INAUGURAL LECTURE
Delivered at the University of Queensland
18 October 1989

The Nature of Philosophy and its Place in the University

by Graham Priest

University of Queensland Press

First published 1991 by University of Queensland Press
Box 42, St Lucia, Queensland 4067 Australia

© Graham Priest 1991

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

Typeset by University of Queensland Press
Printed in Australia by ABC Printing, Brisbane

Distributed in the USA and Canada by
International Specialized Book Services, Inc.,
5602 N.E. Hassalo Street, Portland, Oregon 97213-3640

Cataloguing in Publication Data
National Library of Australia

data applied for

ISBN 0 7022 2314 X

I would like to thank my colleagues in the Philosophy Department for discussions on some of the topics of this lecture and, in particular, André Gallois and Roger Lamb.

I dedicate this lecture to the memory of the late Don Mannison, a colleague who will be sorely missed.

Perfect thought apprehends and thinks its object in such a way that the thought and its object become one, and the thought thus becomes its own object.

Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Lambda, 1072b

Introduction: Some examples of philosophy

I hate going to parties; or at least I hate going to parties where I don't know people. The reason is not a general misanthropy. It is that in chatting to people one is almost certain to be asked what one does; and unless I can change the subject, I have to admit that I am a philosopher. It is not that I am ashamed of being a philosopher – quite the contrary. Rather, it is because I know what is coming next. If I am lucky, it is an embarrassed silence whilst the person tries to remember the difference between philosophy, philanthropy, psychology, physiology and similar words. If I am unlucky, they ask the question I really dread: what is philosophy? The question is one I dread since I never really know how to answer. (A fact that is likely to give the questioner a somewhat mistaken impression, to say the least.) Now it seems to me that a professor of philosophy can hardly rest content with this situation. An honest question deserves an honest answer. The major theme in this lecture is an attempt to give one.

In many ways, the best way to explain what philosophy is – and the way I resort to if pressed – is to give examples of the kinds of problems that philosophers tackle. For example, much is made today of the humble computing machine. Some have thought that there is, in principle, no human cognitive activity that it cannot perform. Indeed, some have gone so far as to suggest that people are essentially such machines. Is this right? A second example: many have claimed that they have a right to abortion; many others have claimed that they have a right to stop others having an abortion. Who is right; and what is all this talk of rights anyway? The nature of time provides a multitude of problems: would it pass if nothing changed, or if there were no conscious beings; and how can time itself, the measure of passage, itself pass. One final example will suffice. Many assume that democracy is the best form of government. But why should the fact that a majority of people think that a person or group should govern be reason to let them? You would

hardly want to base a medical decision on a majority decision of the populace; why a political decision?

I The nature of philosophy: the search for a definition

Examples such as these may be illuminating, but as an account of philosophy they leave something to be desired. Examples can *indicate* the area which is philosophy, but they cannot *specify* what it is. To do this we need a definition. What kind of definition do we need, however? Following Aristotle, it has been customary to distinguish between real definitions and nominal definitions. Nominal definitions are about language. They specify the meaning of a word or phrase. A standard example is: "bachelor" means an unmarried male of eligible age. Real definitions, by contrast, are not about language, but are about things themselves, and specify their natures. For example, the definitions of the chemical elements in terms of their atomic numbers are real definitions. Thus, gold is the chemical element with atomic number 79. Notice that this hardly captures the meaning of the word "gold" – the word was meaningful before the notion of atomic number was thought of. It gives, however, a characterisation of gold itself by stating its essential characteristic.

Now in seeking a definition of philosophy we are not seeking a nominal definition. What the word means is of little interest. What we are after is a real definition, something that tells us what philosophy itself is, that is, which specifies its nature.

Though it is not a nominal definition we are after, perhaps the place to start to look is with the etymology of the word "philosophy". The Greek "philosophia", from which "philosophy" derives, is often translated as the love of wisdom. This, however, is a poor translation. The Greek "sophia" means the exercise of intelligence or intellectual curiosity, and can be used to apply to fields as widely different as cosmology and carpentry. Hence the etymology of the word is of little use here.

Content or Method?

