basket (as opposed to the washing machine) of the Mulhall residence (as opposed to some other house) in Oxford (as opposed to Kuala Lumpur or Mars), but rather the existence of anything and everything that is, then the question no longer directs us to a specific state of affairs in a specific corner of the cosmos, which might therefore have been otherwise in some specific way, with the result that we lose any grip on what exactly it is that is supposed to be explained; and we are no longer able to point to anything independent of what is to be explained by reference to which it might be explained (since any such thing must, *ex hypothesi*, be, and so must be part of what is to be explained). In short, the question looks like a request to specify the cause of a particular (even if a particularly large-scale) effect; but since what it treats as an effect cannot intelligibly be so treated, nothing could conceivably count as a candidate cause for it; so it cannot in fact be (treated as) a request for an explanatory cause. In the absence of any other possible way of taking it, we must accordingly regard it as essentially malformed, or meaningless – the mere appearance of an intelligible question.

My attempt to characterize what is worth calling 'philosophy' will depend upon contesting this dismissive conclusion about philosophical questions by showing how one can and should take this exemplary philosophical question otherwise – otherwise, that is, than as a large-scale instantiation of a familiar pattern of causal explanation. And in so doing, I will draw upon the second of my titular associations: for, as many of you will no doubt know, Heidegger's lifelong project was to recover a space in philosophy for what he called 'articulating the meaning of the question of being' (a project that might, with equal accuracy, be characterized as 'articulating the question of the meaning of "being"') – the question of what it is for something, anything, to be; and he would certainly have taken the question 'why is there something rather than nothing?' as intended to thematize, or at least as interpretable as thematizing, exactly that issue.

1) A Genealogical Myth of Philosophy

Human beings are creatures whose modes of existence pervasively exemplify a comprehending grasp of the phenomena they encounter

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246109990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in the world they inhabit. When a castigated spouse penitently transfers the contents of the family laundry basket to the washing machine, sets it going, then spends an hour or two ironing the clean but crumpled items of clothing that emerge, every aspect of his endeavours presupposes an implicit understanding of the various things he utilizes. Unless he were capable of correctly identifying the presence and location, the nature and the functional possibilities of the basket, the clothes, the washing machine and the iron, he would be in no position to atone for his previous neglect of his domestic duties. Human beings are in this sense immersed in a world of comprehensible entities as fish are immersed in water; but they are also capable of reflecting upon their implicit comprehension of that world – that is, of thematizing it and putting it in question. Our penitent spouse might, for example, be struck by the efficacy of the washing liquid with which he loads the washing machine, and wonder exactly how it achieves its cleansing purpose; or he might, as he unloads the machine, wonder how exactly shirts are constructed, by whom, and in the light of what conception of what is needed to be respectably dressed. Any such moment of reflective questioning might be thought of as the beginning of an intellectual trajectory that culminates in the development of a systematic body of knowledge such as chemistry, textile design, social history or economic theory – what Heidegger would call an ontic science, in which a particular domain or dimension of the world is delineated and made the subject of an appropriately specific kind of intellectual inquiry.

But our penitent spouse's capacity to question his own everyday comprehension of the world, and thereby to deepen that comprehension, can also be turned upon the more systematic bodies of knowledge that he now inhabits. For having established himself in the field of chemistry, he might ask himself what mode of understanding of that aspect of the world is implicit in the rigorous procedures whereby he investigates it with a view to building powerful theories of its nature. In developing a theory about the chemical structure of a particular substance, for example, what is he presupposing about the essential nature of the elements from which any such structure must be composed, and their combinatorial possibilities? In assuming that all material entities are possessed of chemical structure, what is he presupposing about materiality as such? And in testing his theory, why does he presuppose that what he can establish about observed instances of the behaviour of this substance will apply to unobserved instances? What mode of reasoning is he employing, and what if anything grounds his confidence in the reliability of its deliverances?

