Hegelian questions

Whatever topic he thought about, Hegel was wont to ask: how much does your knowledge of any topic reveal knowledge of who you really are? Perhaps he thought that if you don’t know who you are, who exactly it is who asks or answers any question, your answer can’t be objective. If I know that I’m such and such a person, born of such and such parents, in such and such a religion, at such and such a point in history, then I may distinguish which of my beliefs are a product of my circumstances and which are true perceptions. So if philosophers think about a topic (for example, knowledge) do they thereby increase their understanding of what philosophy is? There’s a book of photos called ‘Philosophers’¹ where alongside the photos of distinguished philosophers there are short texts summarizing their view of what philosophy is. It’s surprising how few say anything penetrating about their subject. Let’s look at the conception of philosophy we can find in discussions of (other) philosophical problems, so that philosophizing does not become akin to TV watching—absorbing you so you can escape from seeing who you are.

Why self-knowledge is so connected to knowledge is not as evident to all as it is to, say, Kant and Hegel. Some simple examples may help understand their point of view. In ancient Greece there was the practice of inviting foreigners to judge debates, because it was assumed they would be less biased—they wouldn’t have

any ‘connections’, or indeed enemies there. On the other hand, there is the contrary sentiment, often expressed by nationalist-minded people that only natives can understand ‘our’ culture, language. This could be called the ‘paradox of anthropology’ and it’s a topic that Levi Strauss often ponders—on the one hand ethnic cultures are disappearing, on the other hand they can only be accessed with the roads and telephones which threaten them. Paradoxes say: look at the goods you have to give for this good, look at the price you pay. The solution to the paradox says: it’s only because of the first good that the second is possible. So a balanced view, both informed and non-partisan, is proposed: know the culture you are investigating, but also be very aware of your own culture to catch yourself making impositions or ‘projections’ in your interpretations. Kant’s self must transcend reality and yet be real. An axis can be an absolute point of reference only because it lies in the co-ordinate system it establishes.

So in anthropology we have a way of being fair, and knowing what we’re talking about at the same time. Another attempt to be fair is the argument-oriented culture of analytic philosophy. I once came back from a meeting of the Oxford Philosophical Society, surprised at how aggressive, even vindictive, the discussion had been. My tutor, Roger Teichmann, “Philosophical argument is after all basically a form of fighting”. Truer words I did not hear in the course of my studies! The high place given to arguments in analytic philosophy stems from the same respect for objectivity, or fairness that Kant had. If we can prove that our opponents must also accept our position, then we have something objective. If your friends support you, so what? They’re your friends, that’s what they’re supposed to do. But if your enemies will accept what you say then you have a good argument. Even those who do not wish to accept our view must accept it. Objectivity is when you have something which can force people, ‘compel’ them, enchain them.

Here, as in the example of the anthropologist, fairness is fundamentally being contrasted to desire. On the one hand—in spite of our enemy’s desire to defeat us, he must accept our argument. On the other hand—we seek to catch ourselves imposing our wishes, partialities on our understanding, we seek to go beyond desire altogether. (The English idiom ‘I’m partial to…’ also suggests the connection between desire and partiality, one-sidedness, unfairness.) However, in the case of the balanced anthropologist we are self-critical in our effort to be balanced. In ‘fighting’ against an opponent in some argument we do not criticize ourselves, and do not give anything to our opponent. We remain on one side, partisan and mean-spirited. Hence the futility of philosophical disputes. “Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. It is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than to convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than
love.” (Martin Luther King Jr.)

It seems to me that to reach a deeper understanding of age-old philosophical debates we need the equivalent of non-violence in philosophy.

Hegel developed Kant’s thoughts on fairness—to arrive at a true understanding of yourself as Spirit, you have to go through a stage of ‘losing yourself’ in material things. To get an understanding of yourself as an Ionian, try going native in Athens. You’ll come to a deeper understanding of yourself as a foreigner. Many artists, for example, go through this ‘dialectic’. They feel the artist is somehow above the material world. Yet if they are to really create they must know their material inside out. Know how the clay responds, the properties of paints, the behavior of light (it’s wonderful to observe how much European art was influenced by optics, physics.) The real artist knows his material very, very well, in order to shape it. Our Greek adjudicator should be fluent with local problems, yet able to rise above partisanship. Spirit exists to shape the material.

Hegel’s ‘myth’ is also a set of philosophical variations on the theme of the prodigal son—to become grateful towards his parents, the son had to leave for a time. Children have to acquire independence of their parents, come under other influences, to have a healthy relationship with them. To know someone, e.g. your parent, you have to get some perspective, some distance. This is part of the meaning of the phrase ‘Can’t see the woods for the trees’. It’s not just about detail and an overview, but about being lost because of lack of perspective. This is also part of the metaphor of absolute and relative as axes and co-ordinate points and one reason why philosophy is the love of wisdom. We constantly practice our wisdom, rediscovering its value. We get some distance to come back together. We ever, ever break up, to make up, make up.

Definitions

Knowledge is True, Justified, Belief. Sometimes philosophers say that’s a definition. What do we assume about philosophy when we use, dispute or prove definitions, like the definition of knowledge? What is the point of definitions?

1: The First View.

They may serve as a ‘starting point’ for a discussion—a favorite term of Aristotle, especially in pedagogy—something to get the ball rolling. The ensuing discussion may enlighten the various participants on various points without their coming to any agreement as to ‘the correct definition’. This may seem to limit the role of definitions. In the Socratic dialogues they are treated even less respectfully—

2 See the credits of Spike Lee’s 1989 film, Do the Right Thing, 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks, Universal City Studios, 1989.
definitions are proudly enunciated only to be humbled by Socrates. At best, definitions are Popper’s ‘bold mistakes’. Each Socratic dialogue begins with some colleague of Socrates proposing a definition—and ends in exasperation, ataraxia, or some such state of mind. This may encourage skeptics—‘all definitions, truth etc. are relative’—but we can give another reading. The real message might be: “Reality is beyond any definition. Words are limited, though the skillful may show the limitation of words with their use.” They serve to serve a turn upon themselves. Wittgenstein threw away his ladder after climbing up. The purpose of words is to reach silence; the purpose of silence is to cultivate speech.

