Attempts to Define the Discipline

I will begin by considering the nature of the discipline in which I was trained, philosophy. In the eyes of some, to do this is to tread upon a path filled with pitfalls. Consider the comments made at the beginning of his history of philosophy by my teacher John Herman Randall Jr.:

It is customary to begin any study of the history of philosophy by defining philosophy itself. Like most customs, this is both extremely convenient and exceedingly foolish. It is convenient, for by confining the selection of materials to one's own philosophical problems, it is easy to make the entire course of history lead up to one's own solution, and thus be freed of responsibility for considering what may well be more important ideas. It is foolish, for no really satisfactory definition of what men are agreed to call philosophy has ever been offered, beyond the literal one of "love of wisdom." . . .

It is safer to admit that philosophy is like poetry or religion: every definition is the expression of a particular and limited perspective upon a domain as broad as human life itself. . . . There is no question here, then, of imparting a new one at this point. Rather, this whole volume will be gently insinuating what philosophy is by pointing to what she has been and done. . . . To the incurious many, philosophy has always seemed a subtle deceiver: promising all things, she has delivered not even truth. . . . A philosophic idea, like the words in which it is clothed, when held up by itself and contemplated with too great reiteration, soon seems but a chain of meaningless sounds. How well the academic life has made that clear! But observe it in its natural environment: there is laid bare the secret of its long career. Viewed as an imaginative vision, an ultimate expression of the judgments and aspirations of human nature, a great philosophy may touch our mind with its clarified perfection, its architectonic beauty, without stirring our heart or compelling our will. But when we grasp the climate of opinion out of which that organic structure of ideas arose, when we sense the great social and intellectual conflicts that drove men to construct it, when we see it per-
forming in the world of men that function for which it was created, then we no longer wonder at its appeal and power.¹

At least Randall admits that ideas have played a powerful role in human history! However, his view of the nature of philosophy is highly skeptical and relativistic: there is no dominant wisdom and truth, just a succession of contending ideas. This is the prevailing contemporary view, except in religious institutions, where philosophy is still the handmaiden of theology, as it was in the middle ages. When Randall asserts that the academic life has made the meaninglessness of philosophic ideas clear, he puts his finger, perhaps unwittingly, on the heart of the problem: philosophy has become a thoroughly academic discipline, in the pejorative sense of the term, and that is exactly what is wrong.

In contradiction to this view, I will give the reader a more positive view of philosophy, while roundly criticizing it in its current state. Whatever philosophy may have in common with poetry or religion, it actually is closer to science. Pace Randall, that has been its true identity down through the centuries. While it is true that the literal meaning of philosophia in Greek is “love of wisdom,” this has been taken to mean “the pursuit of wisdom,” i.e., systematic rational inquiry, in other words, science. If somehow it now is bereft of its true nature, we need to consider what happened and why, and what effect this loss is having on our academic enterprise and on society as a whole.

Some readers may be startled at the assertion that philosophy and science are essentially the same. How can I have the audacity to say that philosophy, which, as everybody knows, is vague, imprecise, abstract, and “metaphysical,” is the same thing as hard-nosed, rigorous, factual, experimental science? I answer that when we take a full, panoramic view of our intellectual history and academic life, that broad perspective enables us to put aside many of the stereotypes we have inherited, including our stereotypical views of philosophy and science. When we look in this manner at the long tradition of writers in “philosophy,” we see that it is a great deal more like science than we have been led to believe, and “science,” for its part, turns out to be much more speculative and “philosophical” than most people realize. History reveals these things to us, if we will but study it with breadth and imagination. If one takes each rational, factual step, and watches as each individual strand is woven into the tapestry of the argument, gradually a whole new tableau emerges, one so rational and sensible that we wonder why it was not apparent long before. The answer is that it is
a synthesis of many diverse elements, components that we are accustomed
to consider only in isolation from each other.

