

I. PHILOSOPHY AS POETRY

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There is no agreed answer to the question: What is philosophy? If we try to apply Wittgenstein's "the meaning is the use" to philosophy we get nowhere.

Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblances" may be more helpful, though in the case of philosophy the family members are an odd discordant bunch especially if we take in the youngest generation. Let us try the historical approach, though here too we have more diversity than affinity. Even if we confine ourselves in time to the flicker between the sixth and the fourth centuries BC and in space to that tiny speck in the north-eastern Mediterranean, who would say that Thales and Xenophanes, or Heraclitus and Anaxagoras, or Empedocles and Socrates represent a homogeneous genre of thinking? What I propose therefore is to separate a line of thought that began and apparently ended with two unique figures: Socrates and Plato — to isolate that line of thought and give it a distinctive name. For want of anything better I call it 'philosophy proper' without denying the other family members the right to the proud family name of Philosophy. [See "Philosophy as Prophecy" in *The Sphinx and the Phoenix*, download:

<https://archive.org/details/THESPHINXANDTHEPHOENIX> and "Two Kinds of Metaphysics" in *Plato's Universe of Discourse*, download:

<https://archive.org/details/PlatosUniverseOfDiscourse>]

At his trial Socrates declares it to be his life-mission to live philosophizing and examining himself and others (*Apology* 28e) and these were for him not two things but one: to philosophize is to probe one's beliefs, one's values, one's purpose in life. An unexamined life, he maintains, is not a life for a human being (38a). This belief was well-grounded in his philosophical thought. For the greatest good, the only proper good, for a human being is to have a healthy soul, and the wholesomeness of the soul consists just in being clear about this insight: that nothing is ultimately good but what prospers the wellbeing of the soul and nothing is truly evil but what harms the soul. Thus all good, all understanding, all wisdom

resides in the wholesomeness of our inner reality, our *psuchê* (soul) — variously designated by *nous*, *phronêsis*, *sophia*, or by the unfortunate blanket term *epistêmê*. All else can only be relatively and conditionally good when it conduces to that one ultimate good.

And as all things in the external world are in themselves as nothing to our true good, so all knowledge of the outer natural world is essentially irrelevant to what is ultimately real and to the one insight on which our true good depends. Plato emphasized and highlighted this view. All things in the natural world have only a mock ‘reality’. When the mind investigates what we have come to call the phenomenal world, making use of the body — or as we would now say, making use of empirical data — in considering anything, it is dragged by the body into the changeable and is then led into error and is confused and dizzy and is drunken (*Phaedo* 79c). In modern parlance: the empirical investigation of the natural world is confined to the phenomenal. But when the mind “all by itself reflects, it moves into that which is pure, always is, ... remains with that always, ... and then it rests from wandering, and in the company of that, is constant, being in communion with such; and it is this state that is called *phronêsis*” (*Phaedo* 79d). As all good and all understanding reside for Socrates in the soul (mind) so for Plato all reality, all that is really real, is nowhere to be beheld but in our own inner reality. So in the *Republic* the philosophical quest is summed up in the following words:

“Would we not be making a reasonable defence when we say that a true philosophical nature aspires to what IS, does not tarry by the many particulars that are thought to be, but goes forth with no blunting and no slackening of her desire, until she grasps the essence of every reality by that in her soul to which it is becoming — namely, what is akin — to grasp that, approaching and mingling with what has true being, gives birth to reason and reality; enjoys knowledge and true life and is nourished, and then has relief of her birth pangs, but not before then?” (490a-b.)

As all understanding for Socrates comes from probing our mind so for Plato all insight into reality comes from communion with our inner reality. That inner reality, which is the only reality and all the reality we are vouchsafed to approach, is represented in the *Republic* by the Form of the Good. But the Form of the Good

is beyond being and beyond understanding. We can commune with it in philosophical insight, in poetic and artistic creativity, in mystic experience, but it cannot be conveyed in any determinate formulation of thought or words. It can only be intimated in conceptual myths, in poetic visions, in the creations of artistic genius.

In all of this there is no inferential reasoning, no argumentation in the narrower sense of the term, but oracular proclamation. In all genuine philosophy rationalistic reasoning and argumentation can have only an ancillary role for the purposes of exposition and elucidation. Look at Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Idea*; look at Whitehead's *Process and Reality* (to pick up two examples that come to mind), you will find no pretence of inferential reasoning or logical proof. A philosopher's profoundest insights are not arrived at by reasoning; they are creative notions that render aspects of living experience intelligible.

Thus what I call philosophy proper is poetry oracularly proclaiming the philosopher's insight into the one reality of which we have immediate cognizance, our own inner reality.

Hence I gave my latest book, *Creative Eternity*, the subtitle "a metaphysical myth" and explained in the first chapter why it had to be a myth. [Download: <https://archive.org/details/CreativeEternityAMetaphysicalMyth>]

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