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On What Philosophy Is

After experience had taught me that all the usual surroundings of social life are vain and futile [. . .] I finally resolved to inquire whether there might be some real good having power to communicate itself, which would effect the mind singly, to the exclusion of all else . . .

Benedict de Spinoza, 1662₁

1. The persistence of philosophical questions

In the Epic of Gilgamesh, we find among people to whom civilization was still a novelty, an instinctive concern with the themes to which nihilism would eventually provide an answer; the plot of the standard version has the following outline.₂ King Gilgamesh has achieved great things and built up a secure and civilized way of life for his subjects, but in his unchallenged pre-eminence he has turned to tyranny and decadence. His people ask the gods for protection, and they oblige by creating Enkidu, a wild man who lives among the animals. Enkidu soon becomes civilized and befriends Gilgamesh, inspiring him to set off on dangerous and heroic quests in search of eternal fame. When Enkidu dies, however, Gilgamesh acquires such an unbearable fear of death that he sets out on a new quest to find the secret of immortal life. After racing against time along the path of the Sun God, he ferries across the Waters of Death to meet Uta-napishti, an immortal king. Uta-napishti explains that the circumstances which brought about his own immortality were unique, and tells Gilgamesh to accept the inevitability of death, appreciate his privileges as a king, and go back to performing his proper duties. Discouraged, Gilgamesh prepares for the homeward journey, but just before he leaves, Uta-napishti tells Gilgamesh about a magical plant that grants immortality. Gilgamesh finds it, a snake subsequently steals it, and then finally realizing the futility of fleeing death he returns home by ferry, where he proudly shows the ferryman the city he founded.

The people this story arose from, the first city dwellers possessed of the earliest written languages, had relatively recently – like Enkidu – come from the wild, and thus attained an unprecedented distance from biological imperatives: they had achieved enough security and stability in a complex collective life that they could invest considerably more time in reflecting and setting their own imperatives. What their minds immediately turned to was the question of what they should be doing with

their lives, and they asked this question in the company of Enkidu, newly civilized and thus able to choose, and Gilgamesh, who had lately been making the wrong choices. This question is made more urgent by the appearance of futility to human endeavour in light of our mortality; Gilgamesh gives voice to this when he says, 'As for man, [his days] are numbered, whatever he may do, it is but wind'.³ This thought, later to be developed in *Ecclesiastes*, instinctively connects finitude with futility, just as we still do when considering activities such as building an ice-sculpture or house of cards; all the effort that goes into the building seems wasted on something so transient.

Gilgamesh's initial response to finitude is to try to achieve something that will be remembered after his death. The death of Enkidu, however, brings it home to him that the remembrance of others will not prevent his death, which is what concerns him most, and at this point reflections on the meaning of life, the futility of transient activities and fear of death come together as Gilgamesh decides that what he should really be doing is trying to find a way to avoid death; the Abrahamic religions were later to conceive of life as provided with meaning by just such a quest, since by living according to God's will, the believer hopes to gain eternal life. Gilgamesh's quest fails, however, and so he learns to reconcile himself to the transitory pleasures and duties of life, a lesson made poignant in a variant of the epic in which Gilgamesh is advised to 'Make merry each day, dance and play day and night! [. . .] Gaze on the child who holds your hand, let your wife enjoy your repeated embrace!'⁴

Gilgamesh becomes wise, then, when he stops trying to escape from time and comes to appreciate everything finite life has to offer, as well as what it demands of him. At first he regards our ordinary projects as irrelevant when doom is on the horizon, reasoning that the only worthwhile project is the quest for eternal life; but he comes to regard this quest as illusory, thereafter returning to normal life with his attitude transformed. The Epic seems to be telling us, moreover, that we must each discover this for ourselves, since even after Gilgamesh has been told that his quest cannot succeed he still has to try once more – with the magical plant – before he can accept it.⁵

There are many aspects of the Epic that can only be understood by reference to ancient Mesopotamian culture, as is only to be expected from such a remote text. However this does not detract from the fact that some of the questions raised by these people, within their magical, pre-scientific world-view, are universal enough for us to recognize straight away. This is because the questions never left us, namely questions about the meaning of life, and what we should be doing with our finite measure of existence. That such questions arise for beings like us seems inevitable, for once we had developed the leisure and sophistication to reflect, we were destined to find ourselves in the thick of life, with no idea why we were there or what we were there for. Any historicist thesis claiming that these questions are simply the product of our particular, contingent past, would have to contend with the endless renewability of the conditions that generate the questions, given that new people are born every day who may one day break free of the presupposed meaning provided by their upbringing, and find themselves existing, caught up in a time that carries them to death, and capable of steering their lives in any number of different directions. Maybe we do not have to think in such a way that these questions arise, but so far as we know we always have, and unless major changes take place to our way of life, the questions will remain.

Now if we ask within a contemporary context to which areas of concern these questions belong, then the answer is obvious; they are the concerns of religion and philosophy. There are other disciplines that may provide some insight into the form these questions take and our readiness to ask them, such as sociology and cognitive science perhaps, but the questions themselves are religious and philosophical questions, or better, philosophical questions to which religions have always provided answers. Philosophy is the area of culture to which we would expect to be able to look for rational and impartial approaches to these questions, both to analysing their import and demarcating possible answers; while religion, on the other hand, offers set answers – rationally debated and interpreted – promoted on the basis of faith and the authority of sacred texts and traditions. Let us say, then, that questions concerning human finitude and the meaning of life are paradigmatically philosophical questions, to which religions have provided the best-known and most widely believed answers. These questions have persisted since the dawn of civilization, and are renewed within each new generation by those that feel the need to answer them.

2. What is philosophy?

If we think that the Epic of Gilgamesh is concerned with philosophical questions, we must also think that philosophical questions were being asked long before the official beginning of philosophy. There is nothing surprising in this, for people asked historical and geological questions before anything like a discipline was established in these areas, and our judgement that these are philosophical questions is patently consequent upon the fact that the thinkers who gave us our notion of ‘philosophy’ did concern themselves with them. However the question of the meaning of life has been eclipsed within the history of philosophy by more manifest concerns with metaphysics, epistemology and morality: with the nature of reality, our ability to know it and the basis of moral conduct. In recent years it has all but disappeared.

