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TRUTH AND PHILOSOPHY

KENNETH DORTER

The history of philosophy has been called such things as the graveyard, and crumbling ruins, of refuted systems. This should be of profound concern to us if only because we ourselves are always historical and inexorably incorporated into the history of philosophy, where, whether we call our philosophies systems or only positions, the same fate awaits us. We everywhere see the process accomplishing itself in the present as it did in the past. The traditions of two of the most influential philosophers of our time, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, have little but contempt for each other, and strong disagreement existed even between these thinkers and their equally eminent teachers, such as Husserl and Russell. So each of them already stands refuted in the eyes of most of his contemporaries, with no lack of arguments to demonstrate his shortcomings. As new philosophical positions come into the fore and the relative number of adherents to the present ones wanes, they will be considered as fully refuted as their predecessors. Thus only a naive optimism can laugh at the presumptions of the past without feeling the ironic sting of its own laughter.

The problem is both real and serious, manifesting itself in a circle as old as philosophy. When once we take philosophy seriously we thereby take seriously the possibility of the disclosure of truth; and the affirmation of truth, to be meaningful, must reject the denial of what it affirms. As philosophers, we therefore inevitably reject, on the basis of our disclosure of truth, the philosophies that disagree with us, as they, in turn, reject ours. It soon becomes evident that philosophers of equal intelligence, sincerity, and good will mutually reject one another's positions, which renders suspect the claim of any of them to truth. Thus our seriousness about truth and philosophy soon overcomes itself into its own negation: skepticism and mistrust of truth and philosophy. But skepticism is no more stable than conviction, for it itself becomes a conviction and assertion. A skeptic like Hume turns his skepticism into a philosophical doctrine while at the same time apologizing for this inconsistency, and the denier of truth insists on the truth of his denial (an irony by no means as innocuous and inessential as he would like to believe).

We look in vain for this circle to overcome itself in a dialectical elevation to a higher standpoint. Rather, it has been present since the Sophistic skepticism that accompanied the dawn of philosophy, and it is with us still. It is the inevitable consequence of the tension between the universality of human nature, which encourages us to believe that we all *ought* to be able to agree, and the multifarious variations among individuals, which render this "ought" incapable of accomplishment. We may accordingly decide either

that individuality ought to be overcome for the sake of universality or that universality is itself an illusion that ought to be overcome, but to make that decision is again to take a stand against others, and to find oneself as firmly within the circle as ever.

What can be done, at least, and what is essential, is to confront the problem and come to terms with it as far as possible. Let us begin by examining some traditional testimony as to the elusiveness of truth, in order to determine the grounds of its resistance to universal agreement.

The history of western philosophy begins with Thales' claim that the basis of all reality is a unity, namely water. Despite the subsequent rejection of his characterization of this unity, philosophy has been remarkably constant in the conviction that there is a certain unity, whose characterization is philosophy's fundamental goal. Even where reality or being has been conceived as an irreducible duality, we seek to comprehend this duality not in terms of the exclusiveness of its elements but in terms of their interrelationship, in terms of the unity of their equilibrium. Thus one thinks of Empedocles' view not only in terms of Love and Strife but in terms of the *struggle* between them, and Cartesian dualism is often viewed in terms of a primacy of one substance over the other (as in materialism or phenomenology) or in terms of the *relationship* between them. It is readily seen, from the history of philosophy generally, that philosophers have always strived to bring unity out of dualisms. But if the rendering manifest of unity is the ultimate goal of philosophy (at least in its speculative ontological form) it is questionable whether this goal can ever be attained, for it is by no means clear that such a unity can even be conceived. Plotinus put the problem succinctly in his observation that nothing can truly be said of "the one," since to predicate anything of it is to make it two. Plato makes the same point in the second part of the *Parmenides*, by showing that if one attempts either to affirm or deny a predicate of the one, the unity of the one is destroyed, an absurdity resulting in contradictory predicates appearing as equally false and true. Thus, too, in *Republic VI* Socrates says he can speak of the "offspring" of the good, but not of the good itself, and in the δεύτερος πλοῦς section of the *Phaedo* he says that the blinding ineffability of the good forced him to lower his sights to its reflection in discourse, *i.e.*, the forms. Following his example, let us see what access to an understanding of reality is afforded by these forms.