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246109990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In thus thematizing and questioning the conceptual and methodological resources deployed in any given ontic science, our spouse-turned-chemist is now transforming himself into a philosopher. The purpose here is not to mark a point at which the individual chemist must acquire membership of a different disciplinary union; it is to mark the introduction of a particular kind of question – the kind which naturally arises from the modes of procedure internal to an ontic science (any answers to which can therefore be regarded as deepening our understanding of whatever kind of knowledge that science delivers), but which necessarily cannot be answered by utilizing its characteristic investigative procedures, since every such use presupposes the validity of exactly what is now in question. To raise and pursue such questions is to find oneself engaged in the kind of philosophical inquiry that Heidegger calls 'regional ontology' – an inquiry into what it is for something to have a particular kind of nature, and into what makes it possible for us to acquire genuine knowledge of that nature. In this case, another name for that regional ontology would be: 'the philosophy of science'; but such familiar branches of philosophical inquiry as 'the philosophy of religion', 'aesthetics', and 'the philosophy of history' can also be thought of as each denoting a distinctive regional ontology.

Thus far, my mythical genealogy of philosophy (my account of its unaccountable origins) might not seem particularly Heideggerian – that is, I don't think of myself as having thus far said anything with which any self-respecting analytical philosopher might want strenuously to disagree. And it is already enough to suggest that there will be something called 'philosophy' for as long as there are human beings naturally inclined to put their everyday knowledge of the world in question, and thereby generate ontic scientific knowledge; for they will then equally naturally be inclined to put *that* knowledge in question, and to do so just is to begin to think philosophically. But there is a further step to be taken in the terms of my genealogical myth, and it is this step that is often regarded as being the distinctively Heideggerian one. I, however, want to suggest that it can be seen to emerge as naturally from the questions of regional ontology as questions of regional ontology emerge from those of ontic science; and consequently, that what is regarded as a distinctively Heideggerian form of philosophical inquiry is in fact a development to which philosophy naturally subjects itself as a result of reflexively reiterating exactly the same human tendency to question, and so deepen, our comprehension of the world that engenders philosophy in the first place.

What, then, is this next step? In the terms of my myth, its ineluctability begins to emerge when we imagine our penitent

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246109990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

spouse-turned-chemist-turned-philosopher-of-science being naturally moved to consider the following question: what, if anything, is being presupposed when we conduct regional ontological inquiries? If each of these modes of inquiry can be thought of as enhancing our understanding of whatever the relevant ontic science reveals to us by subjecting its presuppositions to productive questioning, must we not – sooner or later – be struck by the possibility that whatever is presupposed in the acquisition of that enhanced understanding might itself be put in question, and to equally productive effect? If and when we are so struck, then the question that strikes us is: what exactly is it to engage in regional ontology?

Precisely because each species of regional ontological inquiry concerns itself with what we comprehend of a particular region or dimension of the world, what most immediately strikes us about it is its differences from other species of regional ontology. The issues and problems that preoccupy philosophers of art or religion often appear to be very distant from those that predominate amongst philosophers of science or mind or language; and that might itself seem unsurprising, given the obvious differences between the various ontic enterprises (art, theology, physics, psychology, linguistics) from which each regional ontology emerges. This, one might say, helps us to answer the question: what makes a regional ontology 'regional'?

On the other hand, even if each such branch of philosophy focuses on a very different domain of human knowledge, and so of the world we thereby know, it is equally true that it focuses on a strikingly similar dimension of that knowledge, and so of that world. After all, each regional ontology is, precisely, an inquiry into the *ontology* of that region – an inquiry into what it is for an entity or property to exist as, to be, an entity or property of the relevant kind (material, aesthetic, linguistic or mental), and what it is for us to grasp that kind of entity or property as it is. And once we appreciate this, a second question naturally arises: what is it for a regional ontology to be 'ontological'? What, if anything, links inquiries in the philosophy of science to those in aesthetics or the philosophy of religion or the philosophy of language?

Once asked, it quickly becomes obvious that such links exist at two main levels. First, there will be specific links between questions that emerge in one regional ontology and those that emerge in another. For example, one cannot move far into the domain of philosophy of religion without realizing that an understanding of religious beliefs and judgements means establishing an understanding of distinctively religious language; and that understanding cannot be acquired

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246109990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

independently of addressing broader questions about the nature of language as such – the domain of the philosophy of language. Note that I am deliberately refraining from suggesting that either of these regional ontological inquiries has any priority over the other: if philosophers of religion claim to establish certain conclusions about how language works in religious contexts, how exactly those claims are to be brought into alignment with claims made by philosophers of language who may have very different kinds of language use in focus (whether either party should give ground in the light of the results of the other, and if so which) is and should be an open question – something to be settled by a dialogue between the two parties. My point is simply to register the fact that such dialogues are possible, a fact which in turn demonstrates the dialogical openness of any one regional ontology to its others.