2: The Second View.

Or, definitions may be viewed as, not the beginning but the goal of a philosophical debates. This idea often looks like a form of philosophical bad faith. Many philosophers have seemed to have believed that although the realist-absolutist…/relativist-ideal… debate has been going on for centuries, there will be a clear winner one day and one side will get buried in the history of philosophy courses. This completely anti-inductive conclusion—we’ll look at induction in a moment—has a more subtle and a less subtle version. The less subtle version: philosophical debates may have continued for a long time, but we are merely awaiting the killer argument, which will make one side, realist or relativist, the winner. The first coming was the beginning of the philosophical questions (in Greece, let’s say) and the second coming will be the winning argument. And it’s winner takes all here—only the eventual winners of the marathon philosophical debate will continue to be the stuff of serious philosophy courses (which will thereafter cease to involve debate at all?!) This view denies what Hegel would say about definitions—the opposing ‘side’ (or sides) is (or are) essential to the meaning of your position, as the metaphor ‘side’ (e.g. of a coin) suggests. The more subtle view: The ‘positions’ in a debate shape each other—any more refined version of ‘realism’ may be viewed as a more refined version of ‘relativism’, which phrase we choose being a merely verbal question. This subtler version blends into the third view of definition.

3: The Third View.

This view is pragmatic. Definitions are a loose organization of good ideas on related topics. ‘If you’re thinking about knowledge, have a think about truth’ etc. The search engines on the Internet work in a similar way. The links between various concepts provided by (philosophical) definitions are especially useful for students, designers of courses, syllabi, university department planners etc. They

3 See Ravi Shankar’s lecture Buddha, Manifestation of Silence, Art of Living Foundation, 1996.
establish the status quo of the ‘school’—in this school we consider questions of truth very closely to questions of justification. In that school they consider questions of artistic truth paramount…etc. After a student has come to a deeper understanding of, say, knowledge, she may feel that some other concepts are also relevant—she starts to have original ideas. Libraries are parallel to the organization provided by definition-classifications, and indeed one philosopher—John Dewey—is the author of a classification system widely used in libraries today.

There is a classic trilogy in Vedic philosophy, which says that like the traditionally good story we always need a Beginning (Creative aspect/Brahman), Middle (Sustaining aspect/Vishnu) and End (Destructive aspect/Shiva). There’s no reason to decide on one of the aspects of definitions over the others. So, is Knowledge is True, Justified, Belief?

Truth

One of the three views of definitions sees them as the goal of philosophy. This approach is parallel to a certain interpretation of knowledge—knowledge is something revealed in debate, there are winners and losers. Many tenets on the same topic may seem meaningful, but all but one is completely wrong. (There are implications for philosophical thoughts about the relationship—or lack of relationship—between meaning and truth.) A contrasting view of knowledge may be developed from Davidson⁴. Wherever disagreement is clear enough to allow for sustained discussion, there must be a substantial body of agreement. Disagreement, debate is always on the periphery. Wars are fought both on and for the common turf.

The idea that the title, the ‘trophy’, of knowledge will go to the winner of the competition between rival views evolved from philosophers in whose work illusions play a key role, as in Plato and Descartes. There is no degree of truth in their examples; we are either witnessing reality or a mere passing show. Truth—the first condition of knowledge—is thus understood in contrast to something devoid of truth, devoid of honesty anyway—a lie (the possibility of lying absolutely was explored in Greece in the liar paradox). So truth has a very moral tinge. But truth has many aspects. This moral aspect stands in contrast to conceptions of truth based on ‘artistic truth’, and to what we would call the ethics of social and economic life (rather than the morality of social life) where being true to your words, keeping your word is as important as speaking in accordance with the facts as existent and known.

In terms of analytic philosophy, we can observe a parallel contrast between two conceptions of meaning. One—explored by Paul Grice—links meaning to intentions, the meaning of your words is the intention you express with them.

⁴ See Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, Oxford University Press, 1986, especially the essays Radical Interpretation and On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme.
Another conception links meaning to facts—e.g. John McDowell’s book *Mind and World*\(^5\)—or their slightly more Platonic variety—‘propositions’. Emphasizing facts we lay more emphasis on the past and present, emphasizing intentions we lay more emphasis on the future. In a similar way, we may make a distinction between two approaches to truth—the more ‘moral’ and the more ‘ethical’. Lying is more connected to the facts as they stand (important in the correspondence theory), whereas not being true to your words is more connected to intentions, strength of purpose and represents a lack of coherence in your words and deeds. A coherence, or ‘interpretative’, theory of truth may seem morally lax, but it explains some cases better. Let’s suppose a new teacher at the school gives a lot of grade ‘E’s’ without knowing that none of the other teachers ever give grades lower than ‘C’. He has, unwittingly, sent out the wrong message to the students concerned. The customs at the school have set some interpretative standards and it would not be a ‘true’ message to give less than a ‘D’. ‘E’ has a meaning beyond its numerical definition. It means: “You’re an exceptionally bad student, you should reconsider your choice of school…” Even numbers are subject to this kind of ‘interpretation’.