The forms are not all of the same kind. Some may be called forms of the realm of spirit (*i.e.*, of human ψυχή), such as beauty, virtue, piety, and wisdom; others are corporeal species or types, such as living being, master, and bed; and others corporeal properties, such as largeness and heat. Of these it is the forms of spirit to which Plato generally attaches the most philosophical importance, so let us consider them. We are told in the *Republic* that they somehow have both their existence and intelligibility from the good, the Platonic "one." How is this to be conceived? The forms of spirit may be thought of as appearances of the good, refracted through the medium of spirit in accordance with the interrelated universal realms of human experience: sensibility, action, and thought (both as opinion or faith, and as reason). In the realm of sensibility this fundamental

unity appears as beauty (*cf. Phaedrus* 249e-f), in the realm of action as virtue, in that of opinion as piety, and in reason as wisdom. These forms are, to be sure, more determinate than the undifferentiated unity of the good, since they may be conceived in relationship to the empirical realms in which they appear and in relationship to one another, but we look in vain for any great illumination of their nature. They are named, and reasons for postulating their existence are given, but both the *Phaedrus* and *Phaedo* tell us that we never have a clear vision of them, and none is ever seriously defined. In the *Republic*, to be sure, definitions are offered of the forms of virtue, but they are repeatedly belittled as inadequate (435c9-d3, 504b1-6, d6-7).

The reason for this further silence, the silence surrounding the forms as well as the good or one, may be seen also in the *Parmenides*, the first part of which demonstrates the ineffability of the forms as the second does the ineffability of the one. The different arguments explore the consequences of the different ways of characterizing the forms and their relation to individuals: as immanent in them, as separate but not entirely isolated from them, as mental concepts, and as entirely isolated. Only the second of these represents the Platonic view as stated in previous dialogues; the statement and refutation of the others serves to show their unviability as possible alternatives to the second. All but the second are shown to be untenable, while the second, in turn, is attacked by the socalled "Third Man" argument to the effect that, since the form and particulars must have something in common, that common feature must be posited as independent of each, and thus as a second form; which, in turn, must have something in common with the other two, thus requiring a third form, and so on *ad infinitum*. Apart from suggesting that the arguments are not (as a whole) conclusive (133b, 135b-c), Plato leaves the solution of the problem to us. One solution, certainly, is that the "Third Man" argument is not cogent, for to speak of the form and thing as having something in common is misleading, since this "having" is not the same in both cases. The form *is* the quintessence of what the thing *has*. Largeness itself, to take Plato's example, is not large in the way a large thing is large – it does not occupy space, for example – and yet it is "large" in the sense that it is the essence of *what it means* for a thing to be large. A large thing and largeness itself are both large only analogically: a large thing is large in the way a thing has an attribute or nature, while largeness itself is large in the way a form is the essence of an attribute or nature.

If this is so, are we any closer to knowing what a form is? To know only that a form is analogically comparable to a thing is an indication of conceptual defeat, for something is expressed analogically only when it cannot be expressed univocally, as it is in itself. As with analogical predication of God, analogy is not a mode of *knowing* the thing as it is *in itself* but only a way of metaphorically *representing it to ourselves*. The reason for the forms' inaccessibility is presumably the same as that of the one's. An elemental form is an absolutely pure type, the essence of a discrete quality or nature. But as pure, discrete, and simple, nothing can be predicated of it without involving it in multiplicity and impurity, and thus falsifying its true nature. Thus an elemental form can perhaps be truly named, but not defined. Thus, too, such forms can be objects of intuition (νόησις) but not of discursive knowledge (διάνοια).

Yet Plato wrote and kept on writing, despite the dialogues' frequent insistence on their own inadequacy, and the reservations about written philosophy expressed in the *Phaedrus* and letters. What then is there to write about, if neither the one, whether called being or the good, nor the forms in which it appears, can be the subject of predication? This means that not only is the possibility of ontology problematic, as the philosophy of the fundamental unity of reality, but so also is the possibility of the philosophy of the primary forms (beauty, virtue, piety, wisdom) of the refraction of this unity, *i.e.* aesthetics, ethics, religion, and epistemology, since their subject matter too is ultimately incapable of *adequate* discursive knowledge.

The problem of philosophy is evident in Aristotelian terms as well. For Aristotle reality, and philosophical explanation accordingly, are conceived in terms of the four causes and the conception of entelechy, yet none of these can be known as it is in reality. The highest reality, answering to the concept of the "one," is the first and final cause, the god. Unlike other individuals, the god can be known by philosophy, since he is universal (*Meta.* E1 1026a29-31) and *sui generis*, hence definable. But his being defined as pure reflection, thought thinking itself, cannot ultimately represent anything meaningful to us, since our experience of thought is always intentional. Our conception of his reality, thus founded on analogy, is not adequate to its goal. Adequate knowing of the ultimate unity, for Aristotle as for Plato and Plotinus, is afforded by contemplation but not by philosophy.

