

On What Philosophy Is

Stephen J. Boulter

“in the absence of this critical reflection on the nature of the philosophical enterprise,
one is at best but a potential philosopher.”
W. Sellars¹

Introduction

The nature of the philosophical enterprise is a notoriously vexed and somewhat tedious question. Most academic philosophers would prefer to avoid it altogether. Most do. But at a time when the discipline is so fractured (and fractious), with little agreement on what questions or projects ought to be pursued and how,² and with the wider intellectual community, not to mention Pro-Vice Chancellors, beginning to wonder what philosophers and philosophy departments in general are for, it is time to face the question squarely, however uncomfortable this may be.

But there are reasons over and above these purely pragmatic considerations which ought to spur us on to tackle this most vexed of questions. If we assume, with Sellars, that engaging in philosophical activity at a reasonably sophisticated level presupposes *some* conception or other of the nature of philosophy itself, then, if we wish to flatter ourselves with the belief that we are at least “potential” philosophers, we ought to be able to say something sensible on the nature of philosophy and the philosophical enterprise.

Now if this collection of considerations is not too wide of the mark, then philosophers must accept that it is simply not good enough, when pressed on this matter, to frown significantly and say, as we so often do: “Well, the nature of philosophy is itself a philosophical question, for ‘philosophy’ is an ‘essentially contested concept’”, and then hope that no one is so impolite as to press us further. Nor will it do, I think, to suggest that philosophy is just whatever academic philosophers get up to in their working hours, a suggestion which implies that the current fragmentation of the discipline is entirely in order.³ Such responses are likely to cut little ice with a sceptical Pro-Vice Chancellor; but they ought not to impress us either. For despite the fact that we philosophers have been taught not to look for the essences of things, can we accept that there is nothing that our various and disparate activities have in common that makes them distinctly philosophical? Is there not at least a family resemblance to be uncovered here? If not, what have we achieved by calling a work philosophical or a thinker a philosopher in addition to clearing our throats? The time

¹ (2001) “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man”, in *Analytic Philosophy: An Anthology*. Eds. Martinich and Sosa. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 474.

² Graham Priest rightly characterises 20th century philosophy as ending in “diversity and fragmentation”. After listing the philosophers he thinks to have been the most influential in the last 20 years (Dummett, Kripke, Rawls, Armstrong, Derrida, Levinas and Habermas) he notes that “... without exception, everyone had a different philosophical agenda and a different pursuit.” (2003, “Where is Philosophy at the Start of the 21st Century?”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. CII, Part I, p. 94-95).

³ It might be, but this needs to be shown.

has come (again) for philosophers to bite the bullet, to stick their necks out, and to say something sensible about what philosophy is all about and how one goes about doing it.

But before one can begin to speak reasonably about the nature of philosophy and philosophical activity, it seems sensible to pause for a moment to consider what constraints should be placed on any such account. Surely we cannot say just anything we like about the nature of philosophy. For all that “philosophy” is a contested concept, it is not an entirely subjective matter. Presumably some accounts will be better than others, and the criteria by which such judgements are made ought to be identified and brought out explicitly. So I will begin by stating in a cursory fashion the criteria I think any plausible account of the nature of philosophy must satisfy, and then proceed to the account itself.

Suggested Constraints on Accounts of Philosophy

First, any plausible account of the nature of western philosophy ought to be able to accommodate the metaphilosophical insights of the great philosophers in the western tradition.⁴ Clearly it is unlikely that *all* such views can be accommodated; but an account of the nature of the discipline that is able to accommodate a good number of the views of its greatest practitioners is to be preferred to one that does not. The intuition here is that philosophy ought not to be characterised in such a way that one is forced to maintain that its greatest practitioners did not know the nature of their own enterprise. This is not to say that they cannot be corrected on these matters, but merely that the default position ought to be that the great practitioners were not hopelessly confused about the nature of their discipline. Nor does this mean that the nature of the discipline cannot change. But the range of activities into which philosophy can plausibly be thought to mutate is limited by the discipline’s past. If it changes too much, it seems reasonable to say that is no longer philosophy but something else.

