

CHAPTER ONE

PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE

SUPPOSE that some morning you should awaken in a place you have never seen before; everything is new to you. Around you is a strange field, with unfamiliar creatures moving in it. You see objects which you do not recognize, and hear sounds which you cannot interpret. What would you do? If you would do nothing at all, but merely go to sleep again or sit inertly all day waiting for something to happen, then this book will have no interest for you. But it is doubtful if such would be your reaction. Most persons under these circumstances would begin to explore, would feel a strong interest in finding out where they were, and why. They would be a little frightened and intensely curious. They would examine the objects and creatures around them, try to get into communication with someone, look for clues that might account for their presence in this environment. In other words, they would become philosophers.

For philosophy is simply exploration of a strange universe. Every person, at least once, has the experience that has just been mentioned. Not in the morning of a single day,

but in the morning of life, he finds himself in an unfamiliar place, surrounded by unaccountable phenomena and creatures of whose purpose he is ignorant. If he feels curiosity and sets out to quench it, then he takes the first step in philosophy. He can go as far as he likes, for the exploration is endless. The more intelligent he is, the more questions he asks and the less satisfied he is with conventional answers. It is this capacity for wonder at his own existence that distinguishes man from the animals around him. From birth to death he never stops asking questions; and only after long experience and many disappointments does he realize the difficulty and the fascination of his inquiry.

Of course he never succeeds in reaching the one and final answer. Instead, he discovers a great many incomplete explanations of the world, often impressive but also often flatly contradictory. At this he may become discouraged, and decide to imitate the cow, who looks satisfied and does not seem worried by anything. He finds, however, that this is more easily said than done. After one has tasted the delight of intellectual curiosity, a placid bovine existence is not easy to maintain. In Somerset Maugham's novel *Of Human Bondage*, Philip Carey has this experience. He reads a number of philosophers in the hope of finding an answer to all his perplexities. Observing that each philosopher refutes the ideas of the preceding ones, whom their successor considers misguided fools, Philip concludes that philosophy is a matter of temperament, that all ideas are equally true and equally false, and that the best policy is to act on almost any rough working-rule of conduct and ignore the whole matter. Nevertheless he continues to philosophize in spite of himself, and questions concerning the meaning of life are never completely absent from his mind. To abandon philosophy because it cannot solve the riddle of the universe is like saying that we shall relinquish all friendship because none of our friends is perfect.

Students are often puzzled to distinguish between philosophy and other subjects, particularly such fields as science, religion, and art; each of these seems to be an attempt of human beings to find meaning in life. Is not science typically a form of exploration, motivated by curiosity? Does not religion confidently search for a benevolent plan in a chaotic universe? Is not art merely another form of the quest for meaning, a meaning more rich and significant because it is discerned by a sensitive imagination? It is true that each of these kinds of exploration furnishes material for philosophy; but philosophy in its own way includes them all, and more too. The business of the philosopher is to take everything into consideration. He must try to reconcile all contradictions and paradoxes. He must use the discoveries of science, the existence of the "scientific method," and also the fact that most people make decisions on a quite unscientific basis. He must allow for the existence of the religious emotion, that sense of dependence on a divine being which exerts a transforming power on many lives; but at the same time he must recognize that in some persons this emotion is entirely absent, and in others so distorted that it causes evil instead of good. He must take into account as data the existence of creative art and also the scorn with which "practical" men regard the artist. In short, he must make sense of a world which at every step contradicts itself, which appears at the same time good and evil, planned and accidental, progressive and decadent. All other subjects of study provide pieces for an enormous jigsaw puzzle; the philosopher tries to put together the picture.

This inclusiveness of philosophy can be seen more clearly if we compare it with its most closely related subject—science. At first glance it may seem that both have the same purpose: the discovery of truth, the exploration of the world to discover how it is made. The only difference may appear to be that the scientist proceeds toward this goal in a more

practical and less vague way than the philosopher, by using the method of controlled experiment and by insisting that every step be checked by definite evidence. On examination, however, we find that the differences are more deep-seated.

There are four important differences between the work of the scientist and of the philosopher. A good scientist must specialize; a good philosopher should not. It is misleading to say that the aim of any scientist is the discovery of truth; his aim is rather the discovery of some particular fact or law relating to some particular subject matter. He may study the properties of lenses, the distance and chemical composition of the star Betelgeuse, or the respiratory system of the frog. He is not a "scientist," not even a biologist, but perhaps an entomologist or a specialist in endocrine glands. To be sure, a philosopher may also specialize, if he wishes; but the more he does so, at the expense of his understanding of the whole, the less effective he is likely to be as a philosopher. His business is not to cut the picture up, but to put it together. Since he can never quite succeed in doing so, and since the scientist can find answers for some of his specific questions, we are likely to regard the latter as more efficient; but that is only because the philosopher sets himself a much harder task to perform.