But I said that there were two main levels at which such links existed. The second can be articulated in more general terms – terms which will sound more distinctively Heideggerian. If the philosophy of religion concerns itself with what it is for something to be divine, and the philosophy of mind with what it is for something to be mental, and the philosophy of science with what it is for something to be material, then one way of articulating the unity of these distinct enterprises is to say that all are concerned, in their different ways, with what it is for something to be: with what it is for a phenomenon to manifest itself, both as it is in itself and as being rather than not-being, and with what it is for us to be capable of comprehending it as such – as something in particular rather than something else or nothing. This, one might say, is the meaning of the question of being, the question of the meaning of 'being': it is what Heidegger calls the question of fundamental ontology. And what my genealogical myth is intended to demonstrate is that its emergence as a question is not an arbitary 'Continental' imposition on an otherwise perfectly rational and exhaustive cultural economy of knowledge, in which each legitimate ontic science naturally incubates its own regional ontological discipline, and nothing else. For if the mere existence of a diverse array of ontic sciences naturally engenders a diverse array of regional ontologies, that array of regional ontologies will as naturally engender the question of fundamental ontology, and for exactly the same reason – as a result of the natural tendency of human comprehension to thematise and question itself.

I just said that one might think of the question of fundamental ontology as directing us towards linkages between regional ontologies at two different levels. But I hope it is now obvious that the metaphor of different levels is here potentially misleading. For it may be taken

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246109990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to imply that the two levels I distinguished are essentially distinct and self-sufficient. Whereas, in truth, if there is no such thing as something's being (as opposed to not-being) except as a particular kind of thing – if something can exist only as some specific thing or other – then the fundamental ontological question of what it is for something, or anything, to be is internally related to the question of what it is for something to be a particular kind of thing, and so is internally related to the business of some particular regional ontology. And that business is itself internally related to questions that arise in other regional ontologies – internal relations of the kind acknowledged in my earlier discussion of the first level at which the enterprise of regional ontology is unified. In this sense, to raise the question of fundamental ontology is, necessarily, to raise the question of links between regional ontologies on both levels at once; those two levels are simply different aspects of one and the same articulated unity.

Other clarifications are equally in order at this point. In particular, I need to emphasize that recognizing the reality and significance of the question of fundamental ontology does not require that we commit ourselves to the legitimacy or even the availability of a single, specific answer to that question – to, for example, one and only one mapping of any given regional ontology's relations with any other, and so to a single exhaustive taxonomy of the various ways in which things may be, or to a specification of some feature (or some set of features) that all existent beings must exemplify or instantiate insofar as they exist. Some philosophers have thought it possible to give such a specification of what it is to be, and have disagreed with the specifications of others; others still have denied that any such specification is conceivable. Similarly, some philosophers have argued that work in certain regional ontological inquiries should be constrained by results established in others, whilst disagreeing with one another about which regional ontology should constrain and which should be constrained; others have argued against any, even provisional, assignments of relative priority; and others still have denied the existence of any significant relations between any two given ontological regions. For example, many analytical philosophers feel that theories of meaning constructed in the philosophy of language and logic should constrain the interpretative options available to aestheticians and philosophers of religion; some feel that attention to religious and aesthetic uses of language should rather constrain our choice between general theories of meaning; and others again may feel that, once specific accounts of language use in particular circumstances are established and given due

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246109990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

weight, there may be nothing left for a theory of meaning to be a theory of.

The point of emphasizing the reality and significance of the question of fundamental ontology is not to adjudicate between these disagreements, or to deny that they may persist beyond any adjudication, thereby betraying a fundamental mutual incomprehension; the point is rather to thematize the sheer fact of their existence – the fact that it is so much as possible to have such intelligible discussions about whether and how the various regional ontologies relate to one another. For the reality of such debates, whatever their terminus in any particular case, serves to make manifest a horizon of intelligibility within which they are conducted. The various positions taken up in such debates adumbrate a determinable and endlessly-redetermined categorial field of diversity-in-unity or unified diversity to which the articulation – more precisely, the sheer articulability, the simple comprehensibility – of the question of fundamental ontology bears witness.