⁴ There will always be some debate about which philosophers ought to be included on this list. But I think the matter is made less contentious if we agree *not* to include anyone whose work has not stood the test of time. This means that no one within the last 50 years or so should be included in our considerations. To those who would maintain that accounts consistent with this constraint will only tell us what philosophy has been like in the past, not what it is like at the moment, and so is excessively conservative, I would say that these are virtues rather than defects. We ought to ignore recent and contemporary work in this matter because we are poor judges of its philosophical worth. This rather banal point is graphically illustrated by *Modern Classical Philosophers: Selections Illustrating Modern Philosophy from Bruno to Bergson*. This edited collection was compiled by Rand (of Harvard University), and published by Houghton Mifflin Company, originally in 1908. It reveals what an informed professional considered to be the list of philosophical greats of the modern period. What the list reveals is that agreement on who counts as great is always easier to secure the more historically distant the time period under consideration. His list is as follows: Bruno (1548-1600), Bacon (1561-1626), Hobbes (1588-1679), Descartes (1596-1650), Spinoza (1632-1677), Leibnitz (1646-1716), Locke (1632-1704), Berkeley (1685-1753), Hume (1711-1776), Condillac (1715-1870), Kant (1724-1804), Fichte (1762-1814), Schelling (1775-1854), Hegel (1770-1831) Schopenhauer (1788-1860), Comte (1798-1857), Mill (1806-1873), Spencer (1820-1903), Herman Lotze (1817-1881), Charles Renouvier (1815-1903), Bradley (1846-1924), Josiah Royce (1855-1916), James, (1842-1910), Bergson (1859-). What this list reveals is that between Bruno and Kant there is much agreement (the status of the other German Idealists is less certain), but between Comte and Bergson there are names many professional philosophers will never have heard of let alone read. Apart from Mill, who would be routinely included in an undergraduate programme of study?

Second, a plausible account of the nature of philosophy will square with the actual practice of the great philosophers. The intuition here is that philosophy ought not to be characterised in such a way as to force one to maintain that the great practitioners of the discipline were not actually engaged in philosophy at all. A corollary to this is that a plausible account of the nature of the discipline ought to be able to call on historical examples from a variety of thinkers of different complexions as illustrations of certain key points contained in the account.

Third, ideally the account of the nature of philosophy will not depart too widely from the expectations of the educated non-philosopher. If the account provided bears no relation whatsoever to what academics in other disciplines associate with the term “philosophy”, then a question mark ought to be placed next to that account. This is not to say that the philosophical layman ought to be able to understand the work of professional philosophers without a great deal of effort and help (if at all), anymore than the lay person understands advanced theories in physics, mathematics or engineering. But the layperson can recognise a theory in physics or a theorem in mathematics as belonging to physics or mathematics, even if they do not understand the theory or the theorem. In an ideal world, the same would hold for philosophy.

But perhaps the most important criterion I wish to insist upon is the following: It seems plausible and highly desirable that accounts of philosophy identify a role for the discipline within the general intellectual economy. There must be such a role if philosophy is to avoid the fate of all hermetically sealed endeavours, namely, irrelevance to the wider context. I maintain that any account of philosophy which renders it trivial, or a mere intellectual amusement for a group of specialists (perhaps like chess) will have missed something essential. At least this is my hope. Philosophy might not be as important as some previously thought; it might not solve the problems of the world; it might not provide clear cut answers to all its questions; it might be rather dry and difficult at times; but when done properly it is not trivial, despite the fact that the relevance of the work of some philosophers may not be immediately obvious.

It is with this last point particularly in mind that I begin my substantive account of what I take philosophy to be. It is by looking at the distinctive contribution of philosophy within the general intellectual economy that we begin to formulate a clearer idea of its nature.

On what philosophy is

The account of philosophy provided here is based primarily on Aristotle’s remarks in the *Topics*, *Posterior Analytics*, *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian Ethics*, and *Metaphysics*. It also draws heavily on the views of Ryle and Sellars, and generally seeks to accommodate a wide variety of metaphilosophical insights by identifying different stages of the philosophical enterprise, with different metaphilosophical views accurately describing different stages of this enterprise.⁵ And while it is no part of my claim here that all philosophers consciously go through all the processes I set out, I would claim that the philosophical community as a whole does (over many years, if

⁵ That this account shares features with those offered by Ryle in his (2002), *Dilemmas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), Sellars in his “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man” and Lowe in his (2002), *A Survey of Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), i.e., thinkers of a variety of different stripes, suggests that the account offered here has some staying power.

not centuries, of grappling with a problem) while the careers of individual philosophers may be entirely devoted to only certain stages or aspects of the discussion.

