

THE NATURE OF PHILOSOPHY: A REPLY TO HARMAN

The editor has invited me to respond to Professor Gilbert Harman's review of my book, *The Nature of Philosophy*. I am happy to accept this invitation, because Harman and I disagree about some basic issues that need further discussion. I have arranged my remarks around three topics: the place of philosophy in our culture, perennial arguments, and the nature of justification.

PHILOSOPHY IN OUR CULTURE

Harman is quite right about my unhappiness with the current state of philosophy in America. He says, however, that this leads me to say a number of absurd things (p. 64),* and, although one hopes for a list of these absurdities, Harman mentions only one. I say that "the disappearance of philosophers would make no difference to the intellectual life of our society" (p. 4). Harman fails to notice that the quoted passage refers to a rather funny observation I cite in a footnote, but no matter. I concede that I exaggerate. The passage should read: The disappearance of philosophers would make *almost* no difference to the intellectual life of our society. This emendation allows me to escape Harman's objection that "since philosophers are intellectuals . . . their disappearance would by definition make a difference to the intellectual life of our society" (pp. 64-65).

But is the amended passage true? Harman thinks not, and I disagree. My guess is that there are about 5,000 philosophers in America who at least occasionally publish, and another 5,000 who do not. The circulation of these journals is roughly between 1,000 and 4,000, and the usual printing of a philosophy book is about 2,000. These numbers make it unlikely that even philosophers read much philosophy, let alone that nonphilosophers do.

Philosophy in America has become an inbred self-perpetuating specialty. Philosophers write for other philosophers, and their work is appreciated and criticized by their colleagues. The problems they deal with arise from one another's work. I think that it is not unusual for a philosopher to think that one of his articles can be ap-

*The numbers in parentheses following Harman's name refer to the pages of his review in this journal, and those following my name refer to the pages of *The Nature of Philosophy*.

preciated by perhaps 50 souls.

Against these distressing observations, Harman bravely points at exceptions. Yes, Rawls's and Nozick's books have reached a large number of people; yes, Chomsky's work is connected with philosophy; yes, Sen, Dworkin, et al., do draw on the work of some philosophers.

One cannot reasonably suppose, however, that these contacts are essential. Surely, the work of these people would continue virtually unaffected if all contemporary philosophers disappeared. The connection between philosophy and other subjects is not like the connection between, say, physics and mathematics, political thought and economics, or zoology and biochemistry. Furthermore, even if one grants to Harman the exceptions he cites, contrast these drops in the bucket with the immense amount of work, talk, paper, mental energy, and money that has gone into philosophy in this country, say, since the end of the Second World War. Harman is cheered by the rare exceptions; I am distressed by the deadly, monotonous, inconsequential rule. And so I wrote: "Something bad has happened to philosophy. If this has been produced by a defect in the very nature of philosophy, then the subject is doomed. It is my view, however, that the sad contemporary state of philosophy is just a present-day aberration which may be remedied in time." (P. 4)

Harman does not see it as an aberration. However, if we look at the history of philosophy, we can see that the Academicians and Sophists in Athens, Stoics and Epicureans in Greece and Rome, Christian moralists throughout the Middle Ages, British empiricists, the Encyclopedists, utilitarians, Kantians, Hegelians, existentialists, and Marxists were influential people whose opinions, for better or worse, fundamentally influenced the intellectual climate of their society. And these influences were not exerted just by the rare great philosophers but by their many followers, as well. This is not true of the American followers of Quine, Wittgenstein, Whitehead, Husserl, or Heidegger.

Why does Harman fail to see the contrast between philosophy in present-day America and in the periods I have just listed? Because he regards the view "wholly erroneous... that knowledge of history is useful in philosophy" (p. 65). And why is it so? Because, Harman says, "I have never seen the slightest reason to suppose that knowledge of the history of philosophy is any more help in philosophy than knowledge of the history of physics or chemistry is of any help in physics or chemistry" (p. 66). This is a singular observation in any case, but especially so since I devote chapter 11,

“Philosophy and History,” to giving reasons for their connection. I shall return to this. It will suffice to note here that Harman’s avowed ignorance of the evidence supporting the position he finds absurd does not amount to an argument.