**Justification**

When I mention the ‘analytic’ tradition I mean more than the schools of philosophy beginning with Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, but something that includes aspects of European philosophy stretching back to Socrates. Justification has been treated in a similar way to the concept of definition and truth. We have already mentioned the ‘anti-inductive’ view of the history of philosophy. This is that a ‘winner’ will emerge in all the worthwhile philosophical debates, philosophy thereby finally achieving clear progress, attaining the status of science etc. This illusion may be sustained by the ‘success’ of modern logic—justification for philosophers is taking its paradigm from modern logic. Because proofs in logic are absolute in a way they never are in philosophy. The propositions are ‘on the table’—all are assumed to have been given a standard interpretation. Contradiction is absolute, undeniable, because the propositions are given completely unequivocal content—‘\(p\)’—and negation is thereby ‘empty’. The contrary of ‘\(p\)’ is ‘\(\neg p\)’. This represents disagreement as sharing exactly the same conception of the issue—\(p\) is the same in \(p\) and \(\neg p\)—but simply giving it the opposite truth-value. Real disagreement is completely different. When anyone has an opinion about something, and is against some other opinion, it almost always means they simply understand that point of view better and don’t understand the other, or understand it much less.

If the ‘logical explanation’ were an accurate account of debating and discussion—let alone other kinds of communication and persuasion—then debating and proving would be an uncreative activity. To contradict someone would be the

reaction of the adolescent—mere refusal, sheer bloody-mindedness. ‘What do you think of my idea’—‘It’s wrong’. Thanks very much. Convincing someone in the logical scheme is not a matter of adding to their knowledge, merely forcing them to drop some propositions they have accepted or making them discover they ‘already’ accept some others.

A simple analogy may help here. You may check the construction of someone’s house without adding anything to it at all. Some state bureaucrats may indeed have this kind of work. They check all the support beams, walls etc. and may conclude that it will fall. Or you may conclude it is safe. Their role is either sustaining or destructive but not creative. Logic, like the bureaucrat, checks out the reasoning. Logic plays only the first two kinds of role, sustaining and destructive and it’s capacity to play a sustaining role—to confirm the adequacy of reasoning—was dealt a serious blow by the incompleteness theorems. Real life persuasion is more generous—e.g. Nietzsche has a famous argumentative ability. He first makes a much better position for his opponent and only then destroys it. First you give, and then you take away! (This is the opposite of attacking a ‘straw man’, a phrase often used in analytic philosophy.)

We can also look into the role of premises in formal logic and how that contrasts with other kinds of argument. Without doubt modern logic immensely clarified proofs in mathematics. Yet even here logic cannot account for mathematical invention. In maths revealing a premise may be a very creative moment, not just finding something already there. Once there was just geometry, then someone saw something as a premise—came to see something as particular which had previously been thought to be general. A presupposition came to be a premise. Now there are geometries. Euclidean geometry makes a set of definite assumptions from the perspective of our now wider mathematics. ‘Logical argument’ checks up on assumptions, if it finds an error that’s definitely an error, but it can’t uncover premises the way a mathematician does.

In philosophical discussion we have analogous situations. When shared premises of rivals are revealed, when the common ground comes into view the combat subsides a little. Religious thinkers and physicists may think they are archenemies, but they are the two kinds of people who go on and on about the importance of the beginning of the universe. That’s why they can be enemies, because they agree on so much, as Davidson says. One task for philosophy is then to make peace between warring faculties of the university (or maybe also to provoke a new battle). In terms of formal logic we look to find the p which is common to the p and the not-p and thus reduces the opposition to an empty, or ‘adolescent’ one.
Proof, arguments

If some argument has been going on for long enough, it seems fair enough to ask: Why should I get involved? Or at least: Why should I take sides? This will not immediately satisfy anyone stuck in the middle of the battlefield. Sometimes we have to say not ‘yes’ or ‘no’ but: ‘That’s the wrong question’. We ask what logicians might call a ‘meta-question’: Why should I answer that question? What assumptions am I making by even answering that question. Let’s exercise our right to remain silent a little.

Analytic philosophers spend a lot of time in papers presenting their view or ‘position’ and its advantages over some other position. What is the justification for these justifications? Presenting your view with a lot of arguments to defeat your opponents might seem an unqualified good, a rise in the level of reason, even of freedom, democracy. But in fact it’s quite a parochial phenomenon, probably issuing from ancient Greek, especially Athenian culture, which has been such a paradigm for Europe. It subtly assumes that the philosopher is not only the one creative enough to think of some idea worthy of our consideration, but also the only competent enough to decide about it. We are being secretly robbed of our role as readers, adjudicators, the electorate. This smacks of oligarchy. In the time of many of the great philosophers, Athens was a small state, supported by imperial relationships to other states and slavery. So a few gentlemen of leisure, their wives stuck at home, could be said to represent enough of the free population that any proposal could be argued out at length. The population as such did not test out the ideas and then vote, in mass elections for ‘representatives’ as we know them. In modern democracies, for all their faults, there is a useful kind of empiricism at work—the politicians present their ideas, and we can ponder their use to us privately, check them for ourselves ‘in the privacy of our own homes’, and then report back at election time. Whereas the free population of Athens merged with the elites and was thus constantly under scrutiny.

Philosophy journals are full of articles written as if we still lived in ancient Athens. Is it not a little patronizing to the reader to carry on all the arguments for and against positions (as if anyone ever changed sides in those wars…)? It’s like saying to the reader: We’ll present our positions and decide for you which one is the best. Wouldn’t it be more democratic to just put forward the positions and let the reader decide it’s relative merits? Put them forward clearly enough so that at least other academics from other fields could understand them. Rarely are philosophical articles written in such a way that even a chemist could easily catch a hold of the ideas (e.g. their implications for our understanding of chemistry.) If papers were plain presentations of a new idea, without all the paraphernalia and jargon demonstrating the relative merits over other ‘positions’ (realist-internality-naturalist…) perhaps the chemist could really tell us whether that’s a good idea from the chemistry perspective or not. The so-called ‘arguments’ make papers
highly specialized, highly inaccessible to external fair assessment, highly undemocratic, highly scholastic.