I begin with the general aim of philosophical activity in its broadest sense. Trying always to avoid the grandiose (which is difficult) it is not implausible to suggest that the point of the discipline of philosophy throughout most of its history has been to provide a general description and account of the nature of human beings and our place in the natural world. It is this aspect of philosophy which forever ties it to the so-called “Big Questions” (much to the embarrassment of most professional philosophers and the delight of undergraduates). Of course professional philosophers rarely, if ever, have this task in mind on a Monday morning on the way to work; but the core sub-disciplines of philosophy do, when taken together, go some way to completing what one might call “The Big Picture”. These departments of philosophy are devoted to developing accounts concerning (a) the most general features of the natural world (ontology and metaphysics), (b) the most general features of the mind and its relation to the body (philosophical anthropology and philosophy of mind), (c) how human beings come to know and understand something of themselves, the natural world, and whatever else the universe may contain (epistemology), and finally (d) how human beings ought to comport themselves, both privately and collectively (theories of action, ethics and politics). The Holy Grail has a set of accounts covering areas (a) – (d) which are not just satisfactory on their own when taken in isolation, but accounts which are consistent with each other and mutually reinforcing. Moreover, it is arguable that many of the great philosophers have hoped that accounts (a) – (c) will provide some guidance in the area of human action.⁶ It is commonly assumed, at least implicitly, that knowing something about the nature of the world we live in and something of our own human nature is bound to shed some light on what kind of life we should lead and what kinds of actions we ought to perform and which to avoid. Implicit in this view of philosophy then is the claim that philosophy is not just a theoretical exercise, but is ultimately connected, if at times somewhat distantly and indirectly, with the practical and existential concerns of ordinary life.⁷ This is one way, but only one, in which philosophy can claim to be more than a trivial pursuit.

I suspect that this account of the ultimate aim of philosophy will be familiar to most. I also suspect that it will strike many as hopelessly grandiose and perhaps even laughably old-fashioned, maybe even dangerous. And of course there is a very respectable and longstanding tradition within philosophy which maintains that such a project is an impossible undertaking. But despite the fact that many a philosopher has made it her business to attack something like this vision of philosophy (either directly or indirectly), her work as a philosopher would be unintelligible without it. Because, as Aristotle noted, one cannot overthrow philosophy, intelligently at least, without actually doing some philosophy, and those who reject this picture as hopeless must

⁶ Note the recommended order of dependence here. It is the reverse of the current fashion for letting one’s political views constrain, rather than be constrained by, the rest of one’s philosophy.

⁷ Not all great philosophers fall into this camp, but it is clear that Plato, Aristotle, the late Hellenistic thinkers, Aquinas and the Scholastics, Descartes, Hume and Kant, not insignificant figures, would. All these figures made contributions to all the core sub-disciplines of philosophy, and all were concerned not just with the theoretical aspects of the discipline, but with its practical consequences as well. Of course such a task is seldom taken on by any one individual today given the need to specialise to a greater degree in one area if one hopes to make any significant contribution at all to the discipline.

themselves defend a set of philosophical theses which inevitably fall into recognised compartments of the discipline as I have just sketched it. Consequently one should say that philosophy has included an ongoing discussion about whether this grand project is in fact achievable, and if so, how.