And those who are struck by the articulability of that question are not committed to one particular way of articulating it or making sense of it; in particular, they need not regard themselves as posing a familiar kind of request for causal explanation, only one that (impossibly) aims to treat all that is as an effect of some cause. For to treat the question of fundamental ontology as articulable need not involve assuming that any particular way of making sense of things within the world might be used to make sense of the world as such, or as a whole; it merely involves acknowledging that there is something inherently questionable about the many and various ways in which we do make sense of any and every particular kind of thing. For if we are capable of making sense of whatever we encounter, then that too (the validity, the diversity and the inter-relatedness of the ways in which things make sense) is something of which we can attempt to make sense (to thematize, to put in question, and so – we hope – to grasp more fully).

2) Philosophy, Knowledge, Reality

From one point of view, to take seriously the question of fundamental ontology just is to take seriously the question of the unity of philosophy. For if the question of fundamental ontology is not raised within the precincts of philosophy, then that means that the question of whether and how the various branches of philosophy relate to one another is not being raised, or at least not being raised in a rigorous

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246109990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and thorough-going manner; and that raises the possibility that philosophical work in any given branch might be conducted in ignorance of what is going on in other such branches. And one way in which such a possibility is realized is the accelerating implementation of the idea that, in order to become appropriately equipped to do work in one ontological region, one must specialize in it; and of course, the more such specialized work is done, the more of it one needs to be acquainted with in order to be equipped to contribute to it, and the less feasible it becomes to keep track of the possible relations between what is being done in this field and what is being done in other such fields.

The result of such feedback mechanisms is the disarticulation or balkanisation of the subject of philosophy. It no longer amounts even to the sum of its parts, but is rather reduced to an assemblage of elements whose nominal status as parts of a putative larger, unified endeavour (one for which the question of its unity is at least poseable) lacks any real grounding. In this respect, systematically to neglect the question of fundamental ontology amounts to depriving regional ontological inquiries of their nature as branches of a single, articulated field of ontological inquiry. And if their full nature and significance depends upon the intelligibility of their inter-relations, then work prosecuted within their boundaries on the unthematized presupposition that those inter-relations have no reality would radically reduce their authenticity, and so their authority, even taken solely as contributions to regional ontology.

To pursue philosophy in this way is to pursue it without even contemplating the question of what makes it philosophy; and that is to fail properly to comprehend what one is doing – to fail to see its full significance or meaning qua philosophy. One might say: if philosophical inquiry fails to find room for the question of fundamental ontology, which means finding room to acknowledge that the matter of its own distinctive nature and how it can and should be realized is inherently questionable – call it the question of the meaning of 'philosophy' – then it no longer deserves to be called 'philosophy'.

This may matter a great deal to those who feel themselves inclined or compelled to participate in philosophical inquiry; but why should the question of whether or not philosophy makes sense to itself as philosophy be of any great moment to anyone other than philosophers? The answer to this question begins to emerge when we recall that the various enterprises of regional ontology from which the question of fundamental ontology naturally emerges *themselves* naturally emerge from the various ontic sciences. To put it another way: the ontological questions each branch of philosophy addresses

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246109990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

are themselves addressed to the basic categorial presuppositions within which each ontic science produces its distinctive contribution to human knowledge of reality. Hence, to raise the question of whether and how any given regional ontology hangs together with any other regional ontology is to raise the question of whether and how any given ontic science is intelligibly relateable to any other. If the philosophy of history and the philosophy of science have something to say to one another, then so must history and science; if aesthetics and the philosophy of religion bear intelligibly on one another in various ways, then so must art and religion. Or better: the former constitutes one dimension of the latter.

In this respect, one might say that the question of whether or not philosophy hangs together or makes sense is internally related to the question of whether or not human knowledge hangs together or makes sense. So to regard the question of fundamental ontology as worth posing is one way of showing that the unity of human knowledge is an issue for us. For just as one regional ontology is intelligibly relateable to other regional ontologies – each in principle capable of questioning and of being put in question by the others – the same holds true of the various ontic sciences. Each can be thought of as establishing knowledge and raising questions of a kind that might have a bearing on the knowledge claimed and the questions posed by other disciplines; and in each case, coming to grasp the nature and variety of those inter-relations is part of coming to grasp the full significance and implications of the individual ontic science itself. The meaning of each such body of knowledge is in part determined by its relations with other such bodies of knowledge; what it is as knowledge is partly given in the various ways in which it can and does have a bearing on other putative bodies of knowledge, and so by the fact that it is so relateable. To treat any given ontic science as essentially self-sufficient – as something for which the question of its place in the broader human cultural economy of knowledge is irrelevant – is thus to misunderstand its nature.