But back to Randall. Perhaps you noticed that in the passage quoted
above, he started referring to philosophy with the pronoun "she." That is the
beginning of an allusion, which he then develops, to the famous work of
Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Anicius Manlius Severinus
Boethius (c. 480–524 A.D.) was a Roman statesman and intellectual who
fell out of favor with the emperor Theodoric and was condemned to death.
In this work, which he wrote in prison while awaiting execution, he imag-
ines philosophy appearing to him in the form of a woman, Dame
Philosophia or Lady Philosophy:

> While I silently pondered these things and decided to write down my
> wretched complaint, there appeared standing above me a woman of
> majestic countenance whose flashing eyes seemed wise beyond the or-
> dinary wisdom of men. Her color was bright, suggesting boundless
> vigor, and yet she seemed so old that she could not be thought of as be-
> longing to our age. Her height seemed to vary: sometimes she seemed
> of ordinary human stature, then again her head seemed to touch the top
> of the heavens. And when she raised herself to her full height she pene-
> trated heaven itself, beyond the vision of human eyes. Her clothing
> was made of the most delicate threads, and by the most exquisite work-
>manship; it had — as she afterwards told me — been woven by her hands
> into an everlasting fabric. Her clothes had been darkened in color
> somewhat by neglect and the passage of time, as happens to pictures
> exposed to smoke. At the lower edge of her robe was woven a Greek
> [πι], at the top the letter [θέτα], and between them were seen clearly
> marked stages, like stairs, ascending from the lowest level to the high-
> est. This robe had been torn, however, by the hands of violent men,
> who had ripped away what they could. In her right hand, the woman
> held certain books; in her left hand, a scepter. ²

Then in a series of dramatic and poetic conversations, Dame Philoso-
phy consoles Boethius and helps him rise above his earthly travail to con-
template the supreme good toward which he is going.

That was Boethius' vision of Lady Philosophy. Here is Randall’s:

> And so, in ignorance of her deeds, it is idle to analyze philosophy's
> character. It is far wiser to tell the story of her life. She belongs to the
> oldest profession in the world: she exists to give men pleasure, and to
> satisfy their imperious needs. When young and blooming, she was a fa-
> vorite of the rich but cultivated and discriminating Greeks, who kept
her in idleness for the sheer delight of her conversation. She had not even to lift a finger; and it was rumored that the gods loved her and her alone. But as she grew older, her charms faded, she waxed more austere, and took to giving sound advice on every occasion. And when the Romans burst into her garden, with their American moralism and fear of idleness, they led her off and set her to work as the handmaiden of Morality. She has been a working-girl ever since. Most of her life she has spent in serving Theology; but she had quite an easy time of it, especially toward the end, when her mistress was too decrepit to watch her goings-on. From this servitude she was rescued by a handsome young admirer who loved to hear tales of her ancient glory; but she was soon enslaved again by Science, who set her to work clearing fields and putting up fences. Science found her invaluable in private, but was apt to cut her dead in public. She has just put in a century working for the faith of our grandmothers; but the old lady died at last, bequeathing her effects to the brazen young Neo-Orthodoxy, who will have nothing to do with her. At present, she is entertaining proposals from the rich but ailing old Capitalism, and from the up-and-coming heirs of Marx and Lenin, earning her board and keep in the meantime by doing some cleaning up for the physicists, and angling hopefully for an invitation to set up housekeeping in UNESCO. For all the hard work she has done, she is scarcely an honest woman; and notoriously she can bake no bread. For centuries she has been a campfollower: you will find her always where the fighting has been fiercest, wherever men have been torn loose from their familiar domestic ties, when their wives have been left behind, or have run away, or are just grown too wrinkled and old. She consorts with men, comforts men, tells them what they want to hear; and with the wisdom of her incredible experience she teaches them how to win. No wonder countless soldiers in the strife of ideas have sworn to her undying allegiance. But mutabilis semper femina; she turns up in some other camp with a new set of finery. She is indispensable, but quite without conscience.3

That is clever, and as a one-page summary of the history of philosophy, it is not bad, but what a comedown from Boethius it is! Dame Philosophia isn’t a lady. She’s a whore. Randall always did have a nasty sense of humor. More than once, I felt the sting of his caustic tongue. Yet he combined wit and insult so skillfully that one was uncertain whether to be offended or amused, especially since his mockery had a way of boomeranging. Consider the foregoing passage: if Dame Philosophy is a whore, what does that make Randall – her procurer?
Moreover, Randall begs the question just as he did in the passage quoted earlier: The wise old philosopher has seen it all. He loves it, but he doesn’t believe any of it. But how does he know that philosophy is just a succession of contending and ultimately meaningless ideas?