But I now want to insist that the project as outlined above is not as grandiose as appears at first blush.⁸ And the reason for this, not always obvious even to philosophers themselves, is that the basic materials out of which the Big Picture is developed are *not* provided by philosophers *qua* philosophers. It seems to me that if we are to understand the distinctive nature of philosophy we must recognise a division of intellectual labour between philosophy and the sciences. It is the role of the special sciences to conduct investigations into that aspect of reality peculiar to them, and to discover new facts and develop theories within and about that particular realm. But if this paper has a fundamental assumption it is that there is no particular slice or aspect of reality that philosophers study, as there is, say, for the biologist, chemist or economist. The contribution of the philosopher *qua* philosopher to the grand project is to draw on pre-existing materials derived from the special sciences, as well as our store of pre-theoretical common sense beliefs, and co-ordinate *this* material into a coherent picture of human beings and our place in the natural world. It is this task of co-ordination, lying outside the remit of any special science, which is specifically philosophical, and the problems encountered in the pursuance of this task are specifically philosophical problems.⁹ This is not to say that philosophers have not often tried, sometimes successfully, to provide theories concerning matters which strictly speaking belonging to the special sciences. This has occurred repeatedly, particularly when the relevant science had yet to emerge. It is this historical fact which prompts some to say that philosophy is what one does with a problem until one can hand it over to the sciences. But on the account of philosophy offered here such efforts are not strictly philosophical, although they are often prompted by philosophical investigations, and put to philosophical use.¹⁰ But it is also for this reason that we can expect that (a) philosophy will never be replaced by the sciences, for philosophy is not proto-science, or science carried out by philosophers, and (b)

⁸ And many will be blushing. One could try to mask the grandiose nature of philosophy by describing it in more homely language. Sellars talks of philosophy helping us “find our way around” by showing us how things “hang together”. But once these phrases are fleshed out one finds philosophy’s grandiose nature returning to view.

⁹ This is the view of philosophical questions presented by Ryle in his *Dilemmas*. Philosophy on this account is still very difficult. It is like attempting to complete a very complex puzzle when one does not know in any specific detail what the final picture looks like, whether one has all the necessary pieces, whether the pieces one does have all fit into the completed picture, and, of course, whether there is a final picture to be constructed at all. It is not surprising therefore that many philosophers, the sceptics, have maintained that philosophy so construed is still little more than a fantasy.

¹⁰ It is because philosophers historically have worn many hats (philosopher, scientist, theologian, historian, to name just a few) that philosophical activity has often been mistaken for activities of a different sort. While we all recognise clearly enough that Aristotle is wearing his philosopher’s hat in the *Metaphysics* and *Nicomachean Ethics* and his biologist’s hat in *Parts of Animals*, things are not always so clear-cut. Is Searle’s *Speech Acts* a work of philosophy or a work in a branch of linguistics? While it was motivated by philosophical concerns, and can be put to philosophical use, I would suggest that its ultimate home is within linguistics. But it is no less valuable for that. Similar considerations apply to Berkeley’s *A New Theory of Vision*, and much of the work of Descartes.

there will always be a call for philosophy, since it is likely that there will always be co-ordination problems.

So what does a strictly philosophical or co-ordination problem look like? A co-ordination problem arises when one notices a tension between beliefs or lines of thought that one is otherwise inclined to accept. As Aristotle says, an *aporia* (problem or puzzle) arises "...when we reason on both sides [of a question] and it appears to us that everything can come about either way." This produces "a state of *aporia* about which of the two ways to take up." (*Topics*, VI, 145b16-20.) Such problems can emerge within a single science or domain. For example, within anthropology there are currently several respectable yet incompatible theories concerning the origins of bipedalism in hominids, with no clear winners likely to emerge anytime soon. And evolutionary biology saw a furious debate concerning the relative merits of Lamarckian and Darwinian theories of evolution. Both theories had something to commend them, and, at least at first, it was not obvious "which of the two ways to take up". But I would suggest that such internal disputes are best left to specialists within the field, and that they are not the business of the philosopher *qua* philosopher (would they listen to us anyway?). Rather, a strictly philosophical *aporia* arises when the attractive lines of thought have their origins in *different* domains. Consider the problem of induction. At its simplest, this notorious problem is the problem of co-ordinating beliefs emanating from logic on the one hand with another set of common sense beliefs on the other.¹¹ The problem emerges when one acknowledges (i) the common sense view that experience is generally a good guide to action, and that it is reasonable to defer to those of greater experience since they are likely to be better judges of how events are likely to unfold, and (ii) the logical point that a finite set of observations provides no logical guarantee that the future will resemble the past, a point which suggests to some that relying on experience as a guide to action is in fact unreasonable. Both lines of thought seem to be well supported, and yet they appear to be inconsistent with each other.