Maybe in the life of one reader the coherence theory of truth explains a lot, maybe for another the correspondence theory rings more bells, maybe for a third—both. Among musicians for some Beethoven has given them more, for others Mozart. But to take seriously the debate as to whether Mozart or Beethoven has more value is to adopt a basically anti-democratic politic. Both have raised the awareness of generations of listeners, indeed whole cultures. To compare them is like comparing the value of the lives of their listeners. We need to give up this need to choose one over another, to have ‘positions’ as such at all, to have one ‘theory’. Science departments are full of theories. Many philosophers and the odd scientist have tried to show these are all one theory—like socio-biologists try to reduce sociology to biology, literary theorists to ‘texts’ etc. etc. but there’s no evidence to support this scientific speculation at all (and is philosophy just science where there’s no evidence yet?) These thinkers purport to respect science above all, yet their thesis is not based on science at all. The number of theories propounded has in no way gone down through history. This ‘reductionism’ is blind faith of a sort that would embarrass fundamentalists.

Belief

‘Belief’ seems to be appropriate for situations of doubt—I believe him, even if no one else does. This fits with the role of beliefs in learning. When there are a lot of beliefs we are at an intermediate level. Musicians think about the notes they play, about the structure—like mathematicians about proofs—when they are a bit stuck as to what to do. When we are fluent—in a language, say—belief is less important. The typical philosopher’s retort that they account for the ‘structure’ of the knowledge doesn’t convince. Belief exists in real life; it’s an empirical stage on the road to mastery of the topic.

Weber said that whatever the achievements of other mathematical cultures, they could not rival western maths because of the lack of formal proofs. Yet when I was in mathematics lectures as an undergraduate, the geometry lecturer was in awe

---

6 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930, especially the author’s introduction. Weber’s remarks on ‘rationalism’ are a generalization of his ideas on Protestantism as behind the “successes” of modern capitalism. His writings on Protestantism are very balanced—he sees many plusses and minuses in the Protestant influence. For example many of the ‘rationalizing aspects’ of Protestant culture as regards lending money, or labor rationalization (today ‘labor rationalization’ means simply to fire people) seem to put ‘rationality’ simply at the service of greed. The ‘traditional worker’ of the middle ages model was satisfied with his station and security. The modern worker starts to **think**, to calculate: If I earned so much in one day, how much could I earn in three days, with subordinates… The reasoning is paradigmatically counterfactual and linked to dissatisfaction. But when it comes to East versus West Weber is less fair-minded, the West is always the best in some absolute way.
of Indian mathematicians who had much earlier discovered geometric laws—using only pictures. For the mathematician this is real genius, real knowledge. Not only did such mathematicians prove the theorems but they expanded our conception of proof at the same time. The familiar ‘formalized’ proofs are for slow-witted students to learn step by step, and also to make it easier to fish out any possible mistakes.

So belief seems an inappropriate vehicle for knowledge, but again it depends on the cases. The philosophers who most influenced the tradition thought a lot about doubt, uncertainty and illusion. So it’s natural they would have a place for something which is common to uncertainty in the definition of knowledge. So at least you know you’re not dreaming. Perhaps this is not the only approach. If you drive amazingly tentatively and slowly, you’ll be so tense and annoying to other divers that a) you’ll probably never have a serious accident, b) you’ll almost certainly have small ones. Many drivers are in fact like this—the Cartesian drivers. Or we could be so relaxed and confident that we’d probably get out of any danger we might run into. But when we hit something it likely to be a right off—the Popperian drivers with their bold errors. Let’s be sensible but confident.

Knowledge

Positivism said: judge philosophy by scientific standards. Ian Hacking often judges philosophical ideas in this spirit—in an empirical way. Rather than asking is this the (absolutely) right theory or not, he asks which kinds of case does this theory explain well, and which not. The Oxford ‘ordinary language philosopher’ Austin said that post-Aristotelian metaphysics is a good explanation—of medium sized dry goods. In a non-dogmatic way, we can learn from science’s standards, as when we wonder whether anyone will ever win the realist/relativist debate. So the true-justified-belief conception fits well with the cases and cultures it evolved with. Many interpretations of objectivity are possible, one being implicit in the history of science of Kuhn and Feyerabend—when a theory fails by its own standards, then we may say it has suffered objective criticism.

This is neither relativism, nor realism. It is a good explanation, this is something ‘normative’ not arbitrary, but if it is to be objective we should know its limits, know other things about knowledge too. This is not realism: there is no tablet of stone awaiting discovery, somewhere in the North Pole, where it is written that Knowledge is JTB. We shift the question of legitimacy from the question of the ‘real’ existence of some objects, to the ‘real’ world where there are scientists looking for money from funding bodies, laws of states to be justified to those who do not respect them, atoms to be known to help people deal with nature and cultures to understand to cultivate peace. Stipends, laws, natural disasters, penal

---

codes and resolution of conflict are all things which have normative significance without there needing to be objects corresponding to them on the model of medium-sized dry goods. Realism about atoms and chairs is true, but not all that important.

The true, justified, belief definition fits some kinds of knowledge very well. It’s good for questions suited to debate, where there are clear winners and losers. The debates of police involved in criminal investigations, or of archeologists arguing over inconclusive evidence fit well. (This case clearly shows how scientific decisions are made in situations of unclarity, when there is lack of evidence. Or to express the same point differently—it is in the nature of ‘evidence’ to be incomplete. In archeology at some point evidence is the conclusion—e.g. we discover that such and such people had iron objects, then we don’t need to prove from other ‘evidence’ that they must have had it. This reveals one of the false assumptions made by the induction paradox.) They are not situations where the decisions flowing from the debate will have an influence on the political and social landscape itself, thus on the rules.