This raises the question of what the unifying subject-matter of philosophy is, such that philosophers should concern themselves with metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and the themes in the Epic we recognize as philosophical. And yet although the question naturally arises, there is no simple, rule-of-thumb answer to it, despite the fact that such answers are readily available for other disciplines; when definitional precision is required, academic quibbles can arise concerning the nature of any discipline, but with philosophy there is not even any obvious starting point. It has become so far from obvious what philosophy is the study of, in fact, that philosophers have even designated a sub-division of their discipline, ‘metaphilosophy’, to reflecting on the nature of philosophy. Some have even said that philosophy is distinctive in that the question of the nature of philosophy is itself a philosophical question.⁶

If metaphilosophy were a part of philosophy, then on the face of it at least, the range of subject-matters it could deal with would be very limited indeed. Philosophy could not be the study of *the fundamental nature of reality*, for instance, for then metaphilosophy would study *the study of the fundamental nature of reality*, rather than *the fundamental nature of reality*, and hence would not be philosophical. To avoid this

kind of obstacle, metaphilosophy would have to study this subject-matter in a different way to first-order philosophy, which is the approach we shall ultimately take. But leaving this option aside for the moment, the only alternative would be for philosophy to have an extremely general subject-matter, as for example if it were said to be the study of concepts; since metaphilosophy could then count as philosophical in virtue of studying the concept of philosophy. However, this would be too broad, because many concepts, such as 'offside' in football, are evidently not of philosophical interest. Parallel problems arise for any subject-matter broad enough to straightforwardly maintain the claim that metaphilosophy is part of philosophy.

An alternative approach would be to abandon the view that philosophy has any distinctive subject-matter, and instead conceive the discipline as united by methodology. This would render an investigation philosophical if it employed the appropriate methodology, and hence would allow for there to be a philosophy of almost anything, from philosophy itself to sport or wine; tacitly, at least, this idea has been gaining popularity in recent years.⁷ The problem with it, however, is that many different methodologies have been advocated in the history of philosophy, such as radical doubt, phenomenological description, conceptual analysis and most recently, experimentation, and so to alight on any of these to the exclusion of the others is bound to amount to partisanship, rather than a serious attempt to determine what is distinctive about philosophy. Moreover, even if it is true that we are able to recognize a discussion as philosophical in virtue of its methodology, this is only because we recognize the methodology from discussions in which the subject-matter *is* philosophical; a parallel response could be made to the claim that we recognize discussions as philosophical only on account of their writing style or the authors they refer to.⁸

A methodological answer will not tell us what unites the topics and concerns from which the methodologies sprang, then. But it is subject-matter above all else that provides a discipline with its voice; evolutionary biologists and psychologists can talk about sport or wine too, but the interest of what they have to say as experts, rather than simply laypeople, derives from their knowledge of evolutionary biology or psychology. If philosophy also has something distinctive to say, then, it seems clear that this must be because of its subject-matter, with the wide range of methodologies it has employed best interpreted – as they most naturally are – as evidence of disagreement over how to approach that subject-matter.

Since using philosophy to determine the nature of philosophy invites a partisanship which presupposes exactly what it sets out to determine, I think we must recognize that metaphilosophy is not necessarily a kind of philosophy. If we want to determine the nature of philosophy even-handedly, we should not simply get on with philosophical business as usual, but rather engage in general reflection of the sort that occurs in many areas of life, not just philosophy; we need to reflect upon the current practice and history of philosophy, in order to try to discover a unifying subject-matter; which is the same sort of thing we would do to determine the nature of any discipline. Once we know this subject-matter, however, we can then engage in second-order reflection upon it in order to ask why it leads us to certain kinds of philosophical conclusions. And since this is a way of investigating the subject-matter itself, it is a kind of metaphilosophy that does deserve to be called philosophy; when we are in a position to do this, we will

no longer just be investigating the study of the subject-matter, but also what it is about that subject-matter which makes the study proceed in the way it does.⁹

When we engage in the kind of general and not specifically philosophical reflection required, however, a familiar kind of scepticism immediately takes hold. A good place to start is with the name of the discipline, coming from the Greek for 'love of wisdom', since until relatively recently this term was applied indiscriminately to all areas of learning, as seems appropriate to its literal meaning. As such, 'philosophy' was not originally conceived as a name for a discipline with a distinctive subject-matter, which is clear from the fact that the Greek philosophers had many interests apart from those we would now consider philosophical; Aristotle is widely recognized as the founder of biology, for instance. The narrowing of the meaning of 'philosophy' occurred through the increasing specialization of knowledge, as independent disciplines, and particularly sciences, developed to take over discussion of topics that were once the domain of more general scholars. The topics that remained, and hence were not either taken up by a new discipline or abandoned, are those we now regard as philosophical, with the historical figures we regard as philosophers being those who made important contributions to these topics; their contributions to mathematics and science, for instance, are now chiefly of concern in the history of mathematics and science.¹⁰

The fact that the topics philosophy deals with have been largely untouched by the advance of science, raises the suspicion that they may have nothing in common except our inability, at present at least, to treat them scientifically; this would certainly explain why the subject-matter of philosophy is not readily apparent. This kind of view is reminiscent of Comte's claim that 'each branch of our knowledge, passes successively through three different theoretical stages: the theological or fictitious, the metaphysical or abstract, and the scientific or positive', with 'philosophy' as we now understand it, corresponding to Comte's second, 'metaphysical or abstract' stage, prior to science.¹¹ Philosophy might thus be understood as an a priori, speculative stage of inquiry, which offers an improvement on mythological or religious explanations, but which is destined for eventual replacement by a properly regimented programme of empirical research. Such a view is supported by recent history, given that both psychology and cognitive science, founded in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively, originated from a priori philosophical theorizing before becoming established, and then leaving behind the founding assumptions of their philosophical originators.

This view of philosophy as a priori speculation about topics we are unable to treat scientifically at present – a breeding ground for proto-sciences with no real area of expertise to call its own – is a common one. But there are two problems with it. The first is that the traditional core of metaphysical and epistemological problems characteristic of the discipline, do not form the kind of disparate list this view would lead you to expect. Rather, questions about appearance and reality, representation and knowledge and so on, do seem to form a cohesive subject-matter. This impression of unity is reinforced by the fact that philosophers from the Greeks onwards have grouped their treatments of these topics together within unified texts; the core topics of the contemporary discipline were not generally extracted and pieced together from works giving equal prominence to scientific and mathematical matters. And the second problem with the view is that when we consider these traditional problems, it is hard to see how they

could be dealt with in any way apart from through a priori reflection. In recent years, some philosophers have found a role for experimentation in philosophy. But although this certainly adds 'another tool to the philosopher's toolbox', which is valuable, most notably, for the check it provides on baseless claims to the intuitive high ground which can sometimes play an important role in motivating philosophical positions, there nevertheless seems to be no prospect of empirically determining whether consciousness is physical or we can know the world as it is in itself, for instance. This seems a matter of principle, rather than the result of a temporary shortfall in science.¹²