If this is what a strictly philosophical problem or question looks like, the following can then be said about philosophical activity in general. The task of the philosopher is to give an account of the initial set of beliefs that removes the initial puzzlement, and so solves the philosophical problem. Removing the puzzle constitutes success in philosophy. Indeed, on this view, solving co-ordination problems of this sort is the *raison d'être* of the philosopher, and is the philosopher's specific contribution to the *overarching project*.¹² For once the puzzlement is removed pieces of the puzzle that

¹¹ The same sort of problem emerges if one takes on board the view that the main purpose of the sciences is to explain natural phenomena, and that this is achieved primarily by appeal to universal laws of nature. In this case there is a clash between one special science, logic (which says one cannot arrive at a universal generalisation from a finite set of observations) and the other natural sciences (which strive to do just this, think that on occasion this has been achieved, and by means consistent with a commitment to empiricism).

¹² This paragraph draws on the following extended passage from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "We must, with a view to the science [metaphysics] which we are seeking, first recount the subjects that should be first discussed. [The "subjects" being a set of *aporia*.] ...For those who wish to get clear of difficulties [i.e. *aporia*] it is advantageous to discuss the difficulties well; for the subsequent free play of thought implies the solution of the previous difficulties, and it is not possible to untie a knot of which one does not know. But the difficulty of our thinking points to a 'knot' in the object: for in so far as our thought is in difficulties, it is in like case with those who are bound; for in either case it is impossible to move forward. Hence one should have surveyed all the difficulties beforehand, both for the purposes we have

previously would not fit obligingly into the Big Picture find their respective places. On this view, all our conceptual analyses, (second order) theory construction, and argument development, analysis and critique, that is, all the day-to-day activities of the working philosopher, are best construed as means to this end.¹³

Now if this is what a strictly philosophical problem looks like, and what success in philosophy consists in, we still need to recognise that *how* a philosopher goes about achieving this goal is often as philosophically interesting as the solution produced. And it is tempting to launch into a study of the various methodologies employed to this end. But before considering particular methodologies it is well worth noting that in one sense there is a limited number of ways in which a philosophical puzzle can be solved. After due consideration the philosopher must maintain either that

- (a) The alleged tensions in the initial set of beliefs are merely apparent and not real (perhaps stemming from certain misunderstandings either of the facts of the case or of our own conceptual system), or,
- (b) The perceived tensions in the initial set of beliefs are indeed real, and are best removed by modifying, qualifying or perhaps abandoning altogether one or more of the initial set of beliefs.

Other options are available to the philosopher, but these options are signs of philosophical failure. For instance, a philosopher might effectively declare that the puzzle cannot be solved, and that theorising in this domain is futile (either in principle or at least for the present). In practice this amounts to saying either

- (c) No coherent account of the initial data can be given (either in principle or at least at present) but that nonetheless none of the initial beliefs should be abandoned. Or,
- (d) No coherent account of the data can be provided, and for this reason all of the initial beliefs fall under suspicion.

(d) is the position taken by those willing to suggest that in a particular domain or domains human beings are subject to comprehensive and systematic error, not simply at the level of theory, but at the level of the initial beliefs themselves.

These patterns can be illustrated with a quick glance at two old philosophical chestnuts, the free will vs. determinism debate, and the mind-body problem. In both cases the initial data pull in two seemingly incompatible directions. On the one hand we feel free, talk and act as if we are free, and yet we recognise that the freedom of the will is hard to reconcile with the natural sciences. Are there not necessary and sufficient causes for every natural event? Does this not preclude the possibility of freedom? In the mind-body problem, we all accept initially that we have mental states with particular properties (consciousness and intentionality, etc.); but again we recognise that it is difficult to reconcile these claims with the physicalism of the

stated and because people who inquire without first stating the difficulties are like those who do not know where they have to go; besides, a man does not otherwise know even whether he has at any given time found what he is looking for or not; for the end is not clear to such a man, while to him who has first discussed the difficulties it is clear.” (995a23-995b4).