Many philosophers have offered a definition of philosophy. The trouble is that they have offered many quite different definitions. One kind of definition that has been offered draws its rationale from some philosophical theory or other. Thus, for example, Plato identified philosophy with a study of the Forms, and Hegal thought it was

a certain phase in the development of *Geist*. The problem with these definitions is not so much that the theories on which they are based are false – though they are that – as that a definition of a subject should not presuppose any substantive theory within the subject itself. We would not accept a definition of "physics", for example, which enshrined a particular conception of matter (be it particles, waves or the Aristotelian elements). Rather, physics is the study of matter, whatever that should turn out to be. In a similar way, a definition of philosophy should be theory-neutral.

Some disciplines – such as physics – can, as I have just indicated, be characterised in terms of a distinctive subject matter. Some philosophers have thought that philosophy can be similarly defined. For example, the view that mind and matter are totally distinct *kinds* of things grew to prominence in the eighteenth century. This suggested to numerous people that matter was the domain of the physical sciences (natural philosophy) and mind was the domain of philosophy (moral sciences). Thus, philosophy could be defined as the study of the distinctively mental, i.e., of things human. Thus Mill in *Auguste Compte and Positivism,* defined philosophy as the scientific study of man.

Even setting aside the chauvinism of this definition, its shortcomings are too obvious to need labouring. Not only is there much to the study of humanity which is not philosophy (as the disciplines of psychology and sociology show), but there are many philosophical problems that have nothing specifically to do with humanity. This is particularly true of philosophical problems thrown up by concepts in the natural sciences, such as those about time that I mentioned.

Rather than define philosophy in terms of a distinctive subject-matter, some philosophers have tried to define it in terms of the possession of a distinctive method, just as some have wanted to define science in terms of "the scientific method". The most recent attempt at such an account is probably the last which held any orthodoxy in the English-speaking philosophical world; and was to the effect that philosophy proceeded by "linguistic analysis". What, exactly, this meant was itself a point of disagreement. (It meant, for example, rather different things to its most notable proponents: Russell, Carnap, Wittgenstein and Austin.) However, *in nuce,* the

central thought is that in some sense philosophical problems are linguistic and are to be solved by analysing the structure of discourse.

Philosophy has learned a lot from linguistic analysis. Certainly, getting clear about what exactly the issues are is an essential part of any philosophical investigation, and the much lampooned reply "It depends what you mean", is a necessary first step in many investigations. But it is, at best, only a first step. Information about language can not provide an answer to substantial (and clarified) questions about the nature of thought, time or rights, as most philosophers would now agree, in virtue of the fact that linguistic philosophy has simply failed to deliver the goods. Nor is there any reason to suppose that the modern continental form of this endeavour – deconstruction – will ultimately fare any better. I repeat: if you ask questions about language, you will get answers about language. If you want to answer questions about what language talks about, you must ask about that.

The Theory of Criticism

So far we have learned little about philosophy from the definitions I have considered. I now want to consider two others, which are also wrong, but from which one can learn important things. Some of these things I shall flag for future reference. A most interesting definition is offered by John Passmore in his article on the topic in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Passmore defines philosophy as the theory of critical discussion. What he means by this is that philosophy is concerned with the analysis and evaluation of the reasons that are offered for positions (in science, mathematics, religion, morality, politics, art, or whatever). He does not mean that philosophers are concerned to evaluate whether the latest proof of Goedel's Theorem is correct, or if the latest arguments for social justice hold water, though they may do that too. Rather, he means that philosophy is concerned with the various kinds of reasons that are offered for various kinds of conclusion: what exactly they are, how they function, and whether or not they really are good reasons.

There are two very important aspects of philosophy that Passmore's account throws into prominence. The first is that **philosophy is essentially critical [1]**. This is one of the things that distinguishes it from religion, politics and normal science (in the sense of T.S.Kuhn). Nothing is sacrosanct; everything is fair game for

challenge, must defend itself, or go under. The second aspect is that philosophy has a symbiotic relation with other disciplines. It draws many of its central issues from other areas, such as physics, psychology, law, literature etc. In return, it provides for them a critique of their methods, canons of argument and fundamental beliefs, which spur on the long-term development of those subjects.