Once again, of course, the dialogical unity to which the question of fundamental ontology points us here is not that of envisaging, let alone avowing, the idea that each such ontic science does or must form one part of a single, monolithic and exhaustive science of everything. Where some will see critical implications for religion in the deliverances of contemporary biology, others will deny that those implications exist, and still others will deny that there are any significant relations between them at all. Once again, the point is not to adjudicate these disagreements, but rather to note the simple fact that they can be engaged in, and so to bear witness to the fact

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246109990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that whether or not any given body of knowledge does or could have a bearing on any other is at issue for us – that there is an intelligible question to be asked here, whatever one's preferred answer to it may be.

If, however, there is such a question to be posed about the inter-articulations of ontic sciences, and if those sciences are indeed evolving and self-questioning bodies of knowledge about a given domain or dimension of reality, then there must be room for posing a parallel question about whether and how these various aspects of reality hang together. Coming to see that the question of fundamental ontology is askable is thus also a way of getting us to see that it makes sense to ask whether and if so how reality makes sense – to ask about how, if at all, any given aspect of the real world bears upon any other such aspect. And since ontic sciences are Janus-faced – since they not only claim to embody a grasp of (some portion of) reality, but also constitute articulations of human understanding, ways in which the comprehension implicitly guiding our way of inhabiting reality is thematized and questioned – the question of the sense they make in relation to one another is also the question of what sense, if any, accrues to the particular human form of life they help constitute. Seen this way, the question of whether philosophy makes sense just is the question of whether reality makes sense, whether our knowledge of reality makes sense and whether our modes of living make sense. And that, I hope it is clear, ought to be of interest to anyone with a life to lead for whom the question of how to live that life matters – which means, anyone with a life to lead.

3) Philosophy, University, Culture

In Western European culture, the exemplary institutional expression of this sense of the dialogical unity of reality, our knowledge of it and our way of living is the university. The point of bringing a representative variety of ontic sciences (by which I mean sciences, social sciences, humanities and arts) under one roof is not simply to reduce overheads or to corral socially disruptive clerks within an easily-policeable space; the point is to create a context which embeds and embodies a vision of the denizens of each branch of human knowledge as conversing with one another. To be sure, each department pursues its own ways of acquiring knowledge under its own direction; but each does so in a context which makes it as easy as possible for its members to encounter, learn from and put in question the findings and queries of members of any other department.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246109990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Certain institutional arrangements may make this kind of unregulated and unpredictable intercourse more natural than others – and here, the collegiate model of a university (as exemplified by Oxford and Cambridge) may have something vital to be said in its favour, since each college's self-governing membership amounts to a microcosm on a humane social scale of the university's aspiration to intellectual diversity-in-unity. But that is only one way of aspiring to facilitate this ideal of mutual conversibility in the face of explosively expanding bodies of knowledge, not to mention financial, political and cultural pressures that work to eviscerate both the substance and validity of that ideal.

If, however, the way in which I have attempted to articulate the question of fundamental ontology in the preceding pages is at all plausible, then there is one university department whose existence is of particular importance to the university's raison d'etre; and that is its department of philosophy. That department's internal articulation into various branches reflects as broadly as possible the internal articulation of the university as a whole; and its inherent tendency to put in question the intelligibility of the relations between those branches – to reflect upon the significance of the fact that they are the internal articulations of a single subject – means that it is uniquely committed to bearing witness to the dialogical diversity-in-unity of human knowledge and of the reality it aspires to grasp. Philosophy itself is not an ontic science: it is rather the subject which aims to comprehend and question the very possibility of an ontic science, the subject for which the intelligibility of that possibility (the possibility of knowing something, anything, as it really is, hence as being rather than not-being) is an issue, an inherently questionable matter. Philosophy is the subject for whom that possibility matters because it is a way of posing the question of its own nature – the question of whether its own continued existence matters, or matters any longer, to anyone other than itself.