Taken together, these considerations suggest that there is something distinctive about the subject-matter of philosophy that has prevented philosophical questions from being investigated scientifically. If this is right, however, then another strand of Comte's positivism suggests itself, namely scepticism about the legitimacy of philosophical problems.¹³ Much of the impetus for this kind of scepticism results from the combination of the paradigmatic problems of philosophy often involving factual matters, such as the nature of perception or time; and its a priori methodology, which typically involves a lone philosopher simply reflecting on the matter – albeit in the company of previous reflections, and with the intention of subjecting his or her reflections to the criticisms of others.¹⁴ Attempts to work out how the world works through reflection alone, however, have seemed suspicious ever since the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, in which quantitative, mathematical approaches gradually came to replace the use of a priori reasoning framed within imprecise natural language; the contrast between the a priori reflections of philosophers, and the empirical methodology of science, is highlighted by certain conspicuous attempts, now immediately recognizable as misguided, that philosophers made to practise natural science a priori, as for example in Descartes's *The World*, and in later works of *Naturphilosophie*, such as Schelling's *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*.¹⁵

Given that the ascendancy of empirical methodology led to an exponential growth in human knowledge, any suggestion that it is distinctive of philosophical problems that they cannot be dealt with scientifically as a matter of principle, naturally generates suspicion about the cogency of these problems; perhaps the paring down of 'philosophical' concerns that delivered the contemporary discipline really amounted to a steady hiving off, the remainder from which is a residue of archaic pseudo-problems. This suspicion is heightened by the notorious lack of progress in philosophy: for an academic discipline that arguably predates all others, and has been contributed to by some of the most celebrated thinkers of all time, philosophy has apparently enjoyed an astonishing lack of success in solving its problems. All the main ones remain thoroughly controversial, and most of the principal positions taken on them in mediaeval and ancient times survive within contemporary debates in clearly recognizable form. Thus unlike science – which builds on what came before and then forgets it, such that it would be unthinkable for a leading physicist to bring ancient Greek or early modern physics into a contemporary discussion – the history of philosophy seems inseparable from its current practice, and leading philosophers do often defend positions that are explicitly Platonic, Aristotelian or Kantian. Moreover, it is not just that none of the central problems of philosophy has been solved to anything like universal satisfaction, for there are not even any historically important positions that have been definitively

disproved; the belief that the mind is a separate substance which controls the body is one of the most unpopular theories in contemporary philosophy, for instance, and yet it still has its distinguished defenders, and any sensible bookmaker would keep the odds on a twenty-first century renaissance of Cartesian dualism relatively low.¹⁶

Of course, each new generation of philosophers claims to have solved some problems, or at least to have made progress on them, but there are always counterclaims and competing approaches, and the next generation always seems to be dissatisfied. This lack of steady progress does not necessarily indicate that the problems are illusory or insoluble, for it may simply be that the kind of methodology required for work on the problems to proceed as an a priori science has yet to be developed, or has perhaps only been developed relatively recently; this latter kind of claim has been made regularly within philosophy ever since Kant.¹⁷ However, another reason to think that the problem is indeed with the problems, and one which is particularly hard to ignore, is that the most powerful voices to raise suspicions about philosophical problems have been philosophers themselves. Arguably the two most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, namely Wittgenstein and Heidegger, fall squarely into this camp.

Wittgenstein was famously disdainful of philosophy, regarding it as a form of intellectual disease that he needed to free himself from in order to pursue a better, more ordinary life; philosophical problems, in his developed view, were an illusion of language, to be cured through a special kind of therapy requiring us to return to everyday forms of discourse in which the problems do not arise. As such, traditional philosophical problems were not to be solved, but rather avoided, or if necessary, diagnosed and treated. Heidegger, on the other hand, came to regard these problems as an unavoidable stage in the historical development of a metaphysical interpretation of the world that began with Plato and culminated in the technological understanding of the world provided by science; as he once put it, 'the development of philosophy into the independent sciences . . . is the legitimate completion of philosophy'.¹⁸ In his developed view, it was a mistake to try to solve or overcome these problems – as he himself had earlier tried to do by using reflection upon everyday practices to provide an alternative to the metaphysical interpretation of the world – since the problems were characteristic of their historical epoch, and needed only to be passively reflected upon in order to maintain the kind of openness, or *Gelassenheit*, that would allow a new, non-manipulative understanding to naturally develop. Thus although Heidegger was not in the least disdainful of philosophy, but rather considered it of the utmost importance, he still saw no prospect of its problems being solved, and regarded continuing attempts to solve them as misguided.

The end of philosophy themes that emerge in these iconic figures of the twentieth century are not isolated, but rather symptomatic of philosophy's long developing suicidal tendencies, which have been out in the open since Comte, and became a focus of twentieth-century movements such as logical positivism, ordinary language philosophy, pragmatism and deconstruction. A milder scepticism about philosophical problems has even been absorbed by the mainstream, to the extent that traditional problems are rarely taken at face value any more, with the standard approach being to try to unravel them, thereby showing that it is only on the basis of faulty assumptions or reasoning that we come to think there are problems in the first place.

Thus philosophers of perception try to show that our naïve view of perception is the correct one; philosophers of language try to show that there is nothing substantive to say about truth; and philosophers of mind try to show that the mind-body problem is an illusion.¹⁹ This development does not bode well for the future of the discipline, however, since it is increasingly coming to seem that philosophers are the only ones taking the steps in need of unravelling, given that many people today, whose world-view is shaped by science, often seem unwilling to understand philosophical problems, and are ready to express their lack of understanding not in deference to the expertise of philosophers, as might have previously been the case, but rather aggressively, with the implication that there is nothing to understand.²⁰ Philosophy's internalization of scepticism about its problems makes this stance particularly difficult to defend against; why learn to empathize with a problem if doing so consists in being lured into a trap from which you must subsequently learn to escape?