PERENNIAL ARGUMENTS

There are two main reasons for thinking that the current sad state of philosophy in America is not due to some defect in the subject itself. The first requires understanding the nature of philosophical arguments; this is the aim of my discussion of perennial arguments in part 2 of the book. The second requires showing that perennial arguments can be rationally settled; this is what I try to do in part 3 of the book, where I give an account of philosophical justification. Harman has doubts about both reasons. I shall discuss the first here and the second in the next section.

The human condition requires us to cope with problems. The problems occur because achieving what we want is frustrated by our physical environment, by the facts of social life, and by our own limitations. Some of these problems are removable, but others are not. The solution of these latter, enduring, problems is the task of philosophy.

The solution consists in developing a policy for coping with the problems. However, there are many policies available for coping with enduring problems. Naturally, we want to adopt the best policy. Which policy is the best is determined by the ideal in accordance with which we want to solve the problem. But just as there are many policies, so also there are many ideals and many interpretations of each ideal.

Perennial arguments are about ideals in accordance with which particular policies are developed for solving enduring problems. They may be external, if they concern the conflict between different ideals; or they may be internal, if they concern conflicting interpretations of the same ideal.

Perennial arguments are recurrent and endless, because the forms in which enduring problems present themselves change from age to age and because the ideals and their interpretations also change. Consequently, the policies, which depend on these changing ideals and problems, also change.

Scientific understanding, a historical perspective, freedom, rationality, morality, knowledge, democracy, religiosity, culture, education, and aesthetic sensibility are some of the ideals I have in mind. Harman quotes my examples of enduring problems

(pp. 62-63), so I shall not repeat them.

A philosophical theory aims to justify a particular ideal for solving an enduring problem as it occurs in a given problem situation. The disputants in perennial arguments champion competing philosophical theories. The resolution of perennial arguments is thus the selection of a particular philosophical theory. The selection is based on the success of the theory's justification of the ideal or of the interpretation of the ideal in accordance with which the enduring problem is to be solved.

The task of philosophy is to solve enduring problems. This is accomplished by having a system of philosophical theories. Such a system is a worldview. What a worldview aims to do, therefore, is embody a cluster of policies for solving the enduring problems of a particular society in accordance with a rationally justified system of ideals. The benefit a person gains from participation in such a worldview is not just the pragmatic one of having a device for solving his problems, but also the benefit of having a system of ideals that makes these solutions worthwhile, thus giving meaning and purpose to his life.

I found it necessary to restate my position (drawing on pp. 73-74), because Harman's criticisms rest on several misunderstandings of it. Harman thinks that I concentrate on "straightforward factual or descriptive beliefs and [do] not say very much about the special problems that arise concerning the justification of goals and attitudes. So, in the end, Kekes does not really argue for his conception of philosophy." (P. 60)

To begin with a point to which I shall return in the next section, Harman keeps talking about my various attempts to justify attitudes. I make no such attempts. I am not concerned with justifying attitudes; I am interested in justifying philosophical theories or, since philosophical theories aim to justify ideals, ideals. Let us suppose that by goals, in the above passage, Harman means what I mean by ideals. His charge, then, is that I concentrate on justifying factual beliefs but not on justifying ideals.

Now this is a very peculiar charge. If by factual beliefs Harman means straightforward empirical claims about facts, then I cannot recall a single attempt I make to justify such a claim. And to say that I *concentrate* on doing this makes me think that Harman is reviewing some other book.

But what about my attempt to justify ideals? Is it true that I do not say much about their justification? Well, the whole book is an attempt to justify my interpretation of one ideal: philosophy. I say this explicitly in a section entitled "The Ideal of Philosophy" (pp.