However, Randall was far from alone in this view of things. Waves of skepticism and cynicism not only pervade contemporary philosophy, but ripple through many other disciplines at the end of the twentieth century. It is hard to be sure whether our lack of a unified vision of human knowledge and human life is a symptom or a cause of our fin-de-siècle malaise. Probably it is both. Whatever the precise cause-effect relationship, clearly the writers whom we call the “great philosophers” have been at the center of Western intellectual life since ancient times. Since they also form the heart of the discipline called “philosophy,” looking at that discipline from a broad perspective may not only reveal what ails it, but shed light on other important questions as well.

The reader will notice that I write the words “philosopher” and “philosophy” in quotation marks. So many of these marks will occur in the following pages that it may seem as if I am playing fast and loose with punctuation. My purpose, however, is to avoid the verbal confusion into which discussions of the nature of philosophy so easily fall.

Indeed, many people seem to be in doubt about what the word “philosophy” means, and not just professional philosophers, as those who work in the field call themselves. “Oh, philosophy! That’s something like psychology,” I remember a man saying after striking up a conversation with me in a restaurant. Or as a lady commented to me across a restaurant table, “There’ll always be a need for philosophy. People want to know about the meaning of life.” I remember also the casual remark of a student, “Oh, I like philosophy! I always liked bull sessions.” Or that of a woman who had taken a course in the subject some time before: “Ah yes, philosophy! [Pointing to a chair] Is that a chair?”

Not only does this vagueness and uncertainty exist in the popular mind, but it is noteworthy that even the professors in the discipline feel the need to call themselves “professional philosophers.” Normally, we do not speak of professional physicists, professional mathematicians, professional chemists, professional astronomers, geologists, biologists, et al. If someone says he or she is a physicist or chemist or biologist or mathematician, we assume the speaker is a professional, unless told otherwise. Even with less high-powered areas of research like psychology, sociology, anthropology,
history, etc., we do the same. The case is similar with doctors, dentists, lawyers, engineers, architects, and virtually all other professions and occupations. The name alone connotes professionalism. However, the word “philosopher” suggests an inherent absence of professionalism, and not necessarily in a bad sense. To some extent, the popular conception of a philosopher resembles that of a mathematician, that is, an absent-minded professor. Einstein, who embodied this stereotype and breathed new life into it, combined the images of the scientist and the philosopher. Still, everybody has at least some concrete idea of what a mathematician or a physicist does, whereas people are much less certain about what a philosopher does and tend to regard someone identifying himself by that name as an eccentric. Randall wrote of getting into casual conversations with seatmates on airplanes and telling them not that he was a philosopher, but a historian. That was the truth and nothing but the truth, but not quite the whole truth.

A similar encounter on an airplane is reported by the contemporary philosopher David Hall, who tells of a five-week trip to several Asian countries, where his hosts “were not only reputable philosophers but influential government advisors,”* and even Japanese businessmen wanted him to explain to them the philosophy of Nietzsche. His trip concluded, there he sat, on a jet plane homeward bound for the U.S.A., reflecting on the pleasant, but discomfiting contrast between the high regard Asians had for philosophy and its uncertain status back in the West:

Certainly the most striking impression drawn from my visit was that, beyond the many courtesies extended to me simply by virtue of my status as a foreign visitor, I had been treated with extra kindness because I was a philosopher. Such treatment contrasted readily with that which members of the philosophic clan are accustomed to receive within Western societies. For at least since Socrates’ fatal toast to the health of the Athenian establishment, the Western philosopher has enjoyed a rather modest social and political status.4

He did not have to wait long for the charm of his visit to wear off:

My seatmate on the flight from Tokyo to New York was a Manhattan investment banker. We had talked for a few minutes about

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* I.e., the same group of people were both philosophy professors and government advisors.
current crises in international finance — the flight of capital from Hong Kong, and so on. Finally, it came.

