On the nature of proof in philosophy

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In the remarks that follow I shall restrict myself to "critical" or "pure" philosophy, and shall have nothing to say as such about proof in practical or applied philosophy. The question I wish to pursue is the following: when the philosopher makes statements about the nature of proof in other domains, or when he analyzes meanings, what sort of proof are his own statements capable of? I shall be particularly interested in the sort of issue involved in the great and ultimate conflicts between schools of philosophy. I restrict the field in this way only for reasons of economy, and not because I wish to suggest that the issues with which practical philosophy · deals are either unphilosophical or insoluble.

I

The unhappy fact that the history of philosophy is in large part a record of endlessly recurring controversies and permanently unsettled questions is no doubt responsible for the traditional suspicion that there is no such thing as proof in philosophy. In the form of "historicism" this suspicion has now received a systematic argument and wide currency. Taking Karl Mannheim's version of this doctrine as an example, its arguments that proof is impossible in philosophy may, I think, be reduced to three: 1) all philosophical beliefs incorporate value-judgments; 2) all philosophical beliefs are determined by specific and limited social and historical perspectives; 3) even standards of proof incorporate specific perspectives, so that it makes no sense to speak of proof as being non-historical in character.

I shall resist the temptation to dwell on the obvius point that a doctrine which asserts that all doctrines are historically limited in validity has itself a very curious status, but shall proceed instead to each of the more specific arguments.

Even if we take the most extreme position and assume that value-judgments are inevitably incorporated in every sort of philosophy, this does not mean that proof is then impossible in philosophy. For, in principle, it is always possible to appraise any given end or value as a means to another end or value. Even if we say that value-statements are not descriptions, hypothetical or otherwise, but imperatives, we do not have to conclude that proof in philosophy is impossible. For what functions as an imperative in one context can nevertheless be examined as a means to some other end in a further context. The fac, therefore, that a given value functions as an imperative is not incompatible with its having a contingent status logically. Accordingly, to point to the inevitable presence of an assumption of value is no more than to point to the fact that every argument rests on premises, and that it is impossible to prove anything unless we assume something. In general, the argument that the presence of value-judgments in philosophy makes philosophy incapable of proof has force only if we insist that proof in philosophy must be free from any taint of contingency.

The argument that the social origins of philosophy make objective proof in philosophy impossible seems to me at least equally questionable, and to be broadly on a par with the classic notion that so long as the mind is connected to the body it cannot really discover truth. It is obvious that the history of philosophy is littered with the wreckage of systems which astute and honest men have thought to be true and certain, and which have looked to later generations only like socially useful or protected dogmas. But it is also possible to exaggerate the influence of social factors, especially when the notion of "social determination" is as vague as it is with Mannheim. While the direction which research takes in the applied sciences and technology obviously depends on a variety of social considerations, it also depends on the state of research in the theoretical sciences; and when these sciences achieve a highly organized methodology and system of ideas, the direction which their research takes seems to depend mainly on independent theoretical considerations.

To be sure, it can hardly be said that philosophy has achieved that degree of methodological and theoretical organization which would free it from the influence of specific social perspectives or passing intellectual fashions. But those who are anxious to convert philosophy into a scientific discipline have precisely this objective in mind. To achieve just such freedom is in fact one of the major functions of the creation of precise intellectual methods and comprehensive intellectual theories; and, needless to say, it has been a characteristic and traditional ideal of philosophy. And nothing that Mannheim says about the actual social influences that play on philosophy indicates a necessary connection between the social genesis of philosophy and the impossibility of achieving intellectual independence.

But even if we should grant that all the questions which philosophers have ever asked or will ask are socially determined, this would not bear on the issue as to whether their answers to these questions are true or false. It is possible, of course, for a question to be so biased that no true answer can be given to it. But the very making of such an assertion presupposes the independent capacity to detect bias and to distinguish between truth and falsehood. Similar considerations apply to the assertion that the answers philosophers give to the questions they ask are biased because they are socially determined. In general, while it cannot be denied that some social circumstances are such as to prevent the discovery of truth, it is hard to understand why all should be.

