

## Philosophy and Mystification

### Introduction:

There are two currents that run through this book, both of which set it in opposition to a practice and conception of philosophy that can be traced back to the Seventeenth Century and is exemplified most clearly in Descartes. One current flows from the view that the business of philosophy is not with some special kind of truth, such as Descartes sought, a truth higher and more elusive than that found in the everyday world, a truth requiring special techniques for its discovery. The contrary view informing this book is that the object of philosophy ought to be clarity and putting order into our thoughts and our ways of talking about the everyday. These thoughts often enough get tangled when ways of talking that have been developed in one area or field get transferred to another, or come up against ways of talking devised for entirely different subject matter and for different purposes. That view of philosophy and the resources it can appeal to is discussed in Chapter One and it is exemplified throughout the following treatments of particular tangles and confusions endemic to the modern era.

But there is also, beyond this, a view about the source of the tangles and confusions that have been characteristic of that era (which is our era), their source in certain moves, certain assumptions and projects that seemed natural and necessary to the philosophers of the Seventeenth Century, seemed so for very good historical reasons. But good historical reasons, as their name implies, have a shelf life, and in any case, while they may be motivating, they are not compelling with the universal, timeless and abstract force that philosophers generally set themselves to pursue, and often think they have found. And this brings the discussion into a deeper conflict with the self-image of philosophy that has been particularly sharply drawn in the modern era, the image of it as the pursuit of the absolute and the timeless and what is unconditioned by circumstance and history.

One of the tasks on which I have tried to make a start is that of identifying some of those false assumptions and mistaken projects that have shaped philosophy in the modern era, while at the same time giving at least a sketch of a concrete historical analysis of the circumstances in which they came to seem natural, justified and even necessary assumptions to make and projects to undertake. The inclusion of historical discussions and analysis will seem strange to many and unwarranted to some, but it is only a concrete historical analysis that can give any substance to claims about 'the historicity of knowledge'. Without such a concrete account, general claims of that sort are abstract, weightless and of little use. We would have no way of assessing them.

In several of the chapters that follow I have done what I can to give a concrete account of the historical conditions that in the Seventeenth Century gave a plausibility to its individualistic assumptions and an apparent urgency to the project of seeking 'absolute' foundations that was undertaken then. Because I can hardly claim authority as a historian, what I have done in that line will have to speak for itself. I would welcome further discussion of, and even instruction in, the business of historical accounting for the adoption of those projects and those assumptions that have set modern philosophy on its particular course.

But now I need to say something about my title, because the word 'mystification' that appears there is not being used in a loose and general sense to cover muddles and confusions of every kind, even deliberate or interested ones. It is used in a very specific

## Philosophy and Mystification

sense to indicate those confusions and that bafflement which arise out of a failure to separate carefully the secular, concrete and conditioned from the transcendent, the absolute and the unconditioned. That particular sort of bafflement and confusion is involved in almost every one of the problems tackled in the following chapters, and the discussions in those chapters are perhaps the best guide to the nature of the particular sort of confusion and senselessness caused by the attempt to give a transcendental role to words and notions<sup>1</sup> that are to all appearances secular in character. Still, it is important to say something, however sketchy, to indicate what to look for in those later discussions.

The seeking of foundations, for example, is a perfectly sensible project, if by that is meant looking for a good firm place to build, a place that is adequate to the building you have in mind. We apply the principles of geology and soil mechanics, make test bores, and consult records of earthquakes and flooding. If necessary, we sink piles or create rafts that work with the natural conditions to create a foundation that will withstand the forces that it will be subjected to through wind loading, or flood, through earthquakes or the pounding of traffic.

It is quite another thing to look for a foundation that is 'absolute' and 'unconditioned', one that needs no support from anything else, and is not only adequate in itself, but adequate at the same time, to any building however high, or load however great, that you may want to place on it. The latter search, by contrast to the first, is a senseless enterprise. Such a foundation is not to be found in this world, -- or on it. Looking for such a thing is like looking for the rainbow's end, for 'Tír na nOg', for 'El Dorado', Prester John, or the place where parallels meet.

Searching for impossible things may of course lead you through interesting country and teach you much. Or on the other hand, it may lead you into a shadowland where nothing is real. In Chapter Seven I argue that Descartes' 'Method of Hyperbolic Doubt' leads us into just such a shadowland, that the 'doubts' that are the basis of the 'method' are unreal. Because there is nothing really going on in the so-called 'doubting', what this pseudo-process is thought to reveal is just as unreal and insubstantial as the 'doubts' themselves. In setting out on this impossible quest for the absolute, for foundations that, while needing no support themselves can support anything whatever, Descartes employs means that are just as unreal and delusive as the elusive and impossible goal he is pursuing. But that view has to be argued for.