And of course, sometimes philosophy finds that its own continued existence does not in fact matter to anyone else. It discovered this most recently, in my neck of the political woods, when the British government of the 1980s decided to reconfigure its funding of universities, and many universities responded to this pressure by closing their philosophy departments. In responding that way, those universities made manifest their inability to see the point of the existence of philosophy in the context of a university, and inadvertently made manifest their inability to see the point of their own existence as universities; and in refusing to contest these responses, the British government and the British people made manifest its own inability

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246109990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to see the point of either philosophy or universities in and for the wider culture. And what are we to say of a culture that no longer sees any point in raising the question of whether its own particular formation, its internal articulations of intelligibility, have any point – whether it continues to makes sense to inhabit the cultural forms through which its inhabitants are currently formed?

But philosophers shouldn't repress the question of their own responsibility for this fate. For, when all is said and done, how many of our existing philosophy departments reflect in their internal structures a sense of the vital significance of the question of fundamental ontology? How far does the inner life of our departments make room for raising the question of how its various activities hang together or make sense in relation to each other, as opposed to amounting to an assemblage of self-sufficient enterprises, or a domain within which the relative importance of various branches of the subject are fixed, effectively put beyond question? If, on reflection, we cannot confidently say that our own ways of living as philosophers are marked by the conviction that the question of whether philosophy makes sense is of such importance, then we should not be too quick to heap all the blame for our present cultural irrelevance on either universities or governments, as if confident that our fate could only have been forced upon us from without.

4) Philosophy, Finitude, Mystery

It will not have escaped you that the tone of my remarks thus far has tended far more towards the arrogant than the self-effacing. So it might be worth emphasising a variety of ways in which the significance of the role I have been assigning my discipline – in the university, in the broader culture, and in (what one might call) the cosmos – will naturally tend to condition, qualify and more generally put itself in question.

To begin with, of course, it follows from my mythical genealogy of philosophy that there is something called philosophy rather than nothing only because there are ontic sciences (upon which philosophers can reflect questioningly); and there are ontic sciences only because there is a world inhabited by beings who are always already cognitively engaged with it. One might then say: there is something called philosophy rather than nothing because there is something (knowable) rather than nothing. This captures the sense in which philosophy is an inherently parasitic discipline: it can exist only because other disciplines exist, and the price of its capacity to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246109990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sustain itself in relation to any and all of those disciplines is its having no disciplinary subject-matter of its own – no body of knowledge, no domain of reality, to which it is wedded. If its interest fundamentally lies in the fact, the nature and the inter-relations of other disciplines and their subject-matters, then what might at first appear as philosophy's unlimited reach could equally well be seen as its absolute intellectual ungroundedness.

Second, whilst my genealogical myth is designed to capture the sense in which philosophy can be said to be rightly and intelligibly interested in everything, in all that is, it may also thereby create the impression that the philosopher must be occupying a position above or beyond all that is – a kind of God's eye view on Creation from without (for how else, it might be asked, could he take it in as a whole?). But in truth, philosophy does and must occupy a position within the domain that it aspires to take in as if from the outside. Just as philosophy's claim to be the university department which uniquely aspires to acknowledge the articulated unity of the university as a whole must cohere with the fact that it is nevertheless also just one more department within that articulated unity, so philosophy's claim to be the singular point within the culture at which its articulated unity is acknowledged must cohere with the fact that it is simultaneously one node in that cultural economy.

Two important conclusions follow from a proper appreciation of this fact, and so of philosophy's dual-aspect status. First, it means that philosophy's various ways of putting the deliverances of other intellectual disciplines in question can themselves intelligibly be put in question from the perspectives afforded by those very disciplines. Practitioners of any ontic science can question the accuracy of any philosopher's characterization of their founding presuppositions; they might claim for themselves a field of inquiry that philosophers have long regarded as their own (as has happened repeatedly in philosophy's history, to the point at which some philosophers have claimed that philosophy can retain any given field of inquiry only until its distinctive nature and resources have been clarified or thought through to the point at which a genuine science of that domain can be founded); others even argue that philosophy can claim to be grappling with anything of any genuine intellectual substance only insofar as it regards itself as continuous with some ontic science or other.