186-91). But apart from this primary aim, I discuss the justification of several specific ideals: of scientific understanding (in the whole of chap. 10), of historical understanding (in the whole of chap. 11), of rationality (pp. 19-21, 49-50, 53-55), of culture (pp. 213-18), of logical consistency (pp. 111-16); and I also discuss, although in less detail, the justification of democracy, morality, and Christianity. I find it hard to understand how Harman could have missed these absolutely central features of the book.

Harman's next criticism is equally misdirected. He says: "Kekes suggests, implausibly, that perennial arguments are recurrent because the background situation changes over time. . . . But that would not explain why philosophical arguments continue even in periods during which the background situation remains the same." (P. 63) The point is repeated (p. 64).

In offering this criticism, Harman completely misses the crucial distinction between external and internal perennial arguments introduced in chapter 2 (pp. 19-20) and used throughout the book. There is no mention of it in Harman's review. External perennial arguments occur in changing circumstances, when there is no agreement about ideals. Internal perennial arguments occur in stable circumstances, when there is agreement about ideals and disagreement about how they should be interpreted in particular situations. In the first case, the background situation is changing; in the second it is not. Again, I say this explicitly: "A developing or disintegrating society is characterized by many external perennial arguments about ideals" (p. 47), and "homogeneous and robust societies are often preoccupied with internal perennial arguments about mutually shared ideals. Their debates concern the question of how to interpret ideals which are generally accepted." (P. 48) So my explanation of why philosophical arguments continue when the background is stable is that they are internal perennial arguments.

Harman's next objection begins with the observation: "Kekes notes that there are grounds for thinking philosophy cannot provide a rationally justified worldview. Success at justifying a worldview would seem to require philosophical knowledge; but there does not seem to be any instance of such knowledge in the 2,500-year history of philosophy." (P. 63)

Now, I do say this, but Harman omits to mention that I say it in a chapter entitled "The Case against Philosophy," in which I state the objections I am concerned with meeting. At the end of the chapter, I say: "My purpose is to present a view of philosophy which avoids the pitfalls just discussed. . . . Philosophy, it will be shown, can and should play. . . its traditional role and its contemporary failure to

do so is the disease whose cure is one of the intended consequences of this book. . . . A defense of philosophy must ask and give satisfactory answers to such questions as What kind of knowledge, if any, does philosophy provide? What does philosophy do that science does not do better? Is there progress in philosophy? . . . I shall answer these questions favorably for philosophy.” (P. 13)

Having basically misunderstood the aim of the book, Harman blithely goes on to dispose of the problem in a few sentences: “Philosophical inquiry has often resulted in knowledge, but the result has always been counted part of some other discipline. When philosophy is successful, the successful part splits off and becomes a separate science. . . .” (P. 63)

Harman fails to inform the reader that he is here paraphrasing one of the replies to the case against philosophy I consider and reject. I quote Russell’s remark that “philosophical knowledge. . . does not differ essentially from scientific knowledge; there is no special source of wisdom which is open to philosophy, but not to science, and the results obtained by philosophy are not radically different from those obtained by science” (p. 8). Harman embraces Russell’s answer without paying the slightest attention to the extensive criticisms I make of it (pp. 8-9, the whole of chap. 10, pp. 213-18).

My reply, briefly, is that it follows from this answer that philosophy cannot have anything to say about values and also that the field of philosophy has been preempted by science, since there is no presently known aspect of reality for which there does not already exist a science. There is nothing left in philosophy, according to this view, which could split off.

It will not have escaped the reader’s attention that Harman’s is the discredited answer of positivism. It assigns knowledge to science, and values become dependent on arbitrary decisions. As Harman says: “People attach different weights to the values they accept. . . . It is unclear how this sort of disagreement could be resolved except through negotiation and compromise.” (P. 64) He does not say how these negotiations could be rationally conducted and how reasonable compromises could be reached. What would happen, then, is what I fear in the book: “The civilizing restraints of debate, criticism, and rational discussion would disappear and force and propaganda would take their places as the method for settling disputes” (p. 12). And this brings us to the question of justification.