One way to procrastinate and avoid progress in any activity is to label anything challenging as ‘not my problem’. Skills and talents don’t seem to fit the JTB definition, so they can be labeled-away as ‘know-how’. This is disingenuous. One aspect of know-how which also applies to more intellectual knowledge is the sense of timing which wise thoughts have. You may already ‘ know’ that the post-office closes early today, but if you ‘realize’ this as you’re walking past you’ll be able to sort out the mail faster. The knowledge comes up just when you need it. You don’t bother your head reminding yourself about it all day, it just comes to you—just the way geniuses describe inspiration. When we’re reading philosophy books we all ‘ know’ a lot of things from our studies, but there’s a depth of knowledge or wisdom exhibited when we begin to notice those same issues in different unexpected places, where they’re not explicitly mentioned. Correspondence theories deliberately avoid a role for the interaction of our statements about the world with the world; for fear that this would make truth ‘relative’ (they must have a tough time explaining Marxism…). Yet there is a correspondence aspect to the good timing which wisdom requires. It’s not the correspondence of timeless statements to timeless facts, but the fact that the thoughts come up at the right time, the corresponding moment—it’s no good realizing the answer to the maths problem as you’re walking out of the exam room. The word we use in English for getting the right idea at the right time is very instructive—‘realizing’. We realize our knowledge, become an example of it. Depth of knowledge changes the course of your life, it doesn’t permit hypocrisy.
Philosophy—the love of knowledge

Although the Greek word for love appears on the covers of almost all philosophy books, love per se has been the interest of relatively few philosophers. It embarrasses the intellect a little. And yet if it were put it to the philosopher à la Plato:

Oracle: What can be proved?
The philosopher: everything that is true.
Oracle: Could someone prove to you that they loved you?
Philosopher: If it were true, then yes.
Oracle: If you doubted it, they could prove it to you?
Philosopher: Yes, why not.
Oracle: Let’s put it like this. Proof assumes a distance between the disputants. You are against your opponent. This is proof’s interpretation of truth. We want to be objective, so it’s better to speak against someone than with them. If you were their friend, how could we trust what you say about them? The goal, therefore, is to defeat them, force them, the enemy, to accept your words, rather than find a common language as love does. In proof there is no freedom. Love assumes there is no distance. If you had experienced the love of someone, could any proof be strong enough to bring doubt to your mind. Or if in doubt, could any proof equal the experience of that love? And if any ‘proof’ did manage this, couldn’t that only come from the mouth of your beloved, and wouldn’t that mean that, through their words, you came to experience their love, something beyond their words, because you participated in it as you listened. Experiencing makes it so. Proof can never make it so.

The philosopher falls silent

Requests for proof of love are some evidence that love is absent—ipso facto, as the Romans would say. The very fact that the question is asked is more important than the answer to the question, more important and significant than continuing the argument. Being precedes essence, as Sartre would say. Or Oxfordians might recognize it as parallel to Austinian logic—when saying makes it so. (If asking about love means it’s not fully present, then that would be ‘Saying makes it not so’.)

We may distinguish, as Russell put it, between knowledge that and knowledge by acquaintance. Knowledge second-hand and knowledge first-hand, as Russell didn’t put it. A skilful art teacher may direct you to an appreciation of beauty in a painter, given what you already understand and appreciate. (Classical rhetoric was the art which persuaded the particular listener to a particular understanding, but the

---

word and the discipline fell into disrepute⁹. Appreciation is more than the words can convey (Kant’s appreciation (!) of the limits of proof)—it comes when you experience what the words pointed to but fell short of. Words fall short of the experience just as premises must fall short of any interesting conclusion; creativity has an element ex nihilo. (The skeptics challenged our proofs—if they are to teach anything they must exceed the sum of the premises). We may train students in the philosophical canon, but original, completely new, ideas will only appear in a few heads. We don’t know when or where. There’s no algorithm for it—the experience happens when the talking stops. Mathematics students know that they often solve exam problems just after the exam has finished—when they’ve stopped trying to solve it. Words are the directions; the experience is the destination, the analogy of silence.

Progress

Has philosophy made progress? Is there anything we talk about today which the Greeks didn’t? Are any of our answers different? Yes and no. And for this fence-sitter of an answer, here’s a proof, an etymological one. Greek vocabulary was, around, 3000 words. Today’s languages have, let’s say, 8000 words (though Shakespeare used around 40 000…). Etymology teaches us that great ideas, great thinkers, great events each leave a tiny trace in the language, a handful of words each. Now, our translations need regular updating—every fifty years or so—to be in a natural, a living language. So all the time Aristotle translations use more and more words and new aspects of Aristotle appear. Is this creating new Aristotle, or finding hidden meanings? Is the relativist or the realist right? Both. Translation is not such a creative endeavor—the demands of writing well in contemporary speech, and the goal of fidelity to Aristotle are very great. Good translation is bound by both. Yet the fifty years since the last translation will have left their ideas in the language too. If they were good enough ideas to be worth commemorating, that is. Sometimes the translator will himself have to be very inventive to satisfy these constraints well. Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet begins with a dialogue which ends up with triple pun on the word ‘choler’. The Polish translator found a double pun, which changes one meaning from ‘coal carrier’ to ‘painting carrier’. Yet he has done well to preserve this much. Invention, preservation and loss.

There is a parallel discussion in legal philosophy—do judges ‘find’ the legal answers (out there in the courts of Platonic heaven) or do they create the law by fiat, by what they decide (which satisfies the relativist, here known as the ‘legal

---

positivist, who wants to keep a place for creativity, the expansion of the law)? Anyone who has been in such a position will know that justice, just decision making must also take into account the impact of the decision itself. It will set a precedent. That particular judge will have to consider the particular decisions he is going to have to make in the future, and the integrity he may lose if he collides with decisions of the past. Once you go down some roads, there’s no going back. Certain future possibilities may disappear, like the movie ‘Back to the Future’. That’s the element of destruction or loss in decisions. We mentioned above the aspect of destruction in real decision-making, e.g. legal decision-making. We see how simplistic the problem of induction is without this perspective. (Similarly to the simplistic presentation of the Greek paradox of obtaining a finite sum from an infinite series. This was later to be mathematicized and solved.) There’s always a choice between one theory and another—it’s not absolute confirmation or disconfirmation, in a theoretical vacuum. The tortoise is not racing against himself. Secondly the establishment of one theory over another will influence the interpretation of the data, which data are found (not to say that this may not reverse former decisions). So there is no list of E1, E2, E3… of pieces of evidence for a generalized version of E, something that can be formulated in abstraction from the theories in dispute.