Despite this, I think that Passmore's account is not right. It takes account of what we might call the analytic side of philosophy (its critical and evaluative aspects), but ignores what we might call the synthetic side. For **philosophy is also a strongly imaginative and creative subject [2]**. Philosophers have produced some of the most ingenious and important theories in Western thought. Sometimes the theories have become, deservedly or undeservedly, mere history. More importantly, sometimes the theories were taken up later by other disciplines to provide the bases for important developments. Thus in science, atomism and positivism (highly important in the geneses of both behaviorism and the Theory of Relativity) – to name but a couple from a very long list – were first developed by philosophers. In politics, the ideas of Hobbes, Locke and Marx have all been made the bases of political systems. In art, the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century owed much to the romantic philosophy of Rousseau, Coleridge and others. And so it goes on. Indeed Passmore himself, in a recent interview in the *Bulletin* (16 May 1989) notes that "almost all the ideas we now take for granted came from philosophy". Passmore's definition seems to do no justice to this creative aspect of philosophy.

Philosophy and the History of Western Thought

To understand the other illuminating but incorrect account of philosophy it is necessary to look at the historical development of Western thought. It is a striking fact that **philosophy is the area out of which sprang nearly all the more specialised intellectual inquiries that we now recognise [3]**; they each broke away from philosophy when they developed specialised methods appropriate to dealing with the objects of their inquiry. Mathematics was the first subject to break away in about the third century BC. (Pythagoras was as much philosopher as mathematician. Euclid was not.) Astronomy broke away about the second century AD (with Ptolemy). Physics and the other natural sciences broke away in the early seventeenth century (at

the time of Galileo and Descartes), sociology, psychology and economics in the nineteenth. And so it went. We are currently witnessing philosophy give birth to literary theory; and what subjects will follow is anyone's guess. (It is interesting to note that logic, which could have broken away at any time after the third century BC, has retained its central locus in philosophy despite forging allegiances with other disciplines. Why this is I shall not speculate.)

This, I suppose, raises the question of whether philosophy will eventually wither away in favour of more specialist disciplines. Such an optimistic view (or maybe pessimistic – depending on who you are) is, I think, groundless. Human thought, creative and untidy, is unlikely ever to allow itself to be neatly tailored into such Procrustean beds; if only because, as I have noted, the relationship between philosophy and the special sciences is a dialectical one, the sciences themselves posing new philosophical problems as they develop.

Be all this as it may, this historical perspective suggests another definition of philosophy. In chapter 1 of *Some Problems of Philosophy* William James, reviewing the development that I have just noted, remarks that philosophy is but the residuum of questions unanswered. James' actual remark is wrong. There are many purely scientific questions that are unanswered – take your pick in quantum physics, cosmology, evolutionary theory, economics; and many purely philosophical ones that are answered – e.g., all the traditional versions of, say, the Ontological Argument for the existence of God are agreed to be unsound. However, the spirit of James' remark seems sound: **philosophical questions are those that are not within the scope of the methods of more specialised inquiries [4].**

Perhaps this can provide a definition? Unfortunately not; for a very simple reason: as the ancient canons of definition tell us, you cannot define something by saying what it is *not*. To define something is to say what it is; no amount of saying what it is not can do this. (Obviously I cannot define gold by saying that it is not iron and not copper and not...) Indeed, the fact that philosophy has given birth to (most) other theoretical inquiries cannot provide the basis of a definition of philosophy; it is a fact that itself cries out for explanation, presumably in terms of the nature of philosophy.

II The role of philosophy in a university

So far, then, in the search for a definition of philosophy, we have drawn a blank. We have already seen enough, however, for me to take up the secondary theme of this lecture: the role of philosophy in a university. I will return to the question of the nature of philosophy after the following interpolation. Universities have three prime functions and, correlatively, three prime responsibilities. I shall argue that philosophy is important, indeed, essential, to each of these.

Research

The first function of a university is to research; and the correlative responsibility is to the subject researched. There is no older academic subject than philosophy. This has always been a prime area of research in universities. Moreover, it is important to remember that universities now bear the sole responsibility for research in philosophy. Gone are the days when either the church or private incomes provided for the livelihood of philosophers. If the universities of the world closed their philosophy departments, philosophy would not cease: the fascination of the human mind for some of the most profound problems that can be posed will ever outstrip local institutional arrangements, but organised research into philosophy *would* cease. For this reason, if no other, universities have a responsibility to ensure the existence of thriving philosophy departments.