In light of the fact that problems requiring us to take a stance on the nature of the world through a priori reflection are naturally viewed with suspicion within our intellectual culture, that philosophy has apparently failed to make progress on its problems, and that one of the most persistent trends in philosophy's history is the suspicion that its problems are illusory, there is plenty of reason for scepticism about philosophy. Nevertheless, institutionally at least, the discipline is healthier today than ever before, in that there are more professional philosophers, students, journals, academic and popular books, and philosophy has successfully transferred online to continue its exponential growth. In short, according to most objective measures, the discipline is thriving, with the metaphilosophical optimists apparently able to thrive alongside the pessimists; constructive metaphysics, spurned throughout much of the last century, is enjoying a renaissance, thereby reinvigorating pessimism to the effect that metaphysical disputes are 'merely verbal', with a new form of pessimism on the rise in which scientific findings, such as those of cognitive science, are adduced to challenge traditional philosophical methods and assumptions.²¹ And all the while, there are some philosophers who continue to regard their subject as a fledging science; some who regard it as a form of literature that should celebrate the open-ended nature of its discussion; some who think that it deals with insoluble mysteries; and there are even those who would seek to explain the activities of philosophers in terms of psychoanalysis or sociology.²²

Amid all of these competing agendas, approaches and self-images, it is no easy matter to discern a unifying subject-matter of philosophical inquiry. But if we do want to persevere with the question 'what is philosophy?', there are certain key points, broached in the preceding discussion, that it will help to keep in mind:

1. Questions concerning the meaning of human existence are paradigmatically philosophical.
2. The history of philosophy has been centrally concerned with questions of metaphysics and epistemology.
3. Philosophy was not conceived as a discipline, but rather deals with problems left behind by the development of independent sciences.
4. The problems that remain seem to form a unified subject-matter.

5. These problems seem to only be amenable to a priori reflection.
6. Philosophy has apparently made little progress with these problems; in combination with (5), this generates metaphilosophical scepticism.

But why should we persevere with the question? One reason is that we need to know what philosophy is to assess scepticism about its problems. But another equally important reason is that we already implicitly know enough about philosophy – from even the most cursory acquaintance with the concerns and aspirations of the great philosophers of the past – to know that if our culture is to contain any areas of self-conscious practice, philosophy must be surely one of them. For it would be absurd if philosophers, of all people, were simply engaging with inherited puzzles without knowing why they were doing so; and more absurd still if the reasons were always as inconsequential as that the puzzles are interesting (as train-spotting is to some people) or that addressing certain traditional questions is a prerequisite for career advancement.²³ Ideally, at least, a philosopher should be somebody with a clear grasp of their aims in thinking and writing, and a substantive justification to offer for them.

3. Enframement and ontology

The answer provided to the question ‘what is philosophy?’ in this section and the next will address the points listed above. Its leading idea is that philosophy begins in, and remains rooted in, the kind of questions already to be found exercising the authors of the *Epic*, namely questions about the meaning of life. It was in trying to answer these questions that the concept of transcendence was introduced into our thinking about the world, and the employment of this concept produced what was eventually to become the core epistemological and metaphysical subject-matter of a distinctive discipline. The concept of transcendence allows us to think of the familiar world we perceive as a potentially misleading appearance of a more fundamental reality. This concept is familiar from its employment within some of the most influential of all philosophical theories, such as in Plato’s distinction between the perceived world of becoming and the ideal world of being, Kant’s distinction between the empirically real world and things-in-themselves, Laozi’s idea that the unitary and undifferentiated reality of *Dao* transcends perception, and the Buddhist notion that true reality transcends the perceived world. It is an essential ingredient in formulating many of the traditional problems of philosophy, and remains in the background of recent debates even where the aim is to extricate it from our thinking.

Now the concept of transcendence is evidently not implicated in all and only philosophical debates, and neither do all such debates bear upon the kinds of mortal concern we find evidenced in the *Epic*. However, if we understand the concept of philosophy as a prototype concept, that is, as a structured representation which encodes a statistical analysis of the features that items in the extension of the concept tend to possess, then we need only claim that prototypical philosophical concerns relate either to concerns about the meaning of life, broadly construed, or to concerns raised by employing the concept of transcendence; with other concerns counting

as philosophical in virtue of their association, whether for conceptual or historical reasons, with these prototypes.²⁴ Philosophy cannot be said to have one thing in common, then, as was to be expected given its long and complex history. But it does centre on two prototypical concerns; and once the connection between them is understood, we have more than enough unity to speak of a distinctive subject-matter of philosophy.

Connections between the meaning of life and hypotheses of a transcendent reality are not only found in philosophy, of course, since they have also been a mainstay of religious belief. A good part of the reason for this is rooted in our standard patterns of explanation, since in seeking to explain puzzling phenomena within life, we typically invoke a context of meaning into which the phenomena can be placed. In trying to understand human life as a whole, then, it is only to be expected that we should have sought to employ the same form of explanation that usually serves us so well, and that this should have led us to look beyond the human context. As such, religions have typically hypothesized contexts of meaning supplied by supernatural gods, which can then be appealed to in answering practical concerns about how we ought to act and organize our societies. Thus our patterns of explanation provide a natural route to hypotheses of wider meaning; the discipline of philosophy was only able to emerge, however, when a whole host of other routes were discovered.

Let us call a question about the context of meaning into which something fits a question of 'enframing'. Thus if we want to understand the meaning of a particular practice, we do so by framing it within the wider context of social life; and if we want to understand the meaning of human life, we look to frame it within a wider context than that provided by our social framework. When people first tried to systematically understand the world, then, we can assume that questions of enframing were at the forefront of their minds. This is because we know the questions dominated our earliest literature, that religion has dominated human civilization since its beginnings, and that our standard patterns of explanation naturally lead us to the assumption that there might be a reason why we exist. Moreover since answering large-scale enframing questions might reasonably be expected to tell us how to act and organize our societies, it seems likely that the questions have been with us for almost as long as the practical concerns themselves.

Now enframing is obviously not all we would want to know about in a world full of puzzling natural phenomena; and we know it was not from the fact that early literature also shows a preoccupation with meteorology, astronomy, anatomy, physics and many other areas of concern which contribute to a general understanding of how nature works. This agenda of trying to explain the natural world, which was eventually to become the preserve of science, seems to have been the primary concern of those thinkers traditionally regarded as the first Western philosophers, namely the Milesian cosmologists. The way they went about pursuing it was to have a definitive influence on both the history of science and philosophy, for their innovation was to look for a basic constituent, or series of constituents, from which everything in the universe is composed or can be explained. This is an idea that lives on in the scientific assumption that everything is composed of, or can be explained in terms of, elementary physical particles and forces. But it also lives on in philosophical debates about fundamental

categories; debates about whether universals exist in addition to particulars, for example, or whether mind can be reduced to matter.

Let us call a question about the basic constituents of reality a question of 'ontology'. Now if we think of philosophy in the original, expansive way – and thus as encompassing everything we would now count as science or philosophy – then we can say that philosophy was originally driven by questions of both ontology and enframement; we wanted to know what exists and why it exists. These two concerns would have been closely connected from the outset, not only because supernatural enframement can be invoked to explain natural phenomena, but also because ontological issues are directly relevant to large-scale questions of enframement. Thus in order to determine whether there is a meaning of life, a natural place to start is with the ontological question of whether there are any gods to provide a wider framework within which human life exists. However, although questions of enframement naturally lead into ontology, it was not until the concept of transcendence entered the mix that these issues began to be united in the new and distinctive way that was to give rise to the discipline of philosophy as we now understand it.

