

---

*The Turning Point in Philosophy*

BY MORITZ SCHLICK

(TRANSLATED BY DAVID RYNIN)

---

FROM TIME to time prizes have been established for essays on the question what progress philosophy has made in a given period. The period tends to be limited on the one side by the name of some great thinker, on the other by "the present." It was thus assumed that there is some degree of clarity regarding the philosophic progress of mankind up to the time of that thinker, but that it is dubious what further contributions have been made in recent times.

Such questions clearly express a certain mistrust concerning the philosophy of the period which had recently elapsed. One has the impression of being presented only with an embarrassed formulation of the question: Has philosophy in that period made any progress whatever? For if one were sure that contributions had been made one would also know in what they consisted.

If the more remote past is regarded with less scepticism and one is rather inclined to see in its philosophy a continuous development, the explanation may be that one's attitude towards everything whose place is established in history is tinged with greater respect. A further point is that the older philosophers have at least demonstrated their historical influence. Hence in considering them one can take as one's base their historical rather than their substantive importance, especially since one often does not venture to distinguish between the two.

But it is just the ablest thinkers who most rarely have believed that the results of earlier philosophizing, including that of the classical models, remain unshakable. This is shown by the fact that basically every new system starts again from the beginning, that every thinker

"Die Wende Der Philosophie," as this piece is called in German, opened the first number of Volume I of *Erkenntnis* (1930/31). It is here published with the kind permission of Mrs. Schlick and Professor Carnap, the co-editor of *Erkenntnis*.

seeks his own foundation and does not wish to stand on the shoulders of his predecessors. Descartes (not without reason) felt himself to be making a wholly new beginning; Spinoza believed that in introducing the (to be sure quite adventitious) mathematical form he had found the ultimate philosophical method; and Kant was convinced that on the basis of the way taken by him philosophy would at last adopt the sure path of a science. Further examples are superfluous, for practically all great thinkers have sought for a radical reform of philosophy and considered it essential.

This peculiar fate of philosophy has been so often described and bemoaned that it is indeed pointless to discuss it at all. Silent scepticism and resignation seem to be the only appropriate attitudes. Two thousand years of experience seem to teach that efforts to put an end to the chaos of systems and to change the fate of philosophy can no longer be taken seriously. To point out that man has finally succeeded in solving the most stubborn problems, for example that of Daedalus, gives an informed person no comfort; for what he fears is just that philosophy will never arrive at a genuine "problem."

I refer to this anarchy of philosophical opinions which has so often been described, in order to leave no doubt that I am fully conscious of the scope and weighty significance of the conviction that I should now like to express. For I am convinced that we now find ourselves at an altogether decisive turning point in philosophy, and that we are objectively justified in considering that an end has come to the fruitless conflict of systems. We are already at the present time, in my opinion, in possession of methods which make every such conflict in principle unnecessary. What is now required is their resolute application.

These methods have been quietly developed, unnoticed by the majority of those who teach or write philosophy; and thus a situation has been created which is not comparable to any earlier one. That the situation is unique and that the turning embarked upon is really decisive can be understood only by becoming acquainted with the new paths and by looking back, from the standpoint to which they lead, upon all those efforts that have ever passed as "philosophical."

The paths have their origin in logic. Leibniz dimly saw their beginning. Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege have opened up important stretches in the last decades, but Ludwig Wittgenstein (in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1922) is the first to have pushed forward to the decisive turning point.

It is well known that in recent decades mathematicians have developed new logical methods, at first primarily for the solution

of their own problems which could not be overcome by the traditional methods of logic. But the logic thus developed has also long since shown its superiority in other ways over the old forms, and doubtless will very soon supplant them. Was I referring to this logic as the powerful means which is in principle capable of raising us above all philosophical conflicts? Does it give us general rules with whose help all the traditional problems of philosophy can at least in principle be resolved?

If this were so I should hardly have had the right to say that a wholly new situation had been created. For then there would have been only a gradual, as it were, technical progress, as for example, when the invention of the internal combustion engine finally made possible the solution of the problem of flight. However highly the value of the new methods is to be esteemed, it is plain that nothing so fundamental can be brought about by the mere development of a method. The great turning point is therefore not to be attributed to logic itself but to something quite different which was indeed stimulated and made possible by it, but which proceeds on a much deeper level: the insight into the nature of logic itself.