Contrast the Aristotelian dialectic with this search for 'absolute' foundations. When Aristotle looks for a place to begin the investigation of any topic he suggests that we begin with 'the opinions of the many or the wise'. This is hardly because those opinions are thought to be infallible. We need not have a mystical view about 'the

---

<sup>1</sup> In referring to the manner of grasping or referring rather than the thing grasped or referred to, I have deliberately made a practice of using the rather loose and vague word 'notion' instead of the more common philosophical words 'idea' or 'concept'. This is because 'notion' has not had the long history of philosophic use that has attached to the words 'idea' and 'concept' such a weight of philosophic baggage. The use of 'idea' and 'concept' in the history of philosophy might give one the impression that they referred to objects of some sort, entities that could be implanted or removed, perhaps transferred from one site to another.

Descartes so used the word 'idea' that he thought it made sense to talk of ideas being 'innate', and Locke described them as 'whatever is before the mind in thinking' and in that way gave them the status of objects. Without that history, the word 'notion' carries none of that baggage and is therefore more open to being grouped with skills and practices rather than with entities and objects

## Philosophy and Mystification

collective wisdom of humanity' to think it sensible to start there. It simply makes more sense than wasting our time with random fanciful or extraordinary views, views that have come out of nowhere and are likely only to lead nowhere, the wild suppositions of impossible happenings: colors that change on a certain date, universes that consists only of sounds or of one object, and so forth. Under the influence of Descartes's Method, these imaginings have been thought to reveal 'conceptual boundaries'. (That belief also gets discussed in Chapter Seven.)

To be worth examining, Socrates required that views be seriously held. And that seems a good place to start. (It is also where Socrates and Descartes part company. Descartes, by contrast, tells us not to take seriously the doubts that are to be the basis of his philosophical method.) But the Socratic and the Aristotelian examination will be a critical examination of those seriously held views: Have they doubtful antecedents? Have they unacceptable consequences? Do they make sense? How do they square with other deeply held or important views? Can they be incorporated into a larger picture that makes sense and is fruitful? The views may have to be modified before they can be so incorporated, but for Aristotle, the views of 'the many' or 'the wise' are unlikely to be rejected outright. Again, this is not because of some mystical collective wisdom, but rather because, collectively, the speakers of a language ('the many') have a role in forming that language (in which 'the wise' also have a special role, as can be seen by the special place they are given, for example, in the Oxford English Dictionary).

The language that 'the many' and 'the wise' form through what they say and through what they accept as true, will be one that will reflect, and at the same time be incorporated in, the collective practices of a whole way of life. The words of that language will get their sense from their role in those practices and that way of life.

Though the 'many and the wise' collectively determine the language, the two are distinguished here because 'the wise' may have a leading role in summing up and expressing currents that are there in the common life which they share with 'the many'. The greatness of Shakespeare or of Chaucer and their ability to leave their imprint on the language can be seen as lying in their sensitivity to, and ability to articulate, deep changes in human life in their time and culture. They were in that way 'speaking for' us all in that culture, for 'the many', helping us to see who we were, and giving us a vocabulary and stories that would help us think about our lives.

However, while taking this on board we have at the same time to keep in mind Hobbes' great discovery that when a society is itself divided there may be those who pretend to speak for all but really only speak on behalf of an interested section (even when they think they speak for all.) That is, they are providing a vocabulary and ways of looking that help us to see ourselves in certain ways that benefit the one segment and prevent us from seeing ourselves and understanding our life in ways that would damage the interests of that segment.

But now we come to the deepest and most difficult point. We have to understand and come to terms with the charge of 'relativism' and with the charge of 'cultural relativism' which will be made against the suggestion that 'the many' and 'the wise' collectively determine what is sayable, and even what is accepted within the culture. These are not irresponsible charges, but they are not helpful either.

The charge of 'relativism' is not helpful in two separate ways. Firstly, it counterposes a 'written in the sky' absolutism to an anarchic and unfettered freedom of a

## Philosophy and Mystification

culture to make up a language and a view of the world, offering us only these two possibilities. Secondly, what is particularly unhelpful about the accusation of 'relativism' is that it suggests some kind of philosophical or moral wickedness, an abdication of all judgment