It is immediately after the initial phase of Milesian cosmology that we find the concept of transcendence introduced by Parmenides; this was a crucial stage in the development of the discipline, since Parmenides had a definitive influence on Plato, and Plato had a definitive influence on the subsequent history of Western philosophy. Parmenides introduced transcendence by arguing that the concept of non-existence is irrevocably confused, and that if we purge our understanding of it, we arrive at a new understanding of reality quite unlike anything we had previously supposed; thus we discover, for instance, that reality has no past or future and is unchanging. What was important about Parmenides's thinking was not so much the argument he employed, as the general form of the conclusion he reached. For the clear implication of claiming that change is illusory is that the changing world we observe in daily life is merely apparent: reality has been reconceived as something which transcends or exists beyond illusory appearance, and which can only be apprehended by reason.

Parmenides's claim that reality is not what perception and common sense lead us to suppose, opened up the space of transcendence. One of the most important consequences of this new way of thinking – which had a profound effect on the development of religion – was to make it possible to conceive of the hypothesis of a meaning of life in terms of transcendent enframement; the hypothesis of a wider context of meaning, after all, is much weaker than the hypothesis that space and time are transcended, and is more readily conceived as the existence of powerful beings within *our* space and time. This development consequently proved well-suited to the natural presumption against nihilism which the framework and our patterns of explanation provide, since it made the fact that there is little suggestion of a wider context of meaning to be found in the observable world seem irrelevant to questions of enframement, given that the wider context could now be thought of as transcending the entire physical universe and hence anything we might discover within it. In addition, the introduction of transcendence made it possible for the idea that human life fits into a wider context to be modelled on a phenomenon that was already a familiar, but suitably mysterious, part of our lives, namely dreaming; it is no coincidence that

Parmenides sets out his doctrine in a dream-like context in which he is required to pass through 'the gates of the paths of Night and Day' to learn the truth from a goddess, whose presence is itself indicative of a wider context of enframement.²⁵

Another consequence of Parmenides's introduction of transcendence was that it reconfigured the relationship between questions of enframement and ontology. Thus although questions of enframement had always naturally led into questions of ontology, the recognition of the possibility of transcendent enframement raised new and distinctive types of ontological questions, concerning whether the physical universe provides the final context of existence, and whether the basic constituents of the physical universe are the basic constituents of reality itself. These are the kind of philosophical questions we now think of as ontological, as opposed to scientific questions about what the basic constituents of the physical universe are; in Milesian cosmology the distinction had yet to be made, hence its ambiguous status between science and philosophy. And in turn, these new ontological questions raised new types of epistemological questions about whether we can know reality itself, or only an illusion that reality transcends.

When Plato took up the idea of transcendence from Parmenides, one of his most important innovations was to supply a model of the relationship between the familiar world of everyday life and the unfamiliar world of transcendent reality. Thus, echoing Parmenides, he distinguished the illusory world of perception from the transcendent reality we can only know intellectually; but his crucial addition was to relate these worlds by claiming that the perceived is a mere copy of the transcendent. This introduced the concept of representation into philosophy, which has remained one of its central preoccupations. In addition, he made the connection between questions of enframement and ontology considerably more explicit by finding ways to directly employ Parmenides's thesis of transcendence to answer questions of enframement.

Thus Plato makes it the basis of his explanation of 'why the creator made this world of generation', with the explanation centring on the creator's desire to copy his own transcendent goodness.²⁶ And more famously, he makes it central to his political and moral theories, in which it is the philosophers' knowledge of transcendent reality which qualifies them to tell us how we ought to live. Ancient non-Western philosophies made much the same move, by claiming that we need to think beyond the perceptual world to find guidance in understanding the purpose of our lives. Thus for Laozi, conformity to the *Dao* – which is hidden from perception – provides moral guidance by inculcating otherwise overlooked virtues such as inactivity; while Buddhist thought teaches us to detach ourselves from the illusory world of perception to achieve tranquillity and salvation.

Although ontology and enframement are tightly interwoven within Plato's philosophy, the Western philosophical tradition was ultimately to develop a purely ontological interest in such matters. Thus the problem of universals is still worked on today just as it was in medieval and ancient times; and yet although descendents of Plato's views remain at the centre of debates – as do some of his arguments – Platonic realism is now almost always dissociated from the metaphysics of transcendence, and connections to enframement are rarely if ever made. The vast majority of participants to contemporary debates about the relative merits of realism and nominalism would

not suppose for a moment that these debates have any bearing upon questions about how we ought to live.²⁷ Rather, such debates have long since taken on the veneer of disinterested scientific inquiry, with the motivation for continuing them – to the extent that this ever arises as an issue – simply being to resolve an acknowledged philosophical problem, while possibly making progress on others as a result.

Other problems opened by Plato's account of transcendence have developed along similar lines. Thus the traditional opposition between materialists who 'define reality as the same thing as body', and idealists who hold that 'true reality consists in certain intelligible and bodiless forms', has resurfaced in innumerable ways since Plato's time, most notably in modern mind-body dualism, which remains at the root of debates about the nature of consciousness and the efficacy of psychological properties.²⁸ In all these cases and more, then, there are good reasons to think that our paradigmatic philosophical concerns originate in Plato's employment of the concept of transcendence, and thus to agree to some extent with A. N. Whitehead's famous comment about Western philosophy consisting of footnotes to Plato. However the debates we have inherited have certainly changed in one crucial respect; they typically no longer make any connection to the enframing concerns that Plato wore on his sleeve.

Although concerns about transcendence and the meaning of life have been marginalized over the course of the history of philosophy, especially in twentieth-century analytic philosophy's drive to naturalism and the emulation of scientific or mathematical inquiry, they provide the unifying core to the subject-matter of philosophy. According to the present account, then, attempts to answer enframing questions led to the discovery of theoretical motivations to introduce the concept of transcendence into our thinking, and this innovation formed our philosophical conception of ontology, generating epistemological and metaphysical problems that combined with the original questions to become definitive of a new branch of inquiry.