The scientist prefers to work with materials that can be precisely measured; the philosopher cannot do so. The scientific method depends upon the possibility of exact measurement, for what cannot be measured cannot be controlled for the purpose of experiment. In the physical sciences this is obvious: the investigator labors to measure the exact amount of nitrogen in a given chemical compound, the precise parallax of a star, or the mechanical force exerted by a muscle pulling on a bone. Even in the "social" and "mental" sciences the aim is to express results in quantitative or mathematical terms. The sociologist works with percentages of illiteracy or feeble-mindedness in a community. The

psychologist speaks of an intelligence quotient. All scientists hesitate to deal with things which, being intangible, cannot be measured. Nevertheless, since such things are as much a part of the life picture as the measurable ones, the philosopher cannot ignore them. Thus the field of philosophy is again more inclusive than that of science.

The scientist makes more assumptions than the philosopher. Both, of course, assume something to start with; otherwise they could not think at all. But the botanist classifying flowers is not likely to question the existence of those flowers, the fact that they have certain colors, or the fact that they flourish and then die within a certain period of time. He assumes those matters and goes about his business. If the philosopher made as many initial assumptions as this, he would be regarded as neglectful of his duty. He must question and examine every part of experience—he must be inclusive. One philosopher, Descartes, began his investigations by attempting to reject every assumption which had been made up to his time, and basing his conclusions on the one and only fact to which he believed he could bear personal witness: namely, that he himself was conscious. It is interesting that science is coming more and more to question its own assumptions; it no longer asserts dogmatically that such things as time, space, and matter exist, and on the whole seems less confident than it was in the nineteenth century. In this sense it may be said to be growing more philosophical.

The most important difference of all is the fact that science as such is not primarily interested in the value or worth of what it discovers. This is not to say that science has no value; its benefit to mankind is, of course, incalculable. But that is more or less a by-product, not the direct concern of the scientist. The one value in which he is interested is truth; whether a discovery is good or bad does not concern him in so far as he is a scientist. Atomic energy may be used to generate power, to combat cancer, or to destroy a city in a

few seconds; but its discovery was a scientific fact irrespective of its good or evil results. The inventors of the radio might prefer that their brain-child should transmit symphonic music rather than war propaganda; but their scientific success and integrity are not diminished by any other use to which their discovery may be put. Philosophy, on the other hand, must not fail to consider the question of values. They are part of the picture, an essential portion of reality. As far as possible, nothing must be torn from its context; everything must be related to everything else.

From this brief account of what philosophy is, it is evident that we ought not to split up the subject into separate fields as is done with science and most other studies. Nevertheless, it is possible to explore the total structure of the world from different angles, to ask different questions about it. If we are careful never to forget the unity of the whole subject, we may safely inquire what these separate methods of approach are.

When a child sees something unfamiliar to him (say a mowing machine), he is likely to ask first of all, what is that? how does it work? Being told that it consists of many little blades moving back and forth against one another to cut the hay, he may next inquire, how do you know? To that his father will probably reply that he has actually seen it working, moving through a field with the grass falling down behind it. Next the child may look doubtfully at the mower and ask, what good is it? The father answers that it saves the farmer time, and hopes that the boy will not think to inquire what he does with the time he saves.

Though the child does not know it, he has really been asking his father the three major questions of philosophy: What is it? How do you know? What good is it? To answer them about a mowing machine is hard enough; to answer them about the world in general is the unfinished business of all philosophy. Each question is the basis of one angle of

approach toward our total exploratory process. If we ask, "What is the nature and structure of reality?" then we are studying the division of philosophy known as *metaphysics*. If the question is, "How can we know anything about reality? What is the nature of knowledge?" then we are studying *epistemology*. If we inquire concerning the relative values of various parts of reality, asking, "Why are some things better than others?" we are usually studying *ethics*.

No matter which question we are considering, however, we find that it does not stand alone and that it cannot be answered without taking the others into account. If we decide to examine only a certain portion of the field and exclude the rest, we are like an explorer who sets out to make maps of all the rivers in a certain district, but ignores the jungle and the wild animals; the latter are soon forced vividly on his notice. We shall find at once that these separate questions of philosophy are not independent, but constantly overlapping. The existence of value can hardly be explained without inquiring how the universe is put together and how it is possible for a person to get far enough outside his own mind to perceive value at all. In later chapters the reader will notice that some of the problems could be discussed under more than one general head. For example, the question of optimism and pessimism is at the same time ethical and metaphysical, since it deals both with values and with the problem whether one is justified in regarding the whole universe as predominantly good or evil. We divide philosophy into parts only for convenience in discussion.