THE NATURE OF JUSTIFICATION

Harman and I have fundamental disagreements about justification. He has written extensively about it, for instance, in *Thought* (Princeton University Press, 1973), and so have I in *A Justification of Rationality* (SUNY Press, 1976) and elsewhere. The main points separating us are that Harman believes that justification is a matter of coherence among one's beliefs, while I think that it involves the correspondence between one's beliefs and features of the world; Harman denies that there exists a standard external to one's beliefs by which the epistemological merits of beliefs could be decided, while I think that problems and the capacity of beliefs to solve problems present an external standard; Harman thinks that the relativism that follows from his position is harmless, while I think that it is one of the main causes of the disease of contemporary American culture. Obviously, I cannot discuss these large questions here. The reader should be aware, however, that Harman's criticisms and my replies have to be understood against this background.

The key idea of my account of philosophical justification is the distinction between the contexts of introduction and acceptance. The distinction aims to replace the mistaken distinction between the contexts of discovery and justification. There are two main differences between the proposed and the criticized distinctions. The first is that justification plays a role in both the contexts of introduction and acceptance. This contrasts with the context of discovery being nonrational. The advantage gained is that the question of what theories should be candidates for serious consideration becomes rationally answerable. The second difference is that the relevance of cultural influences both to the introduction and to the acceptance of theories must be recognized. The earlier distinction sharply divided the context to which cultural influences are relevant and the context where rational justification is possible. The removal of this ill-conceived distinction makes it possible for philosophy to play the role it needs to and should play in society.

Justification is relevant to both the introduction and the acceptance of theories, but the kinds of justification required are different. The justification of the introduction of a theory is in terms of its problem-solving capacity. It is testable by determining whether the theory is a possible solution of the enduring problem that prompted it and, if so, whether it is initially plausible. Initial plausibility is judged by finding out whether the theory manages to offer a possible reconciliation of the conflict occurring in the worldview. The worldview is the embodiment of the conventional

interpretations of the ideals in accordance with which the enduring problems are to be solved.

The justification of the acceptance of a theory depends on its truth-directedness. Its three tests are logical consistency, adequacy of interpretation, and the capacity to withstand criticism. These tests are applied to determine which of several possible and plausible solutions of problems has the best chance of being true.

Problem-solving and truth-directedness are to be applied jointly. Problem-solving by itself is a purely pragmatic criterion. It alone is insufficient, for it affords no way of choosing between fortuitous success and success due to having come closer to the truth. Truth-directedness by itself leads to triviality. For it is easy and pointless to generate a vast amount of likely truths. Some putative truths are important, and it is these we want our theories to have. Problem solving provides the required principle for distinguishing between important and trivial candidates for truths. Thus, the rational justification of philosophical theories depends on their conformity to the standards of problem solving and truth-directedness. (For this summary, I have relied on pp. 126-27.)

I shall proceed by discussing four of Harman's criticisms. The first is Harman's claim that I do "not say very much about special problems that arise concerning the justification of goals and attitudes. So, in the end, Kekes does not really argue for his conception of philosophy." (P. 60) I have already commented on how wrong Harman is about what I say regarding the justification of goals; here I shall take up the justification of attitudes.

Harman says, "Kekes's discussion of justification is marred by a failure to distinguish between the question whether a given person is justified in holding a certain attitude and the question whether there is a rational resolution of a dispute between people with conflicting attitudes" (p. 60). Now this is another misplaced criticism. Nowhere in the book do I address the question of how attitudes can be justified; my concern is with justifying philosophical theories. So, drawing the distinction Harman thinks I should is irrelevant to the aim of the book. But perhaps this is a mistake; perhaps I should concentrate on attitudes and not on theories?

My reasons for not doing so are as follows. Attitudes are psychological states; theories, including philosophical ones, are constructed by people, but once they are written down, they exist independently of people. By this I mean that theories would continue to exist, in libraries, even if people did not. Attitudes, then, are like theories in being produced by people, but they are unlike theories in that attitudes do and theories do not require people for their con-

tinued existence. Of course, if there were no people, theories would not be used; but that is another matter. What I want to insist on is that theories are objective in a sense in which attitudes are not. This makes an important difference to their justification.

In the case of attitudes, there is no room for distinguishing between justifying an attitude and justifying having an attitude, for they exist no attitudes apart from people having them. In the case of theories, however, there is a distinction between justifying a theory and justifying a person having that theory. For theories do exist, once invented and written down, independently of people.

It follows that psychological considerations are necessary to justifying an attitude, because a person's experiences, temperament, hopes, and fears are necessarily involved in the attitudes he has. And since these psychological considerations differ from person to person, so does the justification of the attitudes. What is a justified attitude for me may not be a justified attitude for you. In short, attitudes are subjective.

Theories, however, are objective. The justification of a theory depends on its problem-solving capacity and truth-directedness. These are what they are independently of psychological considerations. A theory is justified or not regardless of what anyone thinks or feels. Of course, psychological considerations enter when we ask whether a person is justified in having a theory. But notice the shift from justifying a theory to justifying a person having a theory.

In the book, I concentrate exclusively on justifying a theory. I think that theories can be justified independently of people having them. Harman does not think so; he thinks that justification has an unavoidably subjective component. That is partly why he is a relativist. And it may be that he is right and I am wrong. Surely, however, to establish that requires a good deal more than Harman has done. He faults me for not doing what I have not set out to do and fails to grapple with one-half of the book in which I aim to do what he thinks cannot be done: offer an account of the objective justification of philosophical theories.

Harman's second criticism of my view on justification concerns the relevance of cultural influences and my objections to the distinction between the contexts of discovery and justification. In the opinion of Carnap, Reichenbach, Salmon, Popper, and many others who accept the distinction, cultural influences are relevant only to the context of discovery and not to the context of justification. Harman quotes what I mean by cultural influences (p. 68), so I shall not repeat it.

Harman's view is that the "genetic fallacy consists in thinking that whether one is justified in believing something is *always* deter-

mined *entirely* by what led one to believe it in the first place. That is a fallacy. But it is not a fallacy to think that in certain cases, even in most cases, one's reasons for believing something are the reasons that led one to believe it in the first place." (P. 69)

The last sentence contains an equivocation. What leads a person to believe something may not be reasons. Thus equivocating, Harman can render this important dispute innocuous. The question is whether historical, moral, political, and other considerations are relevant to the justification of theories. The philosophers I name above and whose opinions I quote (pp. 80-81 and 88-92) think that these cultural influences have no bearing on justification. I disagree, and I argue against them in chapter 6. My argument, very briefly, is that understanding a theory is necessary to justifying it, and one cannot understand a theory unless one takes into account the cultural influences upon its formulation, so that cultural influences are necessary to justification in this indirect way. The problem about them is not *whether* they are relevant but, rather, *which* of them are relevant.

The first issue between Harman and myself is whether there is a substantial body of philosophical opinion against which I need to argue. As I say above, I quote chapter and verse to show that there is. And what does Harman do? Well, he asserts the contrary, but without taking the trouble to offer any supporting evidence. I miss the reasons behind his pronouncement.

The second issue between us is whether cultural influences should be included in the context of justification, quite apart from who believes what. It seems that Harman and I agree, for he writes: "Kekes's claim reduces to the obvious point that distinguishing the context of discovery from the context of justification does not imply that cultural factors are irrelevant to justification" (p. 70) I take it that this means that Harman thinks, as I do, that cultural influences are relevant to justification. If so, it is pleasant to have as severe a critic as Harman on my side.

I fear, however, that this involves Harman in flagrant inconsistency. For one of the important cultural influences is historical, and Harman believes that it is irrelevant to justification. Recall his claim that he sees no evidence for the "wholly erroneous view that a knowledge of history is useful in philosophy" (p. 65). Which is it then? Are cultural influences relevant to justification or not? I suspect that this inconsistency is obscured from Harman by the equivocation to which I call attention in the third paragraph preceding this.

It is important to note that my diagnosis of the sad state of contemporary philosophy in America is that responsibility is to be at-

tributed to the mistaken belief held by many philosophers that cultural influences are irrelevant to philosophy. This belief is what enables them to proceed as if they function professionally in a moral, political, historical, and aesthetic vacuum. And this is why so many philosophers find it convenient to talk only to other philosophers living in a similar self-imposed internal exile.

Fortunately, I can be quite brief about Harman's remaining two criticisms. He objects to my treatment of logic and to the use I make of Popper's idea of criticism. Now, Harman and I agree that logical consistency is one test by which we can determine the truth-directedness of a theory. I am concerned with justifying this test. I ask: Why is it that logical rules have the obvious authority they have? And I answer it (pp. 111-16) by arguing that logical rules are crystallizations of methods involved in successful practice. Their justification is that they help us proceed successfully.

Harman objects to this by saying: "This is quite wrong. It confuses inference and implication. Logic is the theory of implication. It is not a theory of method or inference in the sense of a theory telling one what to infer under certain circumstances." (P. 67) I agree with Harman that logic is about implication. However, I am interested in asking what justifies the rules of implication, and my remarks about logic are directed at answering this question. Harman takes me to be asking another question, namely, what justifies a person in inferring one thing from another. And so, once again, he misunderstands what I am doing. It is hard to know what more I could do to avoid such misunderstanding than to introduce the discussion by saying, "The question we need to ask here is . . . what gives logical rules the authority they seem to have" (p. 113).

Harman's criticism of the third test of truth-directedness reflects our disagreement about justification being a matter of coherence or correspondence. I think that theories should be tested by criticizing them and then seeing whether they survive criticism. In this way, we can decide which of two or more conflicting theories is better, for we can compare their capacity to withstand criticism.

Harman objects: "This makes the question-begging assumption that, if one interpretation is incompatible with another, there must be some test, some crucial experiment, that could decide between them" (p. 68). Harman is right; I assume that there is such a test—but not a crucial experiment, for that exists, if at all, only in science. But why does he think that this assumption is question-begging? If two theories conflict, they cannot both be true. We can decide between them by finding some criticism that applies to one but not to the other. Of course, it may be very hard to find such a criticism; but this has to do with the nature of theories. My view

may be mistaken, but I fail to see what question it begs.

Now Harman thinks that it is mistaken because justification depends on the coherence of one's beliefs and it is possible to have conflicting sets of coherent beliefs. This means that two theories may conflict, and there may be no rational way of resolving their conflict. I think that this consequence of the coherence theory of justification commits one to relativism. I shall end my remarks by saying why I think that relativism, and Harman's version of it, has dreadful moral and political consequences. In the book, I discuss its epistemological shortcomings.

RELATIVISM

About the dire consequences of relativism, I have said: relativists "deny, unwillingly perhaps, that fundamental questions are capable of rational answers. They are acquiescing in the view that the choice of ideals by which one lives one's life is determined by taste, temperament, accident, authority, or instinct, but cannot be rationally derived from arguments for and against them. And in resigning themselves to this opinion, they disqualify themselves from having a right to object to other people holding other ideals which are vicious, harmful, destructive, and abominable. For if all they have in favor of their ideals is unreasoned commitment, then they cannot very well object to other people's commitments." (P. 22)

Harman's response is that "people attach different weights to the values they accept. . . . It is unclear how this sort of disagreement could be resolved except through negotiation and compromise." (P. 64) The point is repeated (p. 64). This suggestion fails to draw a crucial distinction between ideals and policies for implementing them. In a democratic society, policies must be carried out by negotiation and compromise. But it is a very bad mistake to suppose that it follows from this that the ideals themselves are subject to negotiation and compromise. Many people, including Harman, make this mistake. But ideals are good or bad, justified or unjustified, quite independently of what the political realities dictate about their implementation. How ideals can be justified is the subject matter of one-half of my book. If it is supposed that ideals themselves are subject to negotiation and compromise, we end up with unprincipled men, who lack integrity and who know, as Wilde aptly said, the price of everything and the value of nothing; these people are the cynics. We are surrounded by them.

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