That the logical is in some sense the purely *formal* has been expressed early and often; however, one was not really clear concerning the nature of pure forms. The clue to their nature is to be found in the fact that every cognition is an expression or representation. That is, it expresses a fact which is cognized in it. This can happen in any number of ways, in any language, by means of any arbitrary system of signs. All these possible modes of representation—if they otherwise actually express the same knowledge—must have something in common; and what is common to them is their logical form.

So all knowledge is such only by virtue of its form. It is through its form that it represents the fact known. But the form cannot itself in turn be represented. It alone is concerned in cognition. Everything else in the expression is inessential and accidental material, not different, say, from the ink by means of which we write down a statement.

This simple insight has consequences of the very greatest importance. Above all, it enables us to dispose of the traditional problems of "the theory of knowledge." Investigations concerning the human "capacity for knowledge," in so far as they do not become part of psychology, are replaced by considerations regarding the nature of expression, of representation, i.e. concerning every possible "language" in the most general sense of the term. Questions

regarding the "validity and limits of knowledge" disappear. Everything is knowable which can be expressed, and this is the total subject matter concerning which meaningful questions can be raised. There are consequently no questions which are in principle unanswerable, no problems which are in principle insoluble. What have been considered such up to now are not genuine questions, but meaningless sequences of words. To be sure, they look like questions from the outside, since they seem to satisfy the customary rules of grammar, but in truth they consist of empty sounds, because they transgress the profound inner rules of logical syntax discovered by the new analysis.

Wherever there is a meaningful problem one can in theory always give the path that leads to its solution. For it becomes evident that giving this path coincides with the indication of its meaning. The practical following out of this path may of course be hindered by factual circumstances—by deficient human capacities, for example. The act of verification in which the path to the solution finally ends is always of the same sort: it is the occurrence of a definite fact that is confirmed by observation, by means of immediate experience. In this manner the truth (or falsity) of every statement, of daily life or science, is determined. There is thus no other testing and corroboration of truths except through observation and empirical science. Every science, (in so far as we take this word to refer to the content and not to the human arrangements for arriving at it) is a system of cognitions, that is, of true experiential statements. And the totality of sciences, including the statements of daily life, is the system of cognitions. There is, in addition to it, no domain of "philosophical" truths. Philosophy is not a system of statements; it is not a science.

But what is it then? Well, certainly not a science, but nevertheless something so significant and important that it may henceforth, as before, be honored as the Queen of the Sciences. For it is nowhere written that the Queen of the Sciences must itself be a science. The great contemporary turning point is characterized by the fact that we see in philosophy not a system of cognitions, but a system of *acts*; philosophy is that activity through which the meaning of statements is revealed or determined. By means of philosophy statements are explained, by means of science they are verified. The latter is concerned with the truth of statements, the former with what they actually mean. The content, soul and spirit of science is lodged naturally in what in the last analysis its statements actually mean; the philosophical activity of giving meaning is therefore the Alpha and Omega of all scientific knowledge. This was indeed correctly surmised when

it was said that philosophy supplied both the foundation and the apex of the edifice of science. It was a mistake, however, to suppose that the foundation was made up of "philosophical" statements (the statements of theory of knowledge), and crowned by a dome of philosophical statements (called metaphysics).

It is easy to see that the task of philosophy does not consist in asserting statements—that bestowing meaning upon statements cannot be done in turn by statements. For if, say, I give the meaning of my words through explanatory statements and definitions, that is by help of other words, one must ask further for the meaning of these words, and so on. This process cannot proceed endlessly. It always comes to an end in actual pointings, in exhibiting what is meant, thus in real acts; only these acts are no longer capable of, or in need of, further explanation. The final giving of meaning always takes place therefore, through *deeds*. It is these deeds or acts which constitute philosophical activity.