In fact, Mannheim believes that all sacial circumstances impede the discovery of truth because he believes that even standards of proof are the results of specific historical conditions. For this reason, they incorporate perspectives that are partial, and it therefore follows, he beileves, that objective proof in philosophy is impossible. This argument seems, however, almost a play on the word "partiality". For there is no need to believe that because a perspective is incomplete, it is therefore false. To see or know

things incompletely is not necessarily to see or know them falsely, unless we assume that what we do not see or know necessarily changes the character of what we do see or know. In short, the skeptical implications of the sociology of knowledge rest on that old philosophical ghost, the doctrine of internal relations. This doctrine is responsible, indeed, for Mannheim's sometimes rather puzzling proposals for avoiding skepticism. He seems in general to have believed that men might achieve greater objectivity and truth by attempting to synthesize the variety of existing perspectives with which they become acquainted. But it is hard to know why a false view will be improved by combining it with another false view. And I should think that quite the opposite would happen if one of the views happened to be tru.e

The idea of synthesizing different points of view as a way to greater objectivity in fact borrows what plausibility it has from certain characteristics of the process by which we actually do determine objective truth amidst the clash of perspectives: but an examination of this process suggests conclusions quite different from those of Mannheim. To use Mannheim's own analogy and language, when we have a number of reports by observers, each of whom occupies a different visual standpoint, how do we go about understanding why the object appears differently to each? And how do we find what Mannheim calls "a common denominator" or a "formula" which will bring these "varying perspectivistic insights" together? In the case of visual perspectives, we construct, with the help of certain general laws (e. g., the laws of optics), a "formula" of the shape, size, color, etc., of the object in question. This "formula", together with the laws of optics, etc., enables us to explain why each of the observers, situated as he is, gives the report he does. If one another of these reports does not fit this "formula", we check for aberrations of various sorts —e. g., defects of vision or of veracity—. If we find none, wengo back and reconsider the other reports, checking in terms of an alternative "formula", and so forth, until we arrive at a conception of the object which will explain the appearances. In a sense, this can be called a "synthesis of perspectives", but it is not simply a consensus of them. For it depends also on other beliefs (i. e., the laws of optics, etc.) whose reliability is independent of the particular perspectives at issue. So far as I can see, therefore, this process illustrates not the relativity of perspectives, but their objective relativity —the fact, that is, that they cannot be explained unless we also have a theory of the object, and that this theory is certified, not only by "perspectivistic reports", but by being embedded in a more comprehensive, and independently established, body of beliefs.

II

But let us turn now to more positive considerations. There is an apparently quite different view which holds that while there is such a thing as proof in philosophy, it is something essentially different from proof in other fields. This is a view which is much more frequently held by philosophers, and it will give us an opportunity to see the sort of issue which philosophical debates, especially on such ultimate matters as the nature of proof, seem to involve.

What supports the view that philosophical proof is something *sui generis* is the obvious fact that purely formal considerations play such a predominant role in philosophical argumentation. This characte-

ristic of philosophy has been elevated by many philosophers and particularly by objective idealists, into the position that philosophic proof is discontinuous from proof in other domains because purely formal considerations are the only instruments of philosophic proof. The obvious difficulty with such a position seems to be that such purely formal proofs are plainly relative to the language in which they are formulated. Without interpretation, therefore, they would not appear to settle any empirical issue as such. And since it is presumably the intention of philosophers who hold this position to come to conclusion on empirical issues without depending on empirical techniques, their attempt would, in principle, appear to be a failure.

However, very ingenious attempts have been made to save the purely *a priory* conception of the character of philosophy. If we consider F. H. Bradley's position, for example, he attempts to prove his case by showing, in effect, that arguments of the general kind I have just employed assume distinctions which can only be formulated in the language of external relations; and he then goes on to argue that statements formulated in the language of external relations are bound to be self-contradictory. I think it is possible to reply to this by indicating that Bradley's position rests on a number of definitions —such as the definition of difference as a relation, and the definition of the nature or essence of a thing as identical with all its possible traits and relations— which makes what he proves quite different from what he thinks he is proving. He does not prove that a language in which it is possible to formulate external relations is self-contradictory; he merely proves that it breaks the rules of his own language.

However, although this seems to me a satisfactory rejoinder to Bradley's claim, it is interesting to note that it does not quite end matters. For I notice that when it is pointed out to a person holding a position like Bradley's that this position rests on an elaborate tautology, he is frequently not disturbed at all. He accepts this statement as a description of his position, but not a proof against it. And at this point, it seems to me, the argument has taken a twist which is peculiarly revealing. For under these circumstances it has resolved itself really into a proposal to use language in a certain way. If we take Bradley's position in this way, it still breaks down, to be sure, but not simply because it is tautological or rests on certain definitions and syntactical stipulations which are matters of choice. It breaks down because arguments over the use of language in fact raise issues that are more than linguistic. And it is to these issues that ultimate appeal is made, it seems to me, in philosophical proof.