¹³ If we are entirely honest I think most would agree that in fact academic philosophers spend most of their time discussing the views of other philosophers who themselves took a crack at solving a co-ordination problem, and the conflicts their work engenders with the work of other philosophers. This then engenders a second layer of discussion, and then a third, and then an entire cottage industry, by which time the original problem is often lost sight of entirely. While this work can be immensely interesting for those involved, its usefulness is often questionable.

natural sciences. We find ourselves asking questions like, “How is it that brute matter can become conscious?” And on both issues we find philosophers who claim the noticed tensions are merely apparent (e.g., the compatibilists in the free will debate, and John Searle in the philosophy of mind) and those who claim that the tensions are real, and that more or less drastic revisions of the initial data are required (e.g., the determinists in the free will debate, and the eliminativists and substance dualists in the philosophy of mind). And on both we can find philosophers who despair of ever reaching any coherent account of the data while refusing to give them up (this appears to be Descartes’ view on the freedom of the will,¹⁴ and Thomas Nagel in the philosophy of mind). And while I am not aware of any major philosopher occupying the last logical position (d) on either of these topics,¹⁵ Kant’s treatment of the antinomies is the best historical example of a philosopher maintaining that there are domains in which we are systematically confused and cognitively incompetent, and that all beliefs in these domains ought to be viewed with suspicion.

Historical Examples

Our confidence in the account of the philosophical enterprise offered here would be increased if one could point to a number of recognised philosophers whose work appears to have taken its point of departure from an *aporia* of the sort described above. A few words on these matters will have to suffice.

Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is, unsurprisingly, an obvious example of a major philosophical work taking its start from a set of *aporia*. The first chapter of Book III sets out explicitly the *aporia* Aristotle intends to tackle, and this he proceeds to do. His *Nicomachean Ethics* is also replete with such *aporia*, perhaps the most famous of which is the tension felt between Socrates’ views on incontinence and those of the ordinary person. But it is also clear, at least on a traditional reading, that Plato’s metaphysical theories stem from his reflections on the tensions between two influential lines of thought, namely Heraclitus’ famous claim that all is in flux, and Parmenides’ equally striking but contradictory assertion that change is impossible. What is more, each of these pre-Socratic positions presented challenges to another plausible line of thought, namely that human beings are able to understand something of the world around them. Making sense of these three conflicting lines of thought lies at the heart of Plato’s metaphysical and epistemological work.

If we move beyond the Classical Greeks we find that the Medieval Scholastics, often denigrated as mere theologians, were in fact engaged in genuine philosophical activity. Aquinas’ philosophical challenge was to accommodate two great authorities from different domains, Augustine and Aristotle, whose views were clearly not obviously compatible on all key points. In fact every scholastic question begins with the stating of a question to which contradictory answers have been given by recognised authorities from the domains of theology and philosophy. Descartes can also be read as involved in a similar project, at least in the *Meditations*. In the dedication to this work Descartes acknowledges the need to reconcile his rationalism

¹⁴ I infer this from Descartes’ putting free will on a par with the Incarnation and creation *ex nihilo*. In a journal begun on the 1st of January 1619, he wrote: “The Lord has made three marvels: things out of nothingness; free will; and the Man who is God.” *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*. Edited and translated by Geach and Anscombe. Hong Kong; Nelson’s University Paperbacks, 1976, p. 4.

¹⁵ Although a modern day Pyrronian sceptic might be envisaged here.

in epistemology with the Church's teachings on the existence of God and the immortality of the soul.

One final historical example. Reconciling the philosophical positions of rationalism and empiricism was a significant element of the Kantian project. But Kant can also be read as having been spurred into philosophical action at a more profound level by the apparent tension between the Newtonian mechanics he so admired and his belief in the autonomy of the will. Reconciling these two commitments is undoubtedly at the heart of his metaphysical and epistemological work.

I hope these brief and necessarily incomplete historical observations go some way to establishing that the account of philosophy offered here does indeed square with the actual practice of some of the great philosophers. It is also hoped that this account is not too far removed from the expectations of the educated non-philosopher, at least at some stages, although this remains to be seen. But perhaps most importantly, it is hoped that this account does identify, if not *the* role, then at least *a* role for philosophy as a discipline within the general intellectual economy.