Of the material cause even less can be known, for pure matter is indeterminate, pure potentiality, in itself neither real nor knowable, and conceivable only in terms of the mediation of form. Neither can reality be known through the efficient cause, which shows us only the mechanical relationship of entities to one another but never their fundamental nature. This nature is conceived by Aristotle primarily in terms of form. Form is distinguished from matter and as such is universal rather than individual, since matter is the principle of individuation. But since reality consists of individuals exclusively, our knowledge of forms is not precisely a knowledge of reality but of an abstraction from reality conceived by our mind. Our conceptual thinking perceives directly only universals, and individuals only incidentally, in the light of universals, so individuals are not conceived in themselves but rather *as* universals (Z10 1035b27-30). Nor can any other mode of conception be brought to bear more successfully, since matter, the principle whereby individuals are individuals rather than universals, is not itself knowable (Z10 1036a8). Hence form, which is what pre-eminently is knowable, and individuals, which are the reality to be known, remain fundamentally diverse. Individuals can be known through perception (αἴσθησις) and intuition (νόησις) but not through determinate concepts (ὁρίσμοι) (Z10 1036a5-6), and philosophy therefore can never apprehend reality as it is in itself. This problem lies at the heart of the concepts of entelechy as well.

For the two chief architects of our philosophical heritage, then, it seems that philosophy is incapable of disclosing to us essential being, either in its fundamental unity or primary manifestations. Today, as at that dawn, two of

the most influential philosophers, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, have cast doubt on the ability of philosophy to present us with truth. But since neither of these four thinkers abandoned the philosophical enterprise, and many philosophers between times have proven to be worth reading, what do they convey if not truth?

Without agreeing with Kant that such things are in no sense knowable, we might nevertheless agree from the above considerations that primal unity never can be articulated as it is in itself, nor can the forms (beauty, virtue, piety, wisdom) into which it is refracted by the universal realms of human experience (perception, action, opinion, reason). One way of expressing the reason for the latter is that these universal realms are horizons within which our experience occurs, and thus not themselves directly experienced. What we experience directly is neither the horizon nor its characteristic form, but rather the indirect reflection of the form in our particular experiences, and, therefore, the dilution of it in its intercourse with our personal subjectivity. Kant suggested that we all would agree on matters of taste if we succeeded in purifying those judgments of any empirical elements, such as interest or pleasure; but, granting this, the persistent disagreements on such matters by people of sensitivity, taste, and good will shows that what can be distinguished here in theory may be inseparable in practice. Similarly, Plato argued that if we could free ourselves of every influence of appetite and ambition we could attain to perfect virtue, but he also insisted that this condition can never be met as long as our psyche is wedded to a body.

This personal element, whether called empirical or corporeal, is the expression of the finitude of our individuation, which prevents our fully transcending the particularity of the circumstances of our experiences; and because we can never pass entirely beyond those circumstances, we cannot apprehend their horizon as it is in itself. The horizonal forms are thus diversified and fragmented in their manifestation, appearing in different applications within different circumstances, so that although they evince a common ground, this ground never appears to us as the diverse instances do. Accordingly it is always easier to give a list of beautiful things, instances of virtue, or examples of piety or wisdom, than to explain or define any of these as it is in its unity. As the horizontal forms of experience are scattered throughout our diverse particular experiences, dispersing their unity into multiplicity, each appears as but one of the infinite possible expressions of its form, thus needing to be taken in conjunction with many others in order to be seen in its proper perspective, and thus becoming relational. That is why nothing approaching an adequate conception of these forms is possible except on the basis of long and critical experience, and why one finds no child prodigies in philosophy, unlike purely formal disciplines such as mathematics where the personal element does not obtrude. It is therefore first at the level of personal experience, not that of unity nor even of horizonal form, that true relationality appears, and on which discursive philosophy can take place.

The way the forms are fragmented into particular and limited applications dependent on circumstances can be seen in the realm of action, for example,

in the confinement of the scope of our decisions to narrow alternatives not ultimately of our making. Involuntarily confronted at every moment with innumerable events and influences, and their indeterminate interactions and ramifications, it is circumstantially impossible for us to accomplish anything like absolute goodness, as might be open to one who could create *ex nihilo* (indeed, even this latter would be rendered questionable by such theories as Leibniz's, for which "best possible" is not necessarily the same as "absolutely good"). The circumstantial limits of our finite nature (non-omnipotence) are matched by intrinsic limits, in the form of an ineluctable ignorance (non-omniscience) of the consequences, and their interplay, of any particular course of action. At best we are capable of embodying in our actions various degrees of goodness in varying ways. So too in the realm of perception. If the profound claim that beauty makes on us may be characterized as a rhythmic and harmonious sensuous reflection of the unity underlying the realm of appearances (whether closer to the sense of Plato's "true being" or Kant's "supersensible substrate of human reason"), it must be confessed that we never directly perceive this unity as such, but only its partial presentation in different particular experiences. What is true here of action and perception is true also of opinion or faith, as the world's myriad of competing religions attests, and true of reason as well, as has already appeared in the conclusion that the *immediate* objects of philosophy are neither the primal unity of experience nor its primary forms, but only partial, hence relational and discursive aspects of them, as refracted through the unavoidable subjectivity of our individuation.