Has philosophy made progress? Anthony Kenny gave a wise answer to this question. Philosophy...seems uniquely attractive in that it combines being a discipline in which, as in science, discoveries are made, with being, like literature, a humane discipline in which great works do not become obsolete with age. We have pondered long enough on the negative reasons why some things in philosophy haven’t changed—like the quarrels of children. This idea of a humane discipline which does not age is more flattering. Literature is not a quarrelsome thing, yet it has not aged. Neither has philosophy. We might have assumed that Darwinian mechanisms would just continue, and that people in their thinking would just continue improving so that Aristotle would come, some day, to seem primitive. But then we thought that as you go faster and faster, you continue to have the possibility of moving relatively faster. It turned out that light’s speed is absolute. ‘Humane’ thought moves at the speed of light. How is this possible? Well, let’s ask how it is possible to compare ourselves with Aristotle and decide that on some question we have made definite progress. We must be able to separate Aristotle’s thought on some question from ours, compare them and see ours as a better answer to the same question. If we take two great artists, this would not be possible. Each great artist involves us too deeply and too originally to compare them. Of course, sometimes we say ‘Oh that artist is just a second rate Picasso.’ In this case comparison is possible. When we view the lesser painter’s work we ‘see’ someone

---


11 Steve Pike, Philosophers.
copying Picasso—there is a separation because of the artist’s lack of sincerity. Whereas each great artist has his or her own place, they are ‘incomparable’. Mozart and Bach are too fulfilling for us to be able to abstract ourselves from our experience of them enough to find some common yardstick by which to measure them. With a great philosopher we are afforded an experience of the truths expressed. We are one with Aristotle as we read such great passages. There is no competition. There is a unique view of a truth. And then this experience is an event. ‘Every understanding is a re-understanding’ as Gadamer says. Which also implies that there may be periods or people for whom Aristotle says little. Just as there were generations when Mozart did not speak to many. You cannot listen to all of the music all of the time.

This is related to another age-old remark—the relative requires the absolute. If people are relatively good or relatively bad, then getting better is an absolute good. The perfection is in the perfecting. The river is the same river because it is moving.

Another aspect of what we may call absolute experience is touched on in Austin. Some things become true by being said to be so—they are self-confirming. If, thanks to a great writer, we experience again the idea ‘I am free’, then this is something self-confirming, self-realizing, beyond measure or checking. When we experience this, it becomes true. We have to realize knowledge, not just know it second-hand. If we experience again that “Knowledge is Truth”, then Knowledge and Truth dawn in us in the form of a thought which deeply affects us. We become an instantiation of that truth. Contrast the poor despotic King who would make whatever he wanted true by his decrees—if I say so, it is so. I am the law. Here is the opposite of self-realization—other-realization, force as opposed to freedom. Just as only great painters afford experience which take away all comparisons, so only great thoughts afford this freedom.

Kenny also mentions that science gets out-dated. Yet similar questions may come up in a scientific context and in a philosophical context (it’s not so long since ‘physics’ was called ‘natural philosophy’). Feyerabend mentions the case of spontaneous generation. This was ‘refuted’ by science, then re-established many centuries later as a necessary step in evolution theory. This is the idea in its scientific aspect—it may drop out of interest for a while, not be part of the dominating school. But for philosophy the idea never drops out, this is why progress in philosophy is in some sense lacking, though in another sense the progress of natural science is something superficial. In philosophy, the idea of spontaneous generation, or creation ex nihilo must always find a place as long as we believe there are truly original ideas, for example. Ideas which no one has thought of before, and which come to shape our reality.

---

12 Paul Feyerabend Against Method, New Left Books, 1975. Unfortunately, Feyerabend presents many of his most important examples—e.g. Chinese Medicine, astrology, the burning of witches—in a flippant or highly politicized way. I doubt that many philosophers who knew little about these cases could come to understand their significance from his writings.
I mentioned the Vedic tripartite division of creation, sustenance, and destruction. We can apply this to creation itself. Creativity involves a creative aspect—what is new to the world, creation ‘ex nihilo’ (cf. the idea of ‘ether’, currently in disrepute in the West). Creativity also upholds a tradition, e.g. of a genre like still life painting, or the endless re-painting that icons go through, or the much commented natural aging of the ‘great masters’. And creation also has its destructive aspect, as when a scientific theory produces a ‘crucial experiment’ which pushes a rival theory into the sidelines, usually for lack of funding for both theories.

The ‘same’ idea, however, may be more or less deeply understood, as witnessed in the different practical applications which the ideas lead to at different times. Democritus did not build any atom bomb though he wrote a lot about atoms, and still today we would be unable to build the pyramids as they were thousands of years ago. Another example is astrology. This has languished in the back pages of women’s magazines (for the academic, a fate worse than refutation), and yet what with the developments of hormone theory, it may soon make an official comeback. Hormone theory says that women have monthly cycles (in accordance with the moon) and men, daily cycles—an idea recently popularized as the ‘male period’. Which is to say that men follow the cycle of the sun, all in accordance with ancient, even prehistoric, sciences.

### Induction

1. Popper

Popper’s most famous idea: the point of scientific speculation was to make brave mistakes. This fits with progress as we observe it in pedagogical situations. There are two extremes, or ‘types’ (types=extremes, we could call that a theory of concepts and their relation to reality, hence the word ideology—the ones who go to extremes) of students. There are extremely cautious, let’s say language students who hate making mistakes. They try to work out everything ‘in their mind’ (a neo-behavioral theory of speech and action—mind is the preparation for speech and action), before they say anything. They usually score low marks for fluency, one of the basic aspects of speech. Then there are those, the pragmatists, who just want to get the message across, who make the same mistakes over and over, pay little attention to corrections and get low marks for accuracy. Popper is saying that in science—probably science as philosophers dream about it—we have a tendency to see progress on an analogy with the cautious student. He says instead: doesn’t matter if you make mistakes, if you are saying more. No good having true, justified beliefs about banalities. This also suggests a naivety in the realist conception of science honing in on the facts—in fact the more knowledge we
acquire, the more problems are thrown up, the more mysteries we have to solve. The world doesn’t get less mysterious but more mysterious. That’s why Newton said he was paddling at the ocean’s shore. And that’s why Socrates said the one thing he knew was that he knew nothing.