Thus for Plato, with whom the core moral, epistemological and metaphysical concerns of philosophy come together for the first time, the concept of transcendence provides the key to determining how we ought to live, which is an idea that has dominated the history of Western moral thinking through the agency of religion. But Plato also found other reasons for conceiving reality as something that transcends the perceived world. And there have subsequently been many more suggestions, such as to account for freedom in a world governed by deterministic laws, or to avoid attributing the apparent contradictions in our dynamic conception of time to reality itself, to mention some prominent examples. Once introduced, however, the concept of transcendence brings in its wake a host of problems concerning knowledge, representation, truth and the ontological status of appearance and reality. Thus when a natural set of concerns about the meaning of life combined with an intellectual innovation that led us to see the need for – but problematic consequences of – a new way of thinking about reality, it was then that philosophy acquired its subject-matter.

In answer to doubts about the unity of philosophy based upon its apparently haphazard origins, then, we may respond that although philosophy was not conceived as a discipline, human inquiry nevertheless acquired a distinctive set of concerns at an early stage in its development, when the concept of transcendence was introduced into our attempts to gain a systematic understanding of the world and our place within

it. These concerns, along with others that grew out of them, are those we now classify as philosophical. On this account, we find philosophy somewhere between religion and science, although not as Comte's transitional stage. Rather, philosophy resembles religion in its aims and science in its approach. It resembles religion, in that it begins in the same kind of questions, and is rooted in the same desire for a synoptic vision of the world and our place within it. But it resembles science in seeking a rational, disinterested view of reality, no matter how discomfiting this may be.

Western philosophy came to be explicitly demarcated from other branches of learning in the modern period, and thereby acquired its modern sense; a sense which allowed Western scholars to recognize it within non-Western cultures as soon as they encountered it.²⁹ It became demarcated because concerns relating to transcendence were relatively unaffected by the advent of the independent empirical sciences, and as a consequence of this, they remained a part of the traditional body of learning that had no name apart from 'philosophy'. Thus although empirical science rapidly achieved more success in satisfying our interest in the workings of nature than a priori speculation had ever managed, ontological issues relating to transcendence were left behind; and in combination with correlative epistemological issues, as well as the enframing issues empirical science also left largely untouched, these came to comprise the core subject-matter of the discipline of philosophy.

Looked at in this way, the origins of philosophy no longer provide any reason to doubt the unity of its subject-matter, and the name 'philosophy' seems apt, given the centrality of this subject-matter to many of the best-known Greek philosophers – with whom the name will always be indelibly linked. Moreover the organic process by which this subject-matter came to be the concern of an independent discipline goes some way to explaining why the nature of philosophy should have become a controversial topic, given that the discipline was not inaugurated by anything like a conscious decision, but rather emerged from a long tradition of addressing a group of problems whose connection had long since been obscured, both by the wide variety of directions the tradition had led – often explicitly away from the unifying factor of transcendence – as well as by the distinct concerns it had developed alongside. With this account, then, we can begin to see how the development of empirical science from a priori speculation might have left behind a unified discipline whose unity was not apparent. What is perhaps more significant, however, is the light it sheds on the two most persistent sources of scepticism about the discipline; namely its apparent lack of progress and its a priori method.

4. Against philosophy-scepticism

As regards lack of progress, once it is recognized that questions of enframing are integral to the subject-matter of philosophy – which along with religion is one of only two areas of culture which asks such questions – then philosophy-scepticism is immediately answered by the fact that the discipline of philosophy discovered the truth of *nihilism*. Thus philosophy answered the most important enframing question of all, the question which provided its *raison d'être*. This discovery has produced – or at

least has the potential to produce – a significant change in our self-understanding, since it overthrows the presumption of a meaning of life that has dominated most of human history, a presumption continually reinforced by both our way of life within the framework, and our usual patterns of explanation. With the discovery of nihilism, then, human beings – who have always been in the unique position of knowing they will die – have learnt in addition that their existence serves no overall purpose. Knowledge of this kind lacks any particular practical consequences, but it does have the potential to achieve a deep personal resonance with every individual who reflects on it, thereby making other more impressive human discoveries seem like mere curiosities in comparison.

Complaints about lack of progress in philosophy gain whatever force they have by restricting our attention to the traditional metaphysical and epistemological problems, thereby neglecting the enframing concerns that in large part drew us into this area in the first place. The tradition of investigating these metaphysical and epistemological problems, however, ultimately led to the discovery of nihilism. Nihilism did not appear from nowhere, but rather emerged, in the West at least, from a long tradition of developing ideas about transcendence which progressed from the Greeks, through medieval philosophy and theology, to Cartesian rationalism, British empiricism and German idealism, before Nietzsche brought this tradition to its culmination with his explicit and definitive statements about the threat of nihilism in the late nineteenth century. Philosophy cannot be given sole credit for the discovery, of course, for many ideas belonging to different traditions – particularly scientific ideas – helped to prepare the intellectual ground; as of course did social changes to our way of life. But nevertheless, nihilism is a paradigmatically philosophical thesis, and its truth, in the West, was first understood and thematized by a philosopher who was thoroughly and primarily engaged with the philosophical tradition.³⁰

In the time since this discovery, philosophy has pursued various agendas. One of the most prominent – which largely stems from Heidegger – has centred on nihilism, and has consisted in both reactions against nihilism and attempts to determine its consequences. Much of the rest of philosophy, however, has been largely unaffected, and has continued to focus on traditional metaphysical and epistemological problems; finding innovative new ways to approach and reformulate them, while building links to new knowledge. However, although philosophy has continued to forge ahead, we should not lose sight of the fact that an important stage in its history is already complete; since the fundamental question that led into its concern with transcendence has been answered, even if there is much more to be said about this answer.

The other main source of scepticism about philosophy, namely its *a priori* method, is also undermined by this account. An important aspect of the justification for the *a priori* method of philosophy is simply that transcendence cannot in principle be investigated empirically. This is because any empirical investigation of a phenomenon will be neutral on the question of whether that phenomenon exists in a transcendent context. Thus when science uses experiential testing to develop accurate descriptions of the physical universe, it does so indifferently to the metaphysical status of what it is investigating. Scientific discourses concerning particles, fields of force, and the like, can be read in line with any number of philosophical interpretations, depending on how

we answer metaphysical and epistemological questions concerning whether science describes a world beyond perception, and how we should characterize the relationship between perceptions and the world perceived. These questions can only be answered by a priori reasoning employing concepts derived from a tradition of thought that places the world into the context of transcendence, thereby conceptualizing the world in light of possibilities such as that the particulars we perceive are transcended by universals, or that perceptions are transcended by a mind-independent reality.