There is much that we all have in common by virtue of our common human nature: we all experience by means of sensation, imagination, understanding, and intellection, for example. But as individuals we differ in many ways also, and in our experience place differing emphases on those various faculties. Thus we may interpret the world primarily in terms of any one or combination of them, and may find ourselves respectively empirical scientists, artists, logicians, mystics, or any combination. Cutting across this division is another which it presupposes: our dual nature, as fellow humans and as unique individuals, due to which our true nature has been declared to be each of these in turn. Here arises the perennial question of whether existence or essence precedes the other in man: is my true being my unique existence or my participation in a universal essence, and are we to understand the reality of the world in terms of individuals or universals? And so at once the fourfold division above becomes eightfold, and the possible variations greater still: empiricism, aestheticism, positivism, rationalism, mysticism, idealism, existentialism, *etc.*, to name but a few. What sense can philosophy make of this welter of contrariety? In what relation does a philosophy stand to the repudiations of its rivals?

There are a number of such stances, the most obvious of which is both the most natural and least tenable: the claim that one's own philosophy alone is true, or most nearly true, and all others false to the extent that they differ from it. This doctrinal position is perfectly natural, since one's philosophy is,

after all, one's conception of truth, but whoever advances this claim must be somewhat disquieted at hearing it made by all of his rivals as well. And although he may refute the views of his rivals to demonstrate their inferiority to his, no philosophy has ever been invulnerable to refutation of one sort or another, so his position is no more secure than another's. This is not to suggest that no philosophy is superior to another, but only that the ground of such superiority is highly problematic.

Instead of this doctrinal stance (or together with it) one may try to cope with the variety of philosophical positions by attempting to embrace their contradictory assertions within a higher synthesis. This is the direction taken by perhaps the most influential of the western philosophers, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel, among others. No doubt this course, which sees the merit of all philosophical endeavors, is superior to the doctrinal, which sees none but its own, yet it too gives over at last to doctrinality if it proclaims itself to be the true and only, or even the best synthesis. Hegel has, I think, managed to articulate the various aspects and relationships of reality to a greater degree than anyone else, and the scope, power, and illumination of his system cannot fairly be denied. Yet because of this very virtue he does not, I think, do the justice to non-discursive thought that Plato does, nor to personal individuality that existentialism does. The bias of professedly catholic synthesis is evident in its necessary claim that all previous philosophies were one-sided. To support this claim the truth or essence of each philosophy is distinguished from the philosophy as a whole and woven into the fabric of the synthesis. But the truth so distinguished is not the original philosophy at all, only a caricature of it. The original was itself a complete vision taking account of all aspects of reality, whereas in the synthesis only its starting point is preserved, with all of its development and transformations left behind. The result is that one would rarely guess from the bloodless denizens of a synthesis that each of these, on its own terms, can be as illuminating and forceful as the synthesis itself. The synthesis does not incorporate positions as seen through themselves but rather as seen from an alien point of view. It is thus only partially synthesis and partially arbitrary rejection as well. From the earlier claim that the unity of the whole can never adequately be articulated, it follows too that no synthesis can do justice to all facets of reality. If this is so, no synthesis can succeed, any more than Hegel's, in transforming philosophy finally into wisdom.

This brings us to a third stance one may take toward the variety of philosophical positions, the view that has been maintained thus far in this essay, that no philosophical position can do justice to all facets of reality. Given the plethora of possible variations on, for example, the eightfold differentiation of experience mentioned above, a plethora of perspectives is equally possible, none of which is uncontroversially truer than another, and all purporting to embody the fundamental nature of truth. But if these be acknowledged as perspectives of the truth, rather than the truth in its entirety, the problem of their contradictoriness is avoided. This avoidance, however, has its own attendant problems, giving rise to objections that must

give pause to any proponent. Three such objections can be stated as follows:

1. Is this claim itself only one point of view among many or is it true unconditionally? If unconditionally, is it not just another doctrine, only less honestly so than the others? If only one point of view among many, is it not as easily dismissed as accepted, and thus without cogency?

2. The claim appears rather simplistic in suggesting that these philosophical positions are fundamentally complementary, when with any degree of application one may see that the different positions are diametrically opposed on many issues, and explicitly contradict one another; so that to treat them as compatible is to disregard the law of non-contradiction and thus to make impossible any meaningful discourse, destroying philosophy.