Popper’s idea seems to remove the urgency of the problem of induction (which is all you can do with most skeptical questions. The problem with the hedonist’s paradox—What could satisfy my desire for happiness?—is that the question is its own wrong answer. The presence of a strong desire is a lack of happiness.

How do we ever know that some general statement is justified by particular instances? Popper tells us—that’s not what science theories are about. We want our new theory to make correct predictions, sure, but part and parcel of making correct predictions on interesting topics (what makes the theory interesting) is that you’re breaking new ground. If you’re really breaking new ground then the body of your theory must needs be inadequate. If it were adequate, what new ground could you be breaking? A perfect theory requires progress. Progress requires new elements discovered. If they are genuinely new elements, the theory as it stands will be erroneous in important ways. Therefore—back to the drawing board. No perfect theory. We like theories which open ‘whole new cans of worms’. The Humeans have got their logic wrong, in the deeper, everyday sense of ‘logic’.

Some people say: look at what computers have changed in our lives. Soon computers will be doing everything! Sci-fi filmmakers and philosophers take this a bit more seriously than everyone else. Perhaps it could really happen? But actually computers give us the opportunity to expand human activities even more, ever farther out of the reach of mechanization or computerization. Computers, just like the machines of the industrial revolution, release people from banal duties; leaving them freer to get on with more human tasks, create more things which computers couldn’t. At every point in history, when there’s a great advance, there is a moment of fear accompanying that—‘Maybe the invention will take over?’ The Frankenstein complex. Reductionism in philosophy is a case in point.

2. The view from nowhere

Let’s continue in the Popperian way—not quite answering the skeptic’s question. If in any proof, of any theory, you present the evidence for your theory, new purported law, whatever. If there is to be a genuinely creative aspect of your ‘new’ law—as with all great science theories—then there must be more ideas there than before. The conclusion must exceed the grounds for it (buildings are not just the foundations). That’s a pre-condition of the expansion of knowledge, ideas, etc. Kant in many ways is a kind of pragmatist with his
transcendental arguments, he says: look very carefully at some things we really know (e.g. there’s more ideas around now than there were in the stone age), even quite everyday things. We mentioned above that creation has an ethereal aspect—there must be a sense in which spontaneous generation is true. The Humean asks: How can the premises add up to a bigger conclusion. The answer: Nothing where that didn’t happen could be an interesting argument. How can a team be more than the members who make it up? How can the infinite sum be ‘less’ than the sum of its parts?

3. The skeptic’s argument

A very old paradox about logic ran as follows: if your conclusion contains no new knowledge, something beyond your premises, then you haven’t proved anything worthwhile. Your argument is trivial. But if the conclusion does go beyond the premises, then your argument is invalid. The paradox of induction is a particular case of this paradox. Paradoxes express our ideological tendencies—we want it all, to have our cake and eat it (I imagine this expression comes from the practice of giving when it’s you’re birthday, so that (e.g. in Germany) when it’s your day drinks are on you. Ideology is when you’re ruled by the creatures of the mind, the Frankensteins, as we said above. People thought of the conditions of good arguments—that they be valid and that they expand our knowledge—then they make the ideas the measure of the reality. ‘I want my arguments to be perfectly valid AND to expand our knowledge in important way’. Well, you could spend the rest of your days looking for a perfect circle in nature. Or alternatively you could accept that there is a contradiction between expanding knowledge and logical validity, which is exactly why they are both important (this is why in the East paradoxes have always been regarded as the highest expression of wisdom—each half of a paradox ‘proves’ the importance of the other.) Then you could work on the ‘idealizing’ science of formal logic, expand our understanding of valid arguments, accepting that any argument which fitted this pattern could only have limited value in expanding knowledge. Or you could work on other scientific ideas, using arguments like inductive arguments, accepting their lack of formal validity. Nature suggested the idea of a perfect circle without possessing one. That’s why machines and theories with perfect circles are so useful for examining nature. Because it’s like nature, but a bit different. Machines have to have some relationship to human bodily mechanisms if it’s to serve to relieve us of some laborious tasks like lifting boxes. It has to fit in with society as it looks. But it may also expand our possibilities, transform society—like the industrial revolution. Logic, especially in its influence became an important paradigm, at least for scientists. Give and take.

Let’s put the skeptic’s paradox in a discursive mould. Is knowledge teaching, as Aristotle thought? Do you have to be able to communicate
knowledge, if you are to really know it? This is a requirement of generosity on those who know, it's not just for you, but it exists to be passed on. Is knowledge like a statue—once the work is done, it will stand there for many centuries (but as long as the art restorers take care of it and the country defends the city from invading armies)? Or is it like physical fitness—you may reach a level in some sport, but you must constantly play, even to preserve the same level. Is knowledge for yourself or for others? In five minutes you’ll experience something new—how do we accommodate that new experience with our existing knowledge? Even to incorporate new experience we have to ‘teach ourselves’ what we ‘already knew’. To relive it, relearn it. It may teach us a new aspect of something we already knew, or challenge something we thought we knew. (We may have to add new justifications for our true beliefs to remain justified—justification need not be a once and for all matter). I know that from a medical level upwards through society, law, religion there are new phenomena to understand (there are new diseases, new social formations, new precedents...). But even in astronomy I suppose there are unprecedented events, and I recall that there have been ‘man-made’ elements added to Mendelev’s table. Our considerations on knowledge and philosophy have shown that this is always an aspect of knowledge. Knowledge is always an encounter. This is again to speak of knowledge as a relationship, one that needs to be taken care of. In Polish there are two natural words for knowledge—‘poznanie’ and ‘wiedza’. The first is a participle form ‘getting to know’. From the above it follows that this etymology is no coincidence.