However, the importance of research in philosophy far outstrips its own local confines. As I have pointed out, historically, philosophy has functioned as the mother of theoretical inquiries, giving birth to them all. If we wish new areas or disciplines to emerge — and there is no reason to smugly assume that all that can be already are — research in philosophy is essential to provide the matrix out of which they may arise.

Secondly, and again as I have already noted, even when a discipline breaks away from philosophy, philosophy does not cease to be relevant to it. Fundamental problems are thrown back to philosophy for analysis. Philosophers are in the ideal position to perform this service, first, because of their training in critical scrutiny, secondly, because they are willing to question things which practitioners of the special area are not themselves prepared to question at that time, and thirdly, because they are prepared to suggest fruitful speculative ideas

that someone deeply ingrained in the subject is unlikely to countenance. The historian of science, T.S.Kuhn, observed in the *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that philosophy has played an important role in all revolutions in the natural sciences. His point would be equally valid for revolutions in psychology; politics, and so on.

Teaching

The second function of a university is to teach; and the correlative responsibility is to its students. In one respect this is but a corollary of the previous function: you can't have research in a subject unless you train researchers. However, few people who are undergraduates at university will become researchers. What, then, are they doing here?

Part of the answer is that they are here to absorb a body of information which they will then go out into the wider world and apply. This is only a part of the story however – and a smaller part that many think. If *this* is all there were to teaching there would be much more cost-effective ways of going about it. (We could create the battery-hen university.) The rest of the story is that universities should produce thoughtful, mature, rational, well-rounded people who are capable of living their lives to the full and enriching those of others. If someone can leave a university without having had the opportunity to think about the existence of God, various moral problems such as abortion, the rights and wrongs of the political system in which they live and the nature of the physical universe in which they live – in short, about philosophy – then that university has failed its students. In an ideal world, all students would, perhaps, take courses which required them to think about these problems. However, this is not an ideal world: time is a scarce commodity. But even in a less that ideal world students may attend open discussions, seminars, debates on these issues, provided only that they are available. And they should be available in any university worth its salt. Thus, philosophy should play an integral role in both the formal and the informal educational life of a university.

Society

The third function of a university is to be the locus of certain social resources; the correlative responsibility is to society. In a sense, this too is a corollary of the previous point. As I said there, it is a function of a university to produce people who can enrich the lives of

others. Doing so is precisely fulfilling ones responsibilities to society. This is done in many ways. I attempt no exhaustive list; but first, people at universities are able to help others appreciate their cultural heritage, be this philosophy, literature or science. Secondly, they can actually *create* such a cultural heritage. Amongst the humanities, philosophy is unique in this respect. Writers are rarely to be found in English departments, few people in music departments are composers, but with few exceptions creative philosophers are to be found in, and only in, university philosophy departments.

Next, people at universities have an important role to play in social commentary and criticism, be this through the media, government commissions, moves for social and legal reform, and so on. Philosophers have an important role to play in these things; for usually they have thought about the issues professionally and, just as importantly, have no special interests to protect. Moreover, they are good social critics for exactly the same reasons that they are good critics in general: they have both highly developed critical skills and are prepared to float novel ideas. Of course, this may make them unpopular sometimes — I have yet to see a government that welcomed criticism — which is why the independence of the universities from outside power groups, most notably the government, is absolutely crucial in fulfilling this social role.

Notice that I have not yet used the words "national interest". This is quite deliberate. The social responsibilities of a university go far beyond the parochial considerations of the nation that houses it. The kinds of responsibility I have mentioned above are to *all humanity*. National governments are, of course, agents whose function is precisely to protect *national* interests — another reason why universities will fail in their function if they allow themselves to be dictated to by governments.

Of course, universities do have responsibilities to the national interest. For example, criticising a nation (or a state) because it has irrational drug laws, racist or sexist institutional policies, or short sighted environmental policies, are all in the national interest. I observe that none of these are matters of economic interest (indeed, they may run against economic interest). I take this opportunity to lament the fact that the phrase "national interest" has been hijacked by politicians and their bureaucrats to mean "economic interest"; a

fact that social critics would do well to stress. Interests far outrun, and often outweigh, purely economic interests.