3. If any philosophy is but a perspective of truth, does it not follow that no objective standard exists by which the worth of a philosophy may be measured, and that all philosophical positions may be equally true or equally false, from one perspective or another, therefore ultimately trivial, and philosophy itself a waste of time?

The objections are both pertinent and serious, and must give concern to any who would uphold this view. On the other hand, the only alternative is no less problematic: the view that one philosophy alone is true, or most nearly so, and the others false (or one-sided), a view held simultaneously by all rival parties, all equally possessed of evidence for their claims, which has made philosophy a battlefield rather than a fellowship since its conception. Let us see, therefore, what answer can be made to the objections.

1. In the first place, the claim that philosophical positions represent different perspectives cannot itself be regarded as an exception, fot it rests on a claim that is itself not universally accepted, the claim made earlier that neither the ultimate unity of reality, nor the primary forms into which it is refracted by the realms of experience, are articulable as they are in themselves. Obviously this claim is maintained only from a certain point of view. Many philosopers, for example, have been convinced that such articulation is possible, and even that they have accomplished it. Or again, many others, while acknowledging reality to be numerically one, see this oneness not as a whole standing forth from an underlying principle of unity, but as an aggregate involving no such simple unity lying beyond the possibility of articulation. But even for them the question applies: If reality is one, why are philosophies many? If the answer is said to lie in an as yet incomplete progress toward some future articulation, it should be noted that at present the very methods are so in dispute that success claimed by any one of them would be rejected as irrelevant by the others. While these considerations show that the present claim is made only from one point of view, that does not however leave it without cogency, for it is borne out as well by the entire history of philosophy, in which all such attempts at ultimate articulation have been flawed by radical incoherence and incompleteness, leaving them open to the "refutations" that invariably followed. With regard to incoherence, we may think of the problem of "separation" in Plato, of universals in Aristotle, of the existence of the thing in itself in Kant, the problem

of historical completeness in Hegel, and similar, absolutely fundamental problems in other philosophers. With regard to incompleteness it is enough to observe that the very plethora of philosophical positions suggests the incompleteness of any one: if any position were complete in the sense of successfully doing justice to all aspects of reality, what grounds could there possibly be for resisting it? Its opponents could only be those not intelligent enough to appreciate its achievement or too stubborn to acknowledge it, and there is no philosophical position that does not number persons of intelligence, sensitivity, and good will among its opponents. Thus, although I cannot disprove, and do not deny the possibility of a complete, coherent, and absolutely conclusive philosophy, neither can I conceive its possibility. In any case, it seems that no such philosophy has yet been produced, and this is what is of concern here.

2. If it is claimed that philosophies often explicitly contradict one another on particular issues, it must first be ascertained what the nature is of such contradictions. To this end let us consider three examples: the dispute between Spinoza and Leibniz on the nature of substance, between Plato and Heidegger on the nature of truth, and between Plato and Kant on the possibility of intellectual intuition.

According to Spinoza there is but a single substance, which is infinite and all embracing. Leibniz, however, says that there are an infinite number of substances, each of which is infinitessimal and absolutely simple. What could be more contradictory? – and yet Spinoza and Leibniz are generally thought to have much in common. How can this be? The answer lies in the conception of substance, the criterion for which, according to Spinoza is completeness (*cf. Ethics* I, def. 3), and according to Leibniz indivisibility (*cf. Monadology*, beginning). If one's primary concern is with the unity of all things, that is, with universality, one's conception of substance will be more akin to Spinoza's; but if with individuality, Leibniz's. There is thus no precise contradiction because they are speaking of different things: Spinoza is speaking of reality conceived in terms of universality, Leibniz of it conceived in terms of individuality. To say that one of these is wrong and the other right is to enter into an unsupportable and one-sided doctrinality, for both universality and individuality appear to be ineluctable facts, and the sacrifice of one to the other cannot but be arbitrary. We may accordingly observe that individuation is a serious problem for Spinoza, as the universality of pre-established harmony is for Leibniz. One might even think that both are wrong insofar as they each do justice only to one side of reality, and if both can be conceived to be wrong they cannot genuinely be contradictory.

For Plato truth is eternal, immutable, and independent of man. For Heidegger it is dependent on man and, as such, neither eternal nor immutable. But, once again, the subject of these conflicting propositions is not the same, although the same term is used. What Plato calls "truth" is not precisely the same as what Heidegger calls "truth" (ironically, Heidegger's version corresponds more to the etymology of the Greek term for "truth", ἀλήθεια, "unhiddenness", and Plato's to that of the German, *Wahrheit*, "permanence").