"And what do you do?"

"I'm a philosopher." (To her credit, the silence was brief, the shuffling almost unnoticeable.)

"Ahhh . . . ha! An intellectual!" she jibed. Laughing, she added, "But what do you do?"

Though we were less than a hundred air miles from the Japanese coast, I suddenly felt I was at home.

I guess it all depends on whom you are talking to. For example, when I was a graduate student and was skiing one day at Winter Park, Colorado, I got into a conversation with my seatmate on the chair lift, who turned out to be an airline pilot. "And what do you do?" he asked. I said rather apologetically that I was a graduate student in philosophy, and maybe that was not a very practical line of work. "Oh, no!" he exclaimed, interrupting me. "That’s one of the most important things you can do."

Had Hall been sitting in the cockpit rather than the cabin, he might have got an entirely different response. At 40,000 feet with, as one of them put it, hours of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer panic, pilots spend lots of time looking at the sky, the stars, and the ground or the ocean beneath them. In that lofty environment, they do not have to be Antoine de Saint-Exupéry to think eternal thoughts, at least occasionally. High above the clouds, at the controls of those marvelous machines, surely they feel the sublimity expressed by Sophocles:

Wonders there are many
None more wonderful than man

as well as the humility of the Psalmist:

When I consider the heavens, the work of thy fingers . . .
What is man, that thou art mindful of him?

It may be that we Westerners are not quite the Philistines Hall thinks we are. Let us consider his comment that “since Socrates’ fatal toast to the health of the Athenian establishment, the Western philosopher has enjoyed a rather modest social and political status.”

Certainly it is true that the professional philosopher today has a dubious status in our society. But was it always thus? Beginning right after Socrates,
we note that Plato doesn’t quite fit Professor Hall’s observation. He was, after all, invited by Dionysius, the ruler of Syracuse, to reform the Syracusan state on the model of the ideal state in his dialogue *The Republic*. Then there was Aristotle, who, starting off as tutor to a crown prince named Alexander, maintained his association with this fellow Alexander when the latter became King of Macedon and Greece and led his armies over much of the civilized world. Aristotle was the intellectual spearhead of the drive to make Greek civilization dominant in the world. Both Alexander and Aristotle died prematurely, but in large measure their efforts succeeded, as they made Greek culture available ultimately to the whole world.

Well, Plato and Aristotle may have been exceptions to the modest status of philosophers, and it’s a long way from their time to the present. But wait — there seem to be more exceptions. By 146 B.C., the ascendancy had passed from the Greeks to the Romans. In that year, the latter completed their conquest of Carthage and also assumed control of Greece. Now that they had a polyglot empire stretching across much of the Mediterranean, a group of intellectuals led by the victorious general Scipio Africanus were looking for a body of ideas to provide a rationale for the newly established Roman Empire. They chose the Stoic philosophy of universal brotherhood and universal reason as the official philosophy of the Empire. Still later, in the first century B.C., Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 B.C.), a leading attorney and politician and the foremost orator of his day, translated Greek philosophic works into Latin and wrote numerous dialogues of his own, which have been studied for many centuries. Cicero wasn’t just a philosopher who advised statesmen; he was both a philosopher and a statesman. Nor was he alone. In the second century A.D. the emperor Marcus Aurelius also was a Stoic philosopher.

Amazing, isn’t it, how the list just seems to go on. After the rise of Christianity, St. Augustine (353–430 A.D.) developed a philosophy and theology of Christian Platonism that not only was the intellectual heart of medieval Christianity, but influenced both Luther and Calvin. Luther and Calvin in turn were philosopher/theologians who revolutionized Christianity and society with their Protestant theology and institutions. Augustinian Platonism also influenced Galileo and Descartes and the other founders of modern mathematical science.