III

The question of the nature of philosophic proof obviously depends upon what the objectives of philosophical argument are; and these in turn are indicated by the peculiar characteristics of philosophical argument. It is plain that the method of dialectic and logical analysis, the attempt to examine a belief or a usage in the light of its pre-suppositions and to push it all the way through to its logically implied conclusions, plays a preponderant role in philosophic arguments. Since other domains, from common sense to the sophisticated sciences, also employ this method, proof in philosophy so far as I can see, is not different in this respect from proof in other domains. It is, of course, frequently more

difficult, largely because proofs in philosophy are usually undertaken in a natural language, or at any rate, a not highly formalized one. The rules of the game, therefore, are not so clear as we find them in certain other domains. But this does not affect the question of principle involved.

There is, however, a significant difference, and this is that the method of purely logical argument seems to play so much larger a role in philosophy than it does in other domains, with the exception of mathematics and formal logic. The philosopher is distinctively concerned with the analysis and organization of meanings —or, in other words, with the integration of belief—. And this distinctive objective of philosophy is crucial in considering the nature of philosophic proof.

The integration of belief has two aspects, a linguistic and a practical one. In the first sense, the philosopher is interested in eliminating apparent contradictions or paradoxes that arise within or between systems of ideas. In this connection, he ordinarily proceeds either by exhibiting the linguistic confusions which cause specific difficulties, or by the more general method of attempting to develop a consistent language for the organization and formulation of these various systems of belief. And this attempt to organize a unified body beliefs through linguistic or logical analysis has an import not only for theory, but for practice. Different domains of knowledge come together in the arena of practical decision-making, in everyday life, politics, morals, and the civilized arts. When successful, the integration of belief on the analytic level permits the use of theory in a systematic and deliberate fashion, and indicates the kind of bearing it has on the statements and observations of everyday life. The integration of belief on the linguistic level is thus an instrument to the integration of belief and action on the level of practice. It is these two objectives it seems to me, which give significance to the ancient conception of philosophy as "the love of wisdom".

Accordingly, philosophic arguments are subject to a number of tests, over and above the test of self-consistency. For, although they may be mainly concerned with analytic issues, these arguments have an uneliminable empirical reference. Even when the analysis and clarification of language is carried on with the narrowest intent, it is at least the analysis of some existing usage, or some actual method of inquiry. And when the analysis is also a proposal for the of language, the empirical considerations it raises are more considerable. For example, the rational reconstruction of a term or a set of terms in psychology must meet not simply the test of being continuous with at least some part of existing usage; what is even more important, it must make possible the development of a more systematically inclusive and reliable body of theories. And its success in doing so depends quite obviously not merely on linguistic considerations, but on the actual nature of the materials with respect to which the proposed usage has been introduced.

However, a philosophical proposal is justified not simply because it may render usage more precise, or a body of theories more systematically productive of results. As a proposal, it is offered as a means for the organization of certain materials in relations to certain ends of human inquiry and communication; and its validation accordingly depends not only on the nature of the materials involved, but on the ends invoked. Proof in philosophy therefore involves, it seems to me, at least an implicit reference to the character and conditions of human discourse; for while the ends of communication and inquiry

are, like any ends, matters of choice, their selection and definition can be rationally controlled by a consideration of the limits imposed by the nature of human discourse considered both on its formal side and as a natural and social event. An interest in precision, clarity, intellectual economy, or statements formulated in a publicly verifiable fashion, is not, so far as I can see, an inescapable law of nature; but it can be justified by reference to the conditions under which human inquiry and communication operate, and their functions with regard to the organization of joint human activities and the guidance of human practice. Thus, although philosophy is distinctively concerned with making proposals for the use of language, and therefore has a different objective from the empirical sciences, proof in philosophy is provisional and contingent, and involves the appeal to empirical generalizations of a particularly pervasive sort, and drawn from a variety of fields.