What we are effectively doing when we engage in a priori reasoning about this subject-matter, is trying to determine how to make maximal sense of the world using philosophical concepts, that is, concepts that have traditionally been employed to address enframing and ontological concerns relating to – or at one time thought to relate to – transcendence. Deciding how best to employ these concepts is not the kind of matter that could be determined by science. Thus Berkeley's immaterialist interpretation of science in terms of inert ideas and God's omniscience was not rejected because of its incompatibility with any particular scientific discovery, but rather because of doubts about its internal consistency, allied to qualms about its theoretical extravagance. In principle, no doubt, we could find a way to understand current scientific theories in Berkeleyan terms; but most philosophers agree that this is not the best way to employ concepts such as 'physical', 'idea' and 'causation'.

Other philosophical concerns display similar imperviousness to empirical results. So, for instance, a detailed description of the interaction that takes place between brain and external world in typical cases of sensory experience is neutral on the question of whether that interaction is best conceptualized as knowledge; and the development of a 'hedonistic calculus' allowing us to quantify levels of pleasure would not thereby determine what is the most theoretically satisfactory way to conceptually relate pleasure to moral worth. Empirical results can and frequently do influence philosophical debates, of course, especially when new phenomena are discovered that must be accounted for; but they can only be a factor, interpretable in different ways, within an a priori deliberation about how best to employ our concepts.

The short answer to philosophy-scepticism, then, is that philosophy has a distinctive subject-matter which centres on enframing and transcendence; that its progress in discovering nihilism is unassailable; and that its a priori methodology is entirely appropriate given its subject-matter and aims. However, the fact remains, it might be objected, that the discipline of philosophy has primarily concerned itself with problems on which it has made little or no progress. Moreover, if it is insisted that these problems can only be investigated a priori, then given this lack of progress, there still seems to be good reason to suspect that the problems are illusory.

The objection can be taken a step further, for the metaphilosophy we have started to develop seems to generate its own source of philosophy-scepticism. This is because nihilism's rejection of any transcendent context to provide life with a meaning might be thought to suggest that the whole idea of transcendence is a nonsense we have learnt to see through, such that if the traditional problems of philosophy are rooted in this idea, they are likely to be nonsense too. Thus perhaps the real implication of our account is that the metaphysical and epistemological problems of philosophy are pseudo-problems that served their purpose – by instigating a line of reflection leading to the

discovery of nihilism – but which are now set to fade from the intellectual landscape; this would make them akin to other once pressing but now obsolete problems, such as astronomical problems about equant points. Viewed in this light, then, our account starts to look like yet another ‘end of philosophy’ narrative. This time, the narrative would be that in searching for the meaning of life, philosophy discovered the concept of transcendence, thereby embroiling itself in various metaphysical and epistemological problems. But the eventual discovery that there is no transcendent context has revealed these problems to be illusory. We would be congratulating philosophy, but retiring it nonetheless.

The flaw to this reasoning, however, is that nihilism does not find fault with the concept of transcendence. Nihilism simply holds that there is no transcendent context *of meaning*. Nihilism is thus perfectly compatible with the possibility that human life exists in a transcendent context. This means that we can be nihilists without ruling out the possibility that philosophy did in fact discover a legitimate subject-matter in transcendence. And as we shall see when we turn to the topic of consciousness, it did.

However, the problem of progress remains. About this, two things should immediately be noted, both of which suggest that there only seems to be a problem because an inappropriate comparison to science or mathematics has been made. First, the idea that philosophy might accumulate definitive results, thereby allowing an interested party to consult a textbook to discover not the views of some philosopher or another, but rather the *facts* that, for instance, free will is compatible with determinism, or mental properties are functional properties, seems on the face of it absurd; and not even obviously desirable. Secondly, if philosophy is instead compared to an intellectual endeavour such as art, for instance, then the fact that generation after generation of philosophers take up the same old problems in new ways, without reaching lasting consensus on either solutions or approaches, does not necessarily indicate that no progress is made. After all, artists have represented the same kinds of subjects, such as people and landscapes, throughout history; with each generation developing new styles of representation, and with competing schools typically showing little sympathy with approaches other than their own (just like philosophy). But none of this suggests that there are not better and worse representations of landscapes; or that progress has not been made in the history of art.

The reason that it seems absurd to suppose that philosophy might accumulate a track-record of definitive solutions, is that these are problems each new generation must think through for themselves. To some extent, philosophical opinion is a matter of individual intellectual conscience, such that excessive conformity in these matters would evidence intellectual stagnation within a culture. In short, you simply cannot be told the answers in philosophy, any more than you can in matters of religious faith or aesthetics. Rather, addressing these kinds of questions requires a degree of personal reflection; in philosophy we must personally deliberate over how best to employ traditional philosophical concepts to understand the world – guided by the options developed in the history of the discipline – in order to be said to have philosophical views. Philosophy does not make progress by eliminating these options until only one remains, but rather by exploring their implications, removing their weaknesses, investigating their compatibility with newly discovered empirical facts, developing

new methods of argumentative support and even occasionally working out new options. Thus if Cartesian dualism does make a definitive comeback in the twenty-first century, this can be expected to be a new form of the theory that overcomes previous conceptual problems, and takes into account developments in the new science of consciousness; this would, if nothing else, constitute progress in our understanding of a dualist representation of the world.

That philosophical theories need to be continually thought-through and refreshed, and can apparently never be accepted as a body of knowledge, indicates something distinctive about the aims of philosophy, rather than providing reason to suspect its propriety. Except in the case of some moral and political philosophy, as well as the more applied branches of philosophy of science, the aim of philosophical inquiry is rarely practical; in that nobody is in practical need of a theory of truth or an answer to the sceptic, for instance. Rather, the aim of engaging with the traditional problems of philosophy is to achieve an overall understanding of reality and our place within it – of a kind not available within the necessarily more fragmented perspectives offered by natural and social sciences. To this extent, the aims of philosophy resemble those of religion, and it remains rooted in the same kinds of human need. Science is quite different in that it has the ability to leave old problems behind, aided by technological developments that lead to the discovery of new phenomena to be explained. But if philosophy were to leave any of its traditional problems behind, we would simply have lost some tried and tested vehicles for leading us into the most general thoughts about reality. Luckily, with philosophical opinions and methodologies as diverse as they have ever been, there is little chance of these intellectual resources drying up anytime soon.