When Plato speaks of truth he is referring to the intelligible ground *in itself* of the essential being of things, while Heidegger is referring rather to the way being presents itself *to us*. Thus what Heidegger means by truth corresponds more closely to what, for Plato, would be the *apprehension or expression* of truth. Because of the differing import the various aspects of being have for them, what they pick out as essential is in each case different, so that here, too, no precise contradiction appears.

This difference between them stems largely from Heidegger's acceptance of Kant's denial of the possibility of intellectually intuiting pre-phenomenal being. If Kant is right, and our experience is only of phenomena, then being and truth, as the ground of our experience, must initially be conceived phenomenologically and thus in terms of the constitutive categories (or *Existentialen*) of the human mind. What then of the disagreement between Plato and Kant, as to whether there is an intellectual intuition of things in themselves? It is important to notice, first of all, that the Ideas of which Kant says we can have no knowledge, and those of which Plato says we have a certain apprehension, are not the same. Kant's Ideas of reason are the soul, the universe, and God. Plato, however, never speaks of a form of any of these, which suggests initially that what Kant is denying is not precisely the same as what Plato affirmed. Moreover the forms which are primary for Plato correspond to areas where Kant, too, believed that synthetic a priori knowledge exists: beauty and virtue. Again, although Kant argued against a proof of immortality, Plato's attempts at such proof do not include the ontological version that Kant attacks as paralogistic. Kant does not, after all, object to all attempts to show the soul to be immortal, and undertakes such a course himself in the second critique.

Nevertheless it cannot be denied that there is a real opposition between them. Plato believed the forms of knowledge were present to the mind because they were objectively true – the forms of reality itself – while Kant denied that the epistemological forms had any reality apart from the subjectivity of the human mind. Here there is undeniably a contradiction. Is it possible, then, to maintain that both of these propositions may be equally true? Evidentally not; but since the answer lies beyond the range of possible experience it does not seem possible to discover it. Since intellectual intuition can explain the possibility of synthetic a priori knowledge as well as transcendental idealism can, Kant's "Copernican Revolution," directed primarily against empiricism, leaves intellectual intuition untouched. The only outright attack he makes against the possibility of intellectual intuition is the Transcendental Aesthetic, where he points out the absurdities (*Ungereimtheiten*, B70) that follow from regarding space and time as objectively real: if he can show that space and time can only be subjective then it would follow that the categories, which refer to them, must be subjective also, and all our knowledge must be transcendental rather than transcendent in origin, ruling out the possibility of intellectual intuition. But the greatest "absurdity" he can point to is that an objective space and time would be "actual (*wirklich*) without being an actual object" (A32, B49), or "two

eternal and infinite self-subsistent non-entities (*Undinge*), which are there (yet without being anything actual (*Wirkliches*)) only in order to contain in themselves all that is actual" (A39, B56), or "two infinite entities (*Dinge*), which are not substances, nor anything actually inhering in substances, but nevertheless must be existents, indeed, must be the necessary condition of the existence of all things, and must remain even if all existing things were removed" (B70). Apart from the terminological inconsistencies among these three formulations, it is worth noting that there is no real absurdity (contradiction) here at all, although certainly a conceptual difficulty. Kant shows that the mode of existence of an objective time and space is problematic in a way that the existence of entities is not, but not that it is impossible. Moreover, Kant's subjective conception of time and space has proved to be no less problematic in other ways. Thus, although their contradictoriness prevents us from calling the Platonic and Kantian positions on the existence of an intellectual intuition equally true, we can nevertheless say that they have an equal *claim* to truth. If the answer lies beyond the range of possible experience, it is no wonder that Kant's argument is inconclusive. It can be shown that both positions are equally capable of accounting for all aspects of reality and for all empirical facts, therefore any choice between them must be made for subjective reasons, and thus is determined by individual and personal perspectives.

Most philosophical disputes are not direct contradictions, but alternative ways of representing, hence formulating and categorizing, reality. Thus different philosophies cannot fairly be compared in what they say on particular issues until one has gone through and thought through (not merely analysed into lifeless and ambiguous categories) each position so as to discover the *fundamental* dispute that is at the heart of the particular disagreements. Philosophical debates are valuable not in order to convert one's opponents, a very rare occurrence indeed, but because they often eventuate in the discovery and appreciation of the previously obscure point of fundamental disagreement, and therefore of the irreducible difference of commitment between the two positions, whereupon there is generally nothing more to be said. One can ultimately do no more than defend or formulate a position which most does justice to one's own experience of reality, and here we must resign ourselves to the fact that there are irreducible differences.

3. This brings us to the third objection. If fundamentally opposed philosophical positions have an equal claim to truth, does it not follow that it makes no difference which position we take, in which case all speculation about these matters is idle and philosophy merely a trivial diversion, the most pretentious of intellectual games?