It should be obvious that I don't find the last of these claims at all convincing; but some of my colleagues do, and I can make sense of their sense of conviction. Be that as it may, one can surely acknowledge the way in which other intellectual disciplines might have a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246109990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

bearing on philosophy and its concerns without conceiving of this as a matter of usurpation or reduction. For example, one might think (as does Stanley Cavell) that aspects of the phenomenon that philosophy grapples with under the name of scepticism are engaged with in literature under the name of tragedy; or one might hope to learn something about the roots and the significance of philosophy's apparent aspiration to find a God's-eye view of reality and culture by drawing upon the lessons of psychoanalysis or theology; or one might be brought by the work of historians and sociologists to appreciate the cultural specificity of the terms in which philosophy understands any given aspect of its concerns (in ethics or politics or aesthetics), and so understands itself.

Such possibilities of inter-disciplinary dialogue cannot be rejected *a priori* by any philosopher who recognizes the pertinence to their enterprise of the question of fundamental ontology; for as I have derived that question, it precisely depends upon acknowledging that a culture hangs together only insofar as any of its thematized modes of understanding can in principle intelligibly and fruitfully be engaged in dialogue by any other. Whether any such encounter will in fact be fruitful, or even mutually intelligible, can only be proven through its concrete working-out from case to case; but its bare possibility is surely something that anything worth calling philosophy is obliged (on pain of self-subversion) to acknowledge.

I said that this was one of the conclusions that followed from an acknowledgement of the dual-aspect nature of philosophy – from the unavoidable fact that it forms one part of the phenomenon it aspires to take in as a whole. The second may be no more than a restatement of the first, but it may also help to bring home the central moral of this moment of humility or self-abnegation in my analysis. For what the first conclusion really registers is the fact that any philosophical work is necessarily situated or conditioned by its place in the broader economy of a culture; and that directs us towards the more general point that philosophy is and must be thorough-goingly conditioned or situated insofar as it is (in effect) one step in the reflexive unfolding of the distinctively human mode of comprehending the world.

To say that that comprehension of the world is distinctively reflexive – that is, that it is always capable of putting itself in question – is simply another way of saying that human comprehension is essentially finite (for if it were not, if it were absolute or unconditioned, it would be beyond any possible question). It is a way of acknowledging that any given body of knowledge has limits, that it is always capable of and subject to further refinement (which will

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246109990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sometimes take the form of revolutionary reconceptualisation), and that it will always be conditioned or informed by a variety of presuppositions which can themselves be the subject of inquiry – perhaps within its own precincts, certainly within the precincts of other branches or modes of human inquiry. In other words, there can be no such thing as an absolute end or terminus to human knowledge of reality – nothing that is beyond further interrogation, hence closed to further enrichment or deepening.

Since my genealogical myth of philosophy is driven from beginning to end by a characterization of human comprehension as inherently produced by, and hence inveterately subject to, questioning, it should be no surprise that the conception of philosophy that emerges from that mythical account should be marked by the same acknowledgement of our finitude. What is now perhaps becoming clearer is that philosophy's way of being marked by, hence of bearing witness to, our finitude has to do with the fact that its defining aspiration (to articulate the question of fundamental ontology) is both undismissable and unfulfillable.

For insofar as philosophy is defined as an inquiry into the human capacity for comprehending inquiry as such, beyond any particular way of acquiring understanding of any particular domain of reality, it amounts to a kind of absolutely purified or intensified exemplar of this aspect of the human way of being (one in which questioning comprehension aspires to be both subject-matter and means, with nothing other than itself involved). But insofar as any such inquiry must itself be questionable, because it is no less subject to condition and limitation than any other exercise of this capacity, it is destined to fail to fulfil its own defining aspiration. In the end, then, what is revealed by the fact that there is something called philosophy rather than nothing is the fact that human beings aspire by their very nature to a completeness of understanding that they cannot realize. Philosophy constitutes the place at which finite human understanding endlessly attempts, and as endlessly fails, to take itself in as a whole; and it thereby reveals that it is internal to the nature of finite beings to be subject to the mysterious, unsatisfiable desire to transcend their own finitude. In this way, philosophy's unending struggle with the question of whether it makes sense even to try making sense of the many and varied ways in which reality does (and does not) make sense to us is the most fundamental way in which human beings manifest the essentially enigmatic finitude of their being.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246109990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press