Still, universities have some responsiblities to the national economic interests too (as the government never tires of telling us). Tax payers have the right to expect some sort of economic return for their money. Here, at least, we appear to have found an area of university function in which philosophy is relatively unimportant. Have we? No. This is for two reasons. The first is that the training of philosophy students makes them high-level contributors in employment, as a couple of recent reports show. The first is by the British Royal Institute of Philosophy *(Philosophy Graduates and Jobs,* 1986) and demonstrates that philosophy graduates may take longer to settle into a profession than other graduates, being more discriminating, but within a couple of years of graduation their level of employment is high compaired with other non-professional graduates. Philosophy graduates also report an unusually high level of job-satisfaction. The second report is by the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education *(The Standardized Test Scores of College Graduates, 1954-1982,* 1985), which reports that philosophy majors perform substantially better than average on each of the standard tests for admission to graduate schools, and that *not a single other group of majors shows such a consistently high achievement pattern.* This demonstrates that philosophy majors have the highest level of those general skills sought after by American employers: the ability to think rigourously, express oneself clearly, analyse situations and arguments, and come up with creative solutions to problems.

The second reason philosophy is important to economic interests is that, although research in philosophy rarely provides short term money makers, it may have important and unforeseen economic consequences further down the track. For example, the theoretical basis of computing was worked out by logicians such as Goedel and Church before the first electronic computer was even thought of. And the philosophical speculations of Niels Bohr about the nature of matter eventually made the transistor and the microchip possible. Right now, the traditional philosophical subject of epistemology is finding applications in artificial intelligence that were not dreamed of twenty years ago. Thus, even where you might least expect it, philosophy plays a crucial role in the functioning and responsibility of universities.

I end this section with an aside. As we have seen, there are important reasons why the responsibilities of a university differ inherently from those of a government, particularly those of a government with an eye on the next election. It is, therefore, crucial that those running our universities bear this firmly in mind when determining policy and practice in the light of governmental economic pressure. They must realise that what is in the best short term economic interest of their own particular university may not be in the best interest of the university system, or the economy as a whole, as studies of coordination problems show. For example, if each vice chancellor decides to maximise government funding of his or her own institution by developing those areas nominated as short-term priority areas, the result on a national level will be a general and unintended atrophy of other areas – such as philosophy – essential both to the university system as a whole and to long-term economic development.

The officers of our universities need to be clear, courageous and work cooperatively. They also require the support and solidarity of all university staff. This is something that the government appears to appreciate, since it has taken steps to destroy it with the familiar strategy off divide and conquer. Their actions have aimed to dismantle the collegial structure of universities and to replace it with the divisive, hierarchical, and quite inappropriate corporate structure. I say again, the universities have a responsibility that far outruns the parochial short-term interests of any particular national government. If we do not stand up for this, collectively and determinedly, the result will be the sale of our birthright for a mess of pottage.

III The Nature of Philosophy: Philosophy as Self-reflexive

Having sounded the tocsin – and perhaps with some sense of anticlimax – I leave my discussion of the role of philosophy in a university, and return to the question of the nature of philosophy itself. Earlier, I examined a number of possible definitions of philosophy and rejected them as inadequate. Let us make a fresh start. How should one define something? A standard answer, going back as far as Plato, is that one should proceed by the method of genus and *differentia*. We first say what *kind* of thing something is (give it genus); we then say what species of this kind it is by giving a *differentia,*

something which differentiates it from other species of the same genus. Let us proceed thus.

Fairly clearly, philosophy is a kind of inquiry, or better, theoretical inquiry, since philosophy goes beyond mere fact-collection: it formulates and evaluates theories about many kinds of things. But what kind of theoretical inquiry is it? What differentiates it from other such inquiries? That is the question.