In the thirteenth century, St. Thomas Aquinas showed that Aristotle’s ideas could be Christianized, and gave a whole new direction to medieval intellectual life. Even after medieval scholasticism died out, Thomas’s
ideas have remained a bulwark of the Roman Catholic Church. They underwent a revival in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as they enabled the Church to fit Darwinian evolution into its framework of belief.

In the seventeenth century, Descartes caused a revolution in intellectual life with his mind-body dualism and his advances in mathematics. His fame was so great that Queen Cristina of Sweden all but kidnapped him. She sent a ship commanded by an admiral to where Descartes was living in the Netherlands to fetch him to Sweden to be her private tutor. Also in the seventeenth century, Spinoza corresponded with the leading scientists of his day and may have been acquainted with the DeWitts, the chief executives of the Netherlands. Leibniz too was a leading figure in the intellectual life of his day, for a time was the dominant influence in German thought, and was famous all over Europe. Locke is known as "the father of modern psychology" and was the chief theoretician of England's Glorious Revolution of 1688 and of American independence a century later. In addition to writing treatises in philosophy, Berkeley was a scientific researcher and a bishop. Hume was hardly a philosopher laboring in obscurity but a famous writer whose ideas provoked continuing controversy. Kant, though very much an academic, still was the major influence in the succeeding 200 years of philosophy, and his work had repercussions in many other disciplines. Hegel had a profound effect on the study of history and on the social sciences. His work stimulated Marx, whose effect on intellectual life and on society was even more sweeping. Later on, in America, Dewey caused a revolution in education.

The foregoing list is not complete but is more than enough to make the point. For more than 2,000 years the influence of the people whom we call philosophers has been enormous. The assertion that their status has been modest is a monumental misstatement. The problem is not the public's mistaken view of philosophy, but rather the mess the so-called philosophers have made of their discipline. Befuddled by their own internal problems, they have been helpless to prevent Academe from becoming excessively specialized or to overcome the modern dualism between the sciences and the humanities. Far from helping others eliminate these ills, far from providing the unity and coherence that would bring other disciplines back together, the "philosophers" offer some of the worst examples of incoherence and disunity to be found in Academe. That is why "philosophy" is held in such low esteem.

Perhaps the reader has not stopped to reflect on the fact that the array of
specialized departments and disciplines that constitute the university at the end of the twentieth century is only about a century old. While the university as an institution goes back to medieval Europe, and many disciplines trace their ancestry back to the ancient Greeks or even earlier, many of the academic fields we know today did not become organized into professions until the latter part of the nineteenth century. At that time, when all the other fields were becoming professional disciplines, "philosophy" had to be one too. But the twentieth-century professional philosophers never quite figured out exactly what they were doing, what precisely made "philosophy" different from the sciences as well as from the humanistic disciplines, of which it might seem to be one. "Philosophy" was not systematic or empirical enough to be science, yet it was more literal and rigorous than the arts. So what was it then? Many attempts were made to answer this question. Indeed, as another of my teachers, Justus Buchler, said, there has been more "metaphysical self-consciousness," as he called it, in the twentieth century than in the 2,000 years preceding. Small wonder, because "philosophy" never before had conceived of itself as a discipline with its own method and content separate from all the rest.

Typical of the answers given was that of William James, who defined philosophy as "the residuum of questions left unanswered." In other words, as soon as a solution to a problem or set of problems was found, it ceased to be philosophy and became science. Thus, philosophy by definition was distinct from science.

This view may have been influenced by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and certainly accords with the view stemming from him, known as "foun-
dationalism." That is to say, philosophy seeks to explore the foundations, the *Grund* or *Gründe* as Kant would say, of all particular disciplines. Thus, we have philosophy of science, philosophy of art, political philosophy, etc. Kant's work has been the most influential in the field for the past 200 years. His theories have had a great deal to do with the way the discipline has defined itself.