To answer this it will be helpful to compare philosophy with science, a field where some sort of objective adjudication seems possible. It is significant that there is no cumulative progress in philosophy on the model of that science. The last phrase is important, for there are certainly philosophers who believe in philosophical progress, but the controversial nature of this claim is proof that if there is progress in philosophy it is not the clear, undeniable sort so

evident in the sciences. This is evident from our observation that fundamental philosophical disputes tend not to be direct contradictions at all, or, where they occasionally are, their resolution lies beyond the realm of possible experience since it is about the horizon of that realm that they speak. Thus while specific details of a philosophical position may occasionally be proven false by experience, this rarely affects the fundamental principles of the position itself, so that progress from less to more adequate positions does not normally occur. Plato and Aristotle, accordingly, continue to be two of the most popular philosophers, as subjects both of university courses and private research; but one would hardly teach or do research in physics (as distinct from the history of physics) by studying the works of Archimedes, nor could one seriously maintain that the history of physics is but a series of footnotes to Archimedes. The reason for this difference lies not in any methodological slackness of philosophy that might be corrected but in the nature of the subject matter. Science deals with objectively measurable phenomena, observations that can be repeated and stated in unambiguous, generally quantitative terms. Philosophy, however, is concerned fundamentally with the meaning and significance of our experience. But since, as individuals, we all place varying emphases on the various aspects of our experience, the ultimate meaning and significance of experience will not be precisely the same for different individuals. Thus the fundamental reference for the subject matter of philosophy will to some extent be subjective. It follows too that things will not have precisely the same significance and associations for us, which is why philosophy cannot be stated unambiguously; and philosophical writings, unlike scientific ones, are subject to endless controversies regarding their interpretation and intent (something which is true even of those philosophers who write with the greatest clarity and simplicity). Despite this great advantage afforded to science by its subject matter, it has been argued by Karl Popper that even science cannot escape certain elements of subjectivity (no "pure observation" is possible), and by Paul Feyerabend and Thomas Kuhn that even scientific theories are inseparable from a particular perspective, based on a particular set of emphases that is continually being replaced by others, so that even the history of science can be viewed as a constantly shifting series of perspectives rather than a linear progression: science may become progressively more efficient but not "truer." If this can be true of the most impersonal of man's quests for knowledge, it would hardly be surprising for the same to be true of less exact pursuits.

At the same time, as fellow humans, we all have much in common; and this prevents philosophy from being nothing more than a series of personal confessions, and lets all philosophies speak to us with various degrees of kindredness. The fact that philosophy has an irreducible personal element does not, therefore, mean that it is hopelessly relativistic. It is relativistic in the sense that it seems impossible for any one philosophy ever to be capable of providing an objective and universal standard of truth, but its relativity is limited in certain important ways. Philosophy is a response to the wonder that arises from one's experience of the world, and, as such, seeks to discover

and express the fundamental meaning (or meaninglessness) of that experience. If it is to be a genuine discovery of meaning it must be able to *illuminate* that experience so as to disclose its meaningfulness, and if it is to succeed in expressing that discovery it must be capable of *communicating* something of this insight by shining some illumination on the experience of others, through the common nature that we share. These requirements afford a standard by which the worth of a philosophy may be judged. A philosophy can illuminate only insofar as it is in some sense intelligible, which can be determined only by scrutinizing it on its own terms, from within; and philosophers have sometimes changed their views – or at least their expression of them – under criticism resulting from such scrutiny: charges of inconsistency, incoherence, obscurity, ambiguity, reducibility to absurdity, *etc.*, frequently result in attempts at reformulation, if not revision. For even if such shortcomings are inevitable, one must try to mitigate them as far as possible. Secondly, a philosophy which fails to communicate illumination to many people is in that respect less valuable than one which has had a wide impact. The balance between our individuality and universality is a variable one, but if the personal individual element prevents philosophy from becoming a strict science, the universal element prevents it from falling into the abyss of nihilistic relativism.

Beyond these two universal criteria – intelligibility and communication – lies a third which may well outweigh them. If some philosophical view of the world intrigues me as no other does, the fact that it may be less lucid and immediately intelligible, or less widely esteemed than others, will not dispel my interest. This feeling of being intrigued is an inner response, a recognition in the philosophy of something corresponding to an inward sense of rightness (perhaps previously unnoticed) of our own. We will differ in philosophical inclinations for all the reasons previously noted, but, granting the bias of our interests, within that bias we somehow have it within us to recognise approaches that lead to the heart of the matter and those that miss the mark. This inward response is the most important of the criteria, because the most fundamental. Intelligibility, popularity, and personal bias are in varying degrees subsequent to this, although because they are more evident they tend to obscure it, and a philosophy is often judged on the basis of conceptual clarity, popularity, or saying what one hopes to hear, before its deeper value is explored. What it is essential to see is that even if we cannot be open to all philosophical views, this does not mean that our philosophical judgement is entirely arbitrary and subjective. Philosophy always strives for intelligibility, and the degree in which it is achieved is one measure, though only partial, of philosophic accomplishment, Popularity too is an indication, however fallible and inconstant, of philosophic universality. Most important, our inward response provides the ultimate reference against which a philosophy must prove its value.