The key to an answer has already passed before us. I have been discussing the nature of philosophy. In doing this I have myself been doing philosophy, for the nature of philosophy is itself a philosophical issue. In this, philosophy would seem quite unique. The nature of mathematics is not itself a mathematical issue; in fact, it is a philosophical one. The nature of history is not an historical one; it, too, is a philosophical issue. As far as I can see, there is no inquiry, other than philosophy, discussion of the nature of which falls within the scope of that inquiry. This, then, is the *differentia* I suggest. Let us call an inquiry the nature of which falls within its own scope *self-reflexive*. I suggest that philosophy is that theoretical inquiry which is self-reflexive.

The main doubt, it seems to me, about the adequacy of this definition is that self-refexivity, whilst it may state an essential property of philosophy, does not state a fundamental one. For example, it may be admitted that philosophy is self-reflexive, but argued that this is so only because philosophy has the more fundamental property of being the subject that discusses the nature of *all* theoretical inquiries.

It may be the case that philosophy studies the nature of all theoretical inquiries, though I doubt this. (For example, the nature of entomology hardly seems a philosophical issue; it hardly seems an issue at all.) However, I take the general point: a definition must pick out not just an essential property of something but, in some sense, a fundamental essential property and the *differentia* I have suggested does not appear to be very fundamental.

What does it mean to say that a *differentia* is fundamental? Consider again the definition of gold as the element with atomic number 79. What makes atomic number a good *differentia* is that it is the essential property from which a substance's other properties follow. Once we know the atomic number of an element we can determine, given the appropriate background theory, its chemical properties, such as valency, and even many of its physical properties, such as

melting point. Now it seems to me that self-reflexivity *is* a fundamental property of philosophy in just this sense. For from it one can infer numerous other features of philosophy, including the ones I flagged in Part I. This I shall now argue.

Suppose that an inquiry is self-reflexive. Then prior to the inquiry we have no independent fix on the nature of its object. But if we have no such fix, we have no fix on either the fundamental assumptions or the special methods of the inquiry. (One can know the appropriate methods for investigating something only when one has a pretty good idea of what it is.) In other words, a self-reflexive inquiry must bootstrap itself into existence, both in terms of its objects and its methods. But just this is true of philosophy, as we have seen to be the case [4]. All other inquiries – science or history or anthropology – proceed against a background of shared assumptions, just because the subject is constituted as a special science with determinate shape. Philosophy is not constituted in this way.

Moreover, the lack of doctrinal and particular methodological constraints in philosophy explains why it is the imaginative subject it is, where any hypothesis may be seriously put up [2]. Conversely, since its only way of controlling unbridled speculation is criticism (which is not a special method but something common to all forms of inquiry), this explains why the critical aspects of philosophy are so well developed [1]. Finally, it now becomes clear why other disciplines broke away from philosophy [3]. One thing that can result from philosophical inquiry is the basic assumptions and appropriate methods for investigating some subject (these must, after all, come from somewhere). When these are found they constitute a new subject, which then divorces itself from philosophy.

Thus we see that the self-reflexive nature of philosophy explains a number of its features: its lack of special method and assumptions; its creativity; its critical nature; and its historical fecundity. Hence it seems very appropriate to take self-reflexivity to be a quite fundamental property of philosophy. This justifies defining philosophy as that inquiry that is self-reflexive.

Conclusion: The importance of examples

When all this is said and done, there remains the point that this definition is not very useful in determining whether a question is

philosophical or not. This I concede. Though some have thought that this is an essential condition for a definition, the thought is mistaken. A definition of truth as correspondence with reality – though it may be perfectly correct when suitably fleshed out – is similarly useless for determining whether something is true. And the definition of gold as something with atomic number 79 is of little use in determining whether something is gold; the bank of familiar practical tests is much more useful. If you wish to know whether or not something is a philosophical question, there is no better way than to see whether you find yourself doing philosophy when considering it. (The experience is quite unmistakable.) And the only way to learn what this is like is to get used to doing it with examples. That is why giving examples is, I think, the most effective way of getting someone to understand what philosophy is. So perhaps I'll stick to that at parties.

I finish with reference to the quotation from Aristotle which starts the paper:

> Perfect thought apprehends and thinks its object in such a way that the thought and its object become one, and the thought thus becomes its own object.

Those who know their Aristotle will recognise that in this quotation Aristotle takes himself to be talking about God. I think he is wrong. He is, in fact, describing philosophy.