Popper’s division of Context of Justification and Context of Discovery also seems to remove a presupposition of the induction paradox. Let’s put it a little differently, in accordance with another trilogy of ancient Indian philosophy—thought, speech and action. Suppose a funding body has to decide which university to invest in, the ‘evidence’ will typically be very far from computable—it will be many years before many of the research work is finished, before we can get concrete evidence of the success of the teaching in the subsequent careers of the graduates and so on. That’s the whole skill of being a person of action—to make decisions when there is no algorithm. E.g. A great investor—and Popper enthusiast—like George Soros will be able to estimate the impact of the investment on the confidence of the institution. This is the ‘saying makes it so factor’ or ‘reflexivity’, as Soros calls it13. You predict the impact of a possible decision in order to check if it’s a good decision (and a good theory that lies behind it). The induction paradox assumes that the predictions are also the confirmations.

That’s one set of reasons why we don’t often encounter intellectuals on the battlefield. Mixing up rationality of inference and rationality of decision making has had tragic consequences in military history. However, when someone is important, like the head of the International Monetary Fund, we

---

can see clearly how much responsibility we have for what we think. To take the most well known case, if Alan Greenspan thinks or even feels pessimistic or optimistic, that can have consequences for markets. John McDowell has also said we are responsible for what we think—thus taking a thesis from Kant’s moral philosophy—‘freedom is responsibility’—and with it interpreting Kant’s first critique thesis that concepts are a ‘spontaneous’ (i.e. free) faculty. Thinking and discussion is different when we are about to make a decision. Many political arguments get so agitated because the disputants seem to assume that at the end of the argument the winning idea will become policy of the Prime Minister. If you’re not the Prime Minister or one of his advisors, it’s more rational to think about the issues, sure, but not to feel such a great urgency to take sides, to come to a conclusion (unless a war is brewing, of course). This way you’re more open to other views, more likely to learn. Surely that’s rational too. Isn’t it tragic that some people say “All my life I’ve supported the Labour Party, always opposed the Conservative Party”? Can they be said to have thought at all? Of course quarrels, debates can be fun if you put them in their place; they’re very good for healthy democracies, especially at election time. In London, someone who pontificates on politics, or anything in public life without being engaged in it, is liable to be labeled an ‘Armchair-I-could-do-better-Merchant’. Surely reasonableness cannot simply consist in laziness.

One reaction to the discovery/justification division would be to say that there is such a thing as rationality, but it’s of little relevance to discovery. This seems to have been Feyrerabend’s anti-method line. There are ‘rules of thumb’, which sounds a bit like ‘second rate rules’. But this is not the right interpretation. If I know that I tend to feel pessimistic when the air pressure is very low, I can take this into account when estimating the reliability of my economic predictions of a certain date. This may be backed by real scientific understanding of the influence of pressure changes on hormones etc. Ayurvedic and Traditional Chinese Medicine (one of Feyerabend’s examples) furnish exhaustive accounts of the interrelations of anatomic and psychological phenomena. This is rationality at its highest level—knowledge of science coupled with sensitivity to yourself. Just as Hegel thought—self-knowledge implies and is implied by any real knowledge. The context of discovery—I may decide to give a lower priority to one hypothesis because the idea came to me when I had drunk three coffees, and I know that the ideas which come to me under the influence of caffeine tend to be shallow. This could be made deeper by my understanding of the workings of caffeine—or ignored for the same reason in some other case (e.g. it’s a low-pressure day, so the influence of coffee on my blood-pressure might just be normalizing.)

14 I’d like to thank Konrad Talmont-Kamiński for his thoughts on and around this topic.
Originality

Kenny says philosophy is so attractive because it both makes progress like science, has original new ideas which solve old problems, and at the same time is as eternal as literature. A deep understanding of originality joins these two aspects—progress and eternity—into one. The very meaning of the word 'originality' reveals this. To be original is to do something new, but is also to go back to the source, to the beginning. We have seen that an important part of knowledge missed in the True, Justified, Belief tradition is the fact that knowledge comes to the one who really knows at just the right time. He ‘realizes’ it again and again. This is also the difference between ‘knowing that’, something recalled, stored, in some sense always second-hand, and experiencing the same knowledge anew. This experience is indifferent to the novelty of what is known, it is experienced as if for the first time. Words which express knowledge are like the first words spoken on that topic. They are as if the first words spoken after silence.

Gratitude

‘Written silence’ was broken for the first time when the first great literatures appeared, the great religious works, epics, philosophical treatises. This explains why, with maturity, most philosophers come to appreciate the ‘classics’. The ideas are often expressed more deeply there, and the advantages of a modern presentation—its modern vernacular, greater systematic clarity—are superfluous for those who are deeply involved in the questions. The originality of great philosophers is indifferent to whether these are new ideas on the earth, or old truths experienced afresh. This is why the word ‘appreciation’ has such a sweet ambiguity—it can mean ‘gratitude’ or ‘cultivated awareness’. The awareness of beauty makes one grateful for things which have been experienced millions of times. Hence the classical definition of the philosopher as one ‘in wonder at existence’ ‘stunned by the creation’, speechless. Heidegger pondered this as a ‘question’—but it’s not a question, just simple gratitude. And hence the love that is present in philosophy. As the prodigal son learned, we never get bored with the ones who bore us, not for long, anyway, so philosophy never tires of its timeless questions. Whatever social changes have come, as a point of sociology, there is no doubt that the longest relationships remain the ones marked by love. And the same goes for the longest asked questions.

15 Besides the notes above, I’d like to express gratitude to four people who taught me more. To three professors of genius—John McDowell (cited already) and Camille Paglia (through their writings) and Marek Siemek. And to one enlightened yogi—Poojya Ravi Shankar.