A Final Comment: Common Sense vs. Revisionism

I conclude these reflections on the nature of philosophy with a methodological moral. Philosophers are often characterised by their adopted positions on particularly seminal topics. One is a nominalist or a realist, an empiricist or a rationalist, a materialist or an idealist, a dualist or a monist, ... and the list continues. And most of these designations are useful as a crude beginning to the characterisation of a particular philosopher. But it seems to me that there is one vital characterisation of a philosopher or philosophical school that is often overlooked, and that characterisation stems from what one is willing to modify when tensions between lines of thought are taken to be genuine. It is here that a fundamental but often overlooked division in philosophical schools comes into focus, a division between what for want of better terms we can call "common sense philosophers" and "revisionists."

Most of the major philosophers in the history of the discipline have treated a sub-set of the initial data leading to aporia, namely the views of the common man, as little more than Wittgenstein's proverbial ladder, which once used can be kicked away. That is, while philosophers generally recognise that they must *begin* their reflections by including beliefs that are widely shared and accepted by the common run of mankind (if only because these beliefs play a role in the emergence of the initial puzzlement) they feel no need to include these beliefs in their *final* account of the domain in question. In short, if a philosophical problem can be solved by the rejection of a widely held and intuitively plausible belief, then philosophers have generally shown themselves quite prepared to take this revisionist course.¹⁶

But if the account of philosophy sketched here is on the right track, then this commonest of manoeuvres needs to be looked at with suspicion. For if the task of the philosopher is to remove tensions between reputable lines of thought, then the philosopher has no business rejecting any of the initial data except as a last resort. Rather, with Aristotle, the philosopher ought to strive to *preserve* as many of the

¹⁶ I am reminded of Moore's observation that "...what is most amazing and most interesting about the views of many philosophers is the way in which they go beyond or positively contradict the views of Common Sense." (*Some Main Problems of Philosophy*. London: Routledge, p. 2, 2002).

initial "common opinions" as possible, for these views come stamped with the authority of their respective domains, an authority which neither waits for nor fears the approval or disapproval of philosophers. Aristotle writes:

We must, as in all cases, set the observed facts before us and, after first discussing the difficulties [i.e. *aporia*] go on to prove, if possible, the truth of all the common opinions about [the topic at hand], or, failing this, of the greater number and the most authoritative; for if we both refute the objections and leave the common opinions undisturbed, we shall prove the case sufficiently. (*Nicomachean Ethics*. B. VII, Ch. 1, 1145b0-7)

It is worth noting that even Quine, who was no defender of common sense, and certainly not shy of philosophical paradoxes, argues that while everything in principle is up for revision, one ought not to go in for revision for revision's sake, but only to solve a problem (e.g., to square a recalcitrant experience with one's overall belief system), and when opting for revision, to operate on the assumption that a "minimum of mutilation" is to be sought.¹⁷ On the view of philosophy presented here, while what is saved and what is dropped will have to be decided on a case-by-case basis, *in all cases* we ought to strive to save as much of the initial data as possible. Since the philosopher's job is to solve philosophical puzzles, and not revision for revision's sake, if solution A saves more of the initial data than solution B, then A is to be preferred. But this entails saving as much of common sense as possible, because revisions here are not minimal by any means, demanding extensive and widespread revisions to the entire Big Picture under construction. In particular, dropping a common sense belief will always be more revisionary than dropping a philosophical thesis.

Note that it is not claimed that common sense views should never be given up. The point is that we should not give up on common sense on the strength of 'mere' philosophical arguments, since these arguments have a merely derived authority, an authority derived from their ability to accommodate and co-ordinate reputable opinions. If one common opinion genuinely clashes with another, then clearly something has to give. Moreover, if a common opinion genuinely clashes with newly discovered and reliable empirical information, then again the common opinion will have to give way. The important point here is that there is nothing sacrosanct about common opinions which means that they can never be rejected. All this account of philosophy recommends is that we think far more carefully indeed about rejecting a common opinion than we have been wont to do, particularly if the only motivation to do so is pressure from a philosophical argument or theory.

¹⁷ When considering how and when to make revisions in one's set of beliefs, Quine mentions favourably our "natural tendency to disturb the total system as little as possible", and espouses what one might call a "pragmatic conservatism". (See "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" in *From a Logical Point of View*. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980, pp 44, 46.)