I believe that much traditional philosophy, underneath its often immoderate metaphysical claims, has been interested in explicating this kind of larger non-linguistic reason for talking in a given way. And I think that if we examine the sort of thing which philosophers say or imply when caught in the ultimate sort of controversy that arises between different schools of philosophy, we will find that they are raising this sort of consideration, if only in a rough and ready way. Consider, for example, the arguments provoked by a traditional variant of the position that proof in philosophy is discontinuous from proof in other domains. Many philosophers have seemed to argue that the dialectical analysis of the foundations of proof leads on to a higher leven of reason or logic or proof, where the characteristics of philosophic logic are different from those in other domains. With respect to our present discussion, two things are interesting about this view. In the first place, arguments between philosophers who hold this view and those who do not almost always end with an argument over the meaning of the term "knowledge". In the second place, those who hold this view almost always seem to want to mean by "knowledge" what some poets and most mystics mean by "love" —some form of complete identification of subject with object, in which no questions are asked, and language is both impotent and an impertinence.

Now such arguments usually provoke empirical philosophers into saying a number of things which they do not ordinarily bother to say when they are talking only to one another. And whether what they say is true or not —I happen to think it is— it illustrates the fact that their preference for empirical interpretations of terms like "knowledge" rests at least implicity on considerations of the general nature of language, its relation to other activities, and its consequent use and abuse. They point out, for example, that it is dangerous for communication and intellectual clarity to use a word with a fairly established and stable meaning in a highly idiosyncratic way, or to use an ambiguous word as though it carried its full range of meanings into every context in which it is used. They indicate that the word "knowledge" cannot be used in this way if we mean to preserve a self-corrective and cumulative growing community of belief. And they may suggest that the very men who propose to use the term "knowledge" in this way do not themselves consistently use it as they propose, but save it, quite obviously, for certain cherished beliefs which they cannot preserve on any other basis.

Even the simple test of ordinary usage, it seems

to me, rests on such unspoken considerations. When a man proposes this test, he is saying more than merely that the test of a philosophy is whether it accords with common usage. He is at least implying that ordinary usage is a valuable, or indispensable, instrument for the achievement of certain ends. Many of those who employ ordinary usage as a court of final appeal, for example, would seem to be assuming that a language which has developed in response to generations of workaday experience, and is, on the whole, an efficient instrument for organizing such experience, must in some way reflect fundamental truths about the human scene. I should not myself wish to take any such general view. The test of ordinary usage, it seems to me, has several limitations. In the first place, one man's ordinary usage is another man's bad language. In the second place, where subtle issues are involved, ordinary usage is obviously not always the best instrument for the integration of beliefs. Nevertheless, ordinary usage is a relevant test in many contexts. The philosopher who would use ordinary words in out of the ordinary ways runs the considerable risk of confusing himself as well as others; and many philosophical difficulties are the result of taking a term with an established meaning in ordinary usage and transporting it into another context in which this meaning is inapplicable. Furthermore, since practical decisions are almost always mediated by an ordinary language, and social activities depend upon it, the appeal to ordinary usage must take high priority in any context where the integration of belief in the interest of social practice is concerned.

Because philosophy is concerned with making linguistic proposals; the view has developed that it deals with matters that are insoluble or unimportant. Neither of these conclusions, it seems to me, is justified. It is, to be sure, a matter of choice whether we speak one language or another, and there may be a range of permissible choices. But this does not mean that any choice is as good as any other, or that there is no limit to what we can get away with in philosophy. The formulation of an artificial language, the acceptance of a customary usage, or the proposal of a new usage, though all matters for human decision, are subject in the end to considerations of the general nature of human communication, what purposes it serves and the conditions it must meet if it is to serve them. And when we make these considerations explicit, we touch upon fundamental issues bearing on man's activities, their natural environment, and their proper organization.

I should add that I do not mean that when philosophers are investigating specific problems they must always make these matters explicit. Nor do I mean to imply that philosophy is in any sense a higher form of knowledge, or that it rests on considerations of a special order. On the contrary, while the objectives of philosophical argument are in general different from those in the descriptive sciences, proof in philosophy does not appear to me to be essentially different from proof in other domains. The logic employed is continuous with ordinary human logic, empirical considerations are unavoidable, and the world in which the philosopher moves is the same old world in which everybody else moves. Philosophy is, however, a peculiarly humanistic discipline, for it contains an implicit appeal to certain human objectives, and is, in the end, a critique of human discourse in the light of these objectives. As philosophy becomes more disciplined and professional, it is worth remembering that the new way of talking about it as the analysis of language is only another way of saying that philosophy is a commentary on the career of reason.

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