Both of these views accord with the popular understanding of the word "philosophy," which is used by many people. Although most of them have never studied the subject formally, they use the word in a clear and coherent way. Thus, when a salesman speaks of his "sales philosophy" or an athletic coach of his "coaching philosophy" or a businessman of his "business philosophy," and so on, the meaning is clear: the principles by which the individual guides his or her activity.
These three definitions are consistent with one another. After all, where do the principles of any field or activity come from? How can we justify them? Discovering, comparing, and justifying principles is very much like studying fundamental unanswered questions, if not the same thing. These are questions about which reasonable people can disagree. In other words, they are philosophical questions.

According to Kant, the human reason is doomed to ask itself questions it never can answer, pose problems to itself it never can solve. Chief among these are what he called "the antinomies of reason," which are contradictions that, in his view, follow from the nature of reason itself. For example, it is perfectly plain to anyone who has ever stopped to think about it that the world must have a beginning and an end; yet it seems equally apparent that time and space are infinite and that the world cannot, strictly speaking, have any beginning or end. Then common sense tells us that everything consists of simple elements, that there must be some ultimate elements - atoms, or subatomic particles, or whatever - out of which everything is made; yet at the same time, how can there be any ultimate components of being? You can just keep on dividing forever. Thirdly, we presume that free will exists; are we not the causes of our own actions? Yet science tells us that everything has a cause, everything is determined. Finally, it must be the case that there is some necessary being underlying all the changes and movements we see around us - if absolutely everything were contingent and subject to chance, how could the universe exist? But what then is this absolute being? Everything in our experience seems temporary and contingent.

Every human being at some time in his or her life has thought about these paradoxes or contradictions, however briefly. It is a natural tendency of the human mind. Kant stated them more abstractly than the average person would do and made them one of the cornerstones of his system. He likened the natural tendency of the reason to reflect on such questions to the foam produced by the ocean as it beats against the shore. No matter how much you scoop off, more will arise. He might just as easily have drawn a comparison with Sisyphus, the mythical Greek king condemned in Hades eternally to roll uphill a heavy stone that always rolled back down.

Without for the moment pronouncing on the correctness or incorrectness of Kant's views, we recognize that they influenced the formation of the contemporary discipline that goes by the name of "philosophy" and that organized itself as a discipline in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Perhaps the reader will think I am overdoing things - the quotation marks, the
cautious, diffident way of talking about "philosophy" — as if I were doubting its very existence. On the other hand, systematic doubting is precisely what René Descartes, "the father of modern philosophy," made the hallmark of his method, even to the point of trying to doubt his own existence. Beginning with Descartes and on through the next century, eight major writers as well as some lesser ones wrestled with the same set of problems. The other seven were Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Leibniz, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant. Kant's monumental writings put the capstone on the ideas of his predecessors. Their combined efforts form the core of what has come to be known as "modern philosophy." Since the discipline of "philosophy" focuses its attention principally on "modern philosophy," it reflects the concerns of the writers from Descartes through Kant, whose uncertainty about human knowledge was intensified by their latter-day successors and imitators. The field has emerged in the twentieth century with a very skeptical cast, a problematic turn of mind that is evident not only in its perennial identity crisis, but in all aspects of its activity. As Richard Rorty, a major contemporary "philosopher," succinctly puts it:

Cartesian . . . skepticism seems to us so much a part of what it means to "think philosophically" that we are amazed that Plato and Aristotle never confronted it directly.6

In truth, the lady I quoted earlier had the right idea when she pointed to a chair and said, "Ah, philosophy! Is that a chair?"

I have no quarrel with the ordinary English meaning of the word "philosophy." The general public uses it in a clear, consistent, and acceptable way. The question is, does that word properly name an academic discipline? Is there really a discipline called "philosophy" whose function it is to deal with fundamental questions and raise doubts about the reality of our perceptions? Is there actually an academic field whose subject-matter by definition is "the residuum of questions left unanswered"? Do the professors who call themselves "professional philosophers" really devote their time to asking questions that never can be answered? Perhaps if we take a quick look at the tradition of writers who preceded the philosophy professors of today, we will be able to see how narrow and artificial the current discipline is.

Notes


5. Ibid., p. 5.