It was one of the most serious errors of former times to have believed that the actual meaning and ultimate content was in turn to be formulated in statements, and so was representable in cognitions. This was the error of "metaphysics." The efforts of metaphysicians were always directed upon the absurd end of expressing the content of pure quality (the "essence" of things) by means of cognitions, hence of uttering the unutterable.<sup>1</sup> Qualities cannot be "said." They can only be shown in experience. But with this showing, cognition has nothing to do.

Thus metaphysics collapses not because the solving of its tasks is an enterprise to which the human reason is unequal (as for example Kant thought) but because there is no such task. With the disclosure of the mistaken formulation of the problem the history of metaphysical conflict is likewise explained.

If our conception is in general correct we must be able to establish it historically. It would have to be capable of giving some account of the change in meaning of the word "philosophy."

Now this is actually the case. If in ancient times, and actually until recently, philosophy was simply identical with every purely theoretical scientific investigation, this points to the fact that science found itself in a state in which it saw its main task still in the clarification of its fundamental concepts. The emancipation of the special sciences from their common mother, philosophy, indicates that the meaning of certain fundamental concepts became clear enough to make successful further work with them possible. If, today, ethics

1. See my article "Erleben, Erkennen, Metaphysik," *Kantstudien*, Vol. 31 (1930).

and aesthetics, and frequently also psychology, are considered branches of philosophy, this is a sign that these studies do not yet possess sufficiently clear basic concepts, that their efforts are still chiefly directed upon the *meaning* of their statements. Finally, if within a well-established science the necessity suddenly arises at some point of reflecting anew on the true meaning of the fundamental concepts, and thereby a more profound clarification of their meaning is achieved, this will be felt at once as an eminent philosophical achievement. All are agreed that, for instance, Einstein's work, proceeding from an analysis of the meaning of statements about time and space, was actually a philosophical achievement. Here we should add that the decisive epoch-making forward steps of science are always of this character; they signify a clarification of the meaning of the fundamental statements and only those succeed in them who are endowed for philosophical activity. The great investigator is also always a philosopher.

Frequently also the name of philosophy is bestowed on mental activities which have as their concern not pure knowledge but the conduct of life. This is readily understandable. For the wise man rises above the uncomprehending mass just by virtue of the fact that he can point out more clearly than they the meaning of statements and questions concerning life relationships, facts and desires.

The great turning point of philosophy signifies also a decisive turning away from certain erroneous paths which have been embarked upon since the second half of the 19th century and which must lead to quite a wrong assessment and evaluation of philosophy. I mean the attempts to claim for it an inductive character and accordingly to believe that it consists solely of statements of hypothetical validity. The idea of claiming only probability for its statements was remote from earlier thinkers. They would have rejected it as incompatible with the dignity of philosophy. In this was expressed a healthy instinct for the fact that philosophy must supply the ultimate support of knowledge. The reverse side of the medal is the dogma that philosophy supplies unconditionally true *a priori* axioms, which we must regard as an extremely unfortunate expression of this instinct, particularly since philosophy does not consist of statements at all. But we too believe in the dignity of philosophy and deem incompatible with it the character of being uncertain and only probable; and we are happy that the decisive turning point makes it impossible to attribute any such character to it. For the concept of probability or uncertainty is simply not applicable to the acts of giving meaning which constitute philosophy. It is a matter of positing the meaning of statements as something

simply final. Either we *have* this meaning, and then we know what is meant by the statement, or we do not possess it, in which case mere empty words confront us, and as yet no statement at all. There is nothing in between and there can be no talk of the probability that the meaning is the right one. Thus after the great turning point philosophy shows its decisive character even more clearly than before.

It is only, indeed, because of this character that the conflict of systems can be ended. I repeat: in consequence of the insights which I have sketched we may today consider it as in principle already ended. I hope that this may become increasingly clear in the pages of this journal\* in the new period of its existence.

Certainly there will still be many a rear-guard action. Certainly many will for centuries continue to wander further along the traditional paths. Philosophical writers will long continue to discuss the old pseudo-questions. But in the end they will no longer be listened to; they will come to resemble actors who continue to play for some time before noticing that the audience has slowly departed. Then it will no longer be necessary to speak of "philosophical problems" for one will speak philosophically concerning all problems, that is: clearly and meaningfully.

\* Sc. *Erkenntnis*, Ed.