5. Meno's paradox

In the argument that has come to be known as 'Meno's Paradox' (or 'The Paradox of Inquiry'), Plato has his character Meno ask Socrates – who has just been expressing his characteristic combination of self-confessed ignorance and readiness for inquiry – how it is possible to look for something if you do not know what it is; as Meno puts it, 'even if you come right up against it, how will you know that what you have found is the thing you didn't know?' Socrates's response is to invoke Plato's theory of recollection, according to which to learn is to remember truths that the immortal soul once knew but has forgotten. Inquiry is thereby modelled on the process of trying to prompt a memory, with its conclusion occurring when the memories come flooding back; inquiry reaches a natural conclusion, then, when the inquirer is able to recognize that their questions have been satisfactorily answered, because this recognition is the moment of recollection. Socrates draws back from claiming that we are literally remembering forgotten knowledge by saying that 'I shouldn't like to take my oath on the whole story', but he does nevertheless think that we are better off believing this story – which provides an impetus to inquiry – than believing that 'there is no point in looking because what we don't know we can never discover'.³¹

What Plato offers here is a useful model of constructive inquiry, and a good way to make sense of it is to think of the moment of recollection as our realization that a

possible answer to an inquiry fits into the parameters of the question we have asked. Thus if I arrive in a town for the first time and ask a passer-by for directions to the town hall, then when I receive an answer I will obviously not literally remember the route. But I will recognize whether or not the answer is appropriate to the question; my grasp of its significance allows me to recognize whether the answer is of the appropriate type. Thus if I am told to play chess, or to make my way to the airport, then I will not feel that my question has been satisfactorily answered; but if I am told to continue two blocks and take a left, then I probably will. When I make an inquiry, then, I may not know exactly what I am looking for, but I do know the sort of thing I am looking for, otherwise inquiry really would be impossible. And the sort of thing I am looking for is something that will satisfy my curiosity by fitting into the implicit parameters for satisfaction of the question I have asked. So we might say that when I recognize the answer as appropriate and am thus satisfied that the inquiry is concluded, this is not because I remember the answer; but rather because I remember the question.³²

The difficulty of remembering the question is a major obstacle to constructive inquiry in philosophy. This is because the questions we have inherited have been reformulated countless times, and come to us in a more or less technical format. This makes it highly unlikely that we would have asked some of these questions for ourselves prior to encountering the philosophical tradition; although we may have asked questions that subsequently strike us as related. The process of learning to be engaged by these questions – of coming to feel their ‘pull’ – is the process of joining the tradition; but this can be done without awareness of the natural curiosity that led to the questions being raised in the first place, or of how the questions connect up with our own natural curiosity. Without this curiosity to set parameters for its own satisfaction, however, the question is in danger of becoming an isolated intellectual puzzle, cut off from its own significance, which even if solved in its present form will soon reappear in another. Thus someone may become engaged by a question, and find an answer that fits the parameters they have either accepted or perhaps partially set themselves; but so long as its motivation remains obscure there are bound to be others with different parameters in mind who will be dissatisfied, and who will consequently set about reformulating the question in order to tackle it afresh.

Now as any discipline develops, the questions it addresses inevitably become further removed from natural sources of curiosity; it is hard to imagine anyone being naturally curious about black body radiation, for example, and nobody was in a position to become curious about distant nebulae until they were discovered. Thus it might seem inevitable that any discipline will eventually leave behind the initial sources of curiosity that gave it its start, in order to generate new and more sophisticated forms of inquiry. Moreover, by replacing intuitive, more or less inarticulate questions, with technical and precise ones, it seems that we increase our chances of being able to provide answers. Thus even if philosophy has in many cases moved beyond matters of natural human interest, this might be thought to be nothing more than a sign of the discipline’s maturity.

Where the difficulty arises, however, is that in coming to concern itself with more sophisticated questions, philosophy has rarely satisfied the more natural forms of curiosity, but has rather lost sight of them to a greater or lesser extent. This kind

of distancing which attends increasing sophistication does not present problems for science, because answering scientific questions adds to our stock of knowledge to incrementally build up an account of the workings of nature. Natural curiosity is legitimately left behind when explanations become available for the more obviously puzzling phenomena, and attention can then turn to other less apparent issues. However when philosophy asks sophisticated questions that we must actively learn to engage with, this is usually not because the more obvious questions have already been answered. Rather, sophisticated questions in philosophy often represent attempts, usually inherited, to formulate the obvious questions with precision, or else concern extraneous matters that have arisen in the course of such attempts.

Thus given that philosophical problems are rooted in matters of natural human interest, but have grown distant from this source, attempts to solve them can prove inconclusive and dissatisfying, because they have been cut off from their potential for natural resolution. Formulating a question with precision may make it more amenable to a solution, but while its intuitive basis remains a background theme vaguely motivating the inquiry, the solution is liable to simply shift attention to variant forms of the question. However, if traditional philosophical problems could be more explicitly connected – or in some cases reconnected – with the kinds of curiosity from which they arose, then there might be some prospect of this curiosity being satisfied; we might come to feel that we had found out what we wanted to know. Given that most philosophical problems – and certainly all the core, traditional ones – cannot be settled with an empirical result as in science, or with a conclusive proof as in mathematics, then this may be the best we can hope for.

Another, equally important reason why it is worth trying to connect philosophical problems with matters of natural human interest is that this provides a motivation for engaging with them. There is rarely any practical interest in non-moral philosophy, so apart from the possibility that philosophical theories might have positive knock-on effects for other fields of inquiry, as well as the general cultural benefits of sustained intellectual activity, all there is to motivate it is the interest of its problems. Once these problems have become disconnected from anything we might naturally want to know about, however, the interest starts to look artificial and not worth pursuing. After all, we can take a strong interest in the problems of fictional characters, but this interest is fabricated. And although philosophical problems are real rather than fictional, it is easy to fabricate real problems. Counting the blades of grass in a meadow would certainly create some real problems, but there is no reason for anybody to make the attempt.

If we work on the assumption that philosophical problems are rooted in matters about which we might be naturally curious, then, the connections we uncover or make more explicit may provide both the motivation for investigating the problem, and the potential for it to be satisfactorily resolved. This approach may not always be appropriate or even necessary, but trying to connect debates with matters of natural human interest may on occasion provide a fruitful counterbalance to philosophy's long-established tendency towards insularity. Furthermore, such an approach provides a simple check on artificial and self-inflicted intellectual torture; the 'why' game can go on as long as you like, as most children quickly learn, so it pays to stop when you find out what you

wanted to know. Of course, you may not be clear what you wanted to know, but the present suggestion is that such matters need to be reflected on as a matter of priority if inquiry is to find a natural resting place; we must reflect impersonally on what might have led people into the familiar problem areas of philosophy, and reflect personally on why we ourselves are interested.³³ Philosophy's precarious cultural position between science and religion has put great psychological pressure on its practitioners to wrap matters of obvious human interest in wilfully obscure prose or the trappings of technicality – depending on tradition – but it may be more productive, if also more disconcerting, to get things out in the open.