The source of this response is not in itself universal in the previous sense, for it is not objectively determinable and so cannot become the object of a consensus, although perhaps it is what makes such consensus possible for

other criteria. Nor is it idiosyncratically personal, for it is a standard by which we judge not only the value of a philosophy but ourselves as well; it is not something by which we judge simply whether things are meaningful for our personal existence, but by which that personal existence itself may be judged meaningful. This source within ourselves is that truth with which we are in touch in a non-discursive way (and which may be considered the source of the impetus towards and the possibility of discursive truth), whether called recollection, pre-ontological, intuition, inner experience, innate ideas, will, or self. We are capable of judging in its light only because it is absolutely prior to all experience, and permeates all experience if only in the sense of being universally relevant. Thus appearing as a unity underlying all experience, it is naturally evocative of the fundamental unity of reality, whether as a reflection or manifestation of that unity – although some, such as Kant, who will testify to the psychological necessity of this association will nevertheless deny its ontological validity. As it is unitary and prior to all experience, we are in touch with it only in a non-discursive way, as indeterminate and impossible to represent to ourselves. Accordingly the basic experience of contemplation or meditation is often described as "nothingness," *i.e.* nothing determinate. As soon as we try to focus on it to represent it to ourselves in a way subject to conceptual analysis, we become arbitrary and distort it in terms of our personal subjectivity; just as the more we focus our eyes, the more we limit our vision to a single object and lose sight of the periphery of the visual field, any part of which could equally have served as our focal point.

If it cannot be represented in our thoughts, its presence can nevertheless be felt, both in itself at certain moments, and in its illumination of our experience generally. This source, it may be, is constant and the same for all of us: what is it that is constant in "perennial philosophy" if not this? Certainly not the particular formulations and systematizations but only what they point towards. But even if this can never be represented without distorting its nature, that would not mean that philosophy is irrelevant to it. Philosophy is the rational endeavor to mediate between this "one" and the multiplicity of our experience (as morality represents this endeavor in the realm of action, art in the realm of perception and religion in the realm of opinion or faith). It is the attempt to make intelligible to ourselves our experience, and thus to bring it into the light of that which makes meaningful. But our experience is unavoidably personal. Experience is not simply sensory perception of the world's colors, shapes, sounds, touches, smells, and tastes; it is not their sum total, but arises out of them by means of selection, organization and interpretation, and the principle according to which this transformation occurs is only partially universal, and partially as well individual and personal. Thus, if philosophy cannot be a pure representation of the one, but rather a rational illumination of our experience in the light of it, the personal element cannot be extirpated.

These observations in no way counsel a change in the normal procedures of philosophy, but only in its attitude toward them. Argument and refutation

may be useful, the former to show the power of one's own philosophy and the latter to show the weaknesses of alternative philosophies, but they are not fundamental because they cannot be conclusive: one should not suppose that one's philosophy is the only one with persuasive reasons to commend it, or that it is without limitations of its own that, for some individuals, might weigh heavily against it. The fact that a philosophy can be refuted from a certain point of view will never in itself wholly discredit it as long as no alternative philosophy exists which is beyond any refutation or limitation whatever. This is not to deny that some philosophies are so limited that almost no one will feel that their explanatory power compensates for their deficiencies.

For all that philosophy may involve a personal element, it is by no means trivial. Every philosophy aspires toward unity and comprehensiveness; it is a bridge from bewildering multiplicity toward the comprehensive source of meaningfulness and intelligibility, and its success may be measured by its intelligibility, communication, and – underlying these two, but within us rather than objective – the degree to which it can serve as one's own philosophy. Philosophy is not trivial, for it is nothing less than the attempt to bring meaning and intelligibility to our experience, both in the sense of making conceptually intelligible the meaning of our experience (or to work out specialized problems stemming from this attempt) and, as a consequence, making our experience *personally* meaningful, which may otherwise be devoid of such meaning. And if philosophy can never become identical with wisdom, can never articulate the one but only mediate our experience in the light of it, there is nothing strange in the suggestion that there may be many paths, though not all of equal worth. It is thus inappropriate to call the history of metaphysics "a graveyard of refuted systems." It is rather a legacy of trailblazing. And why should one hold a path in contempt just because it begins from someone else's door?

University of Guelph