It is interesting that all three of the questions previously outlined appeared at the very beginning of philosophy in ancient Greek times. When thinkers began to ask one of the questions, they soon found it necessary to study the others also. The inquiry started in the sixth century B.C., when a group of men in the Greek colony of Miletus set out to discover what the world is made of—that is, raised the

problem of metaphysics. The first answers seem to us crudely simple. One inquirer announced that everything is composed of water; another, that air is the primary substance; a third, that the basic substance is no kind of matter as we know it, but an indeterminate material called *The Infinite*. One ingenious theory, put forward by Heraclitus, was that reality is composed merely of a continuous process of change or flux, just as we might say that a candle flame, which appears real and constant, is a transition from tallow and wick to oxygen and heat. But he was straightway contradicted by Parmenides, who asserted that change cannot exist at all, because everything in the universe is a fixed part of a single great whole, where nothing can be added or taken away. In course of time the Greeks hit upon the startling new explanation called the atomic theory. According to this, all objects are made up, not of any continuous substance, but of tiny indivisible particles, all alike in material but differing in size and shape. These particles are then put together in various ways to form the universe.¹

All these theories concern the metaphysical problem, but at this point the second question arose. No one can see an atom; how, then, can we know of its existence? If bodies are really composed of atoms, then reality is very unlike what our senses tell us it is. And if we cannot trust the evidence of our senses, how can we know anything at all? This question became so baffling that a group of Athenian teachers, called Sophists, began to assert that no general, objective knowledge is possible. Nothing is true in itself; it is true only with reference to the particular person who believes or perceives it, and varies according to the individual.

The Sophists, however, concerned themselves only indirectly with the problem of knowledge. Their main interest was in conduct (thus the third question arises), which they approached from a similar point of view. Just as there is no objective truth, so there is no objective right or

wrong; ethical standards must vary with the individual. Once this ethical problem had emerged as an important part of philosophy, it occupied the center of attention for some time. Socrates, the most remarkable personality among the Greek thinkers, was an ethical teacher who urged men to develop the good of their souls instead of seeking honor and wealth. Finally, in the early part of the fourth century, the three problems were all joined by Plato, who showed how inseparable they really are and how all philosophy is a unit.

So far we have said nothing about literature, with which our exploration is to be primarily concerned. The reference to Plato should remind us of the close connection that may exist between literature and philosophy, for besides being a philosopher Plato was a great artist, a poet and dramatist. To be sure, few philosophers possess any particular literary skill; but most great writers have in them an element of philosophy. Through the medium of literature, therefore, it is possible to learn a good deal, in an unusually interesting way, about philosophical problems. In a novel, a poem, or a play, the artist offers us many riches. He appeals to our senses and our emotions; he makes us acquainted with varieties of human character; he gives us vicarious experience in living. But behind the story, the descriptions, and the characters, sometimes directly stated and sometimes left for the reader to infer from the whole situation, he reveals to us a general point of view toward life. The idea behind a piece of literature can be studied as philosophy, and such a study is our object in the present book.

Besides being more informal and less involved than a direct technical study of philosophy, this approach through the medium of literature has one outstanding advantage. Philosophy has a tendency to become too abstract. It runs the danger of withdrawing itself from life as one lives it every day, of moving on with both its head and its feet in the clouds. Vitally as it concerns everyone's actions and opinions,

many readers are likely to be perplexed by its constant use of abstract terms such as monism, categorical imperative, or hedonism. But when we approach philosophy by means of literature, this difficulty is diminished. Good literature is, among other things, a combination of abstract ideas with a concrete presentation; it relates specific individual persons and things to general concepts. "The object of art," it has been said, "is a particular that contains a universal." The combination is irresistible.

Two literary examples will illustrate the advantages of concreteness. In John Galsworthy's play *The Pigeon*, we find two enthusiastic social reformers, Professor Calway and Sir Thomas Hoxton, arguing about the best way to reclaim a drunken old ne'er-do-well named Timson. In the heat of abstract controversy, they rush out of the house without noticing that Timson is reclining in a stupor on the threshold. Of course they trip over him, and as they pick themselves up one of their friends remarks, "You see, they had lost sight of the individual!" Good literature never loses sight of the individual; abstract philosophy is likely to do so.

The second example is from Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, in which two extremely intelligent men, Settembrini and Naphta, engage in long theoretical arguments about the state of society and the future of Europe. Brilliant as these discussions are, Mann gradually impresses on the reader that they are getting nowhere; that, losing themselves in a maze of abstractions, they run into the ground. To emphasize this fact, Mann introduces the character of Peeperkorn, a man incapable of coherent thought or abstract reasoning, but with a vivid sense of concrete reality. When the two philosophers theorize about the "sense of power" and the "primitive urge for mastery," Peeperkorn quietly points upward to a golden eagle circling overhead, his keen eyes watching for his prey beneath, his iron beak and curved talons ready to bury themselves in its flesh—a living symbol

of the ruthless force of nature. And Mann remarks: "All interest in Settembrini's and Naphta's antinomies fled away. But the vision of the eagle remained." So it is with literature. We may study philosophy through the medium of art, for the artist and the philosopher often deal with the same concepts. But no matter how remote from ordinary life those concepts may appear to be, the artist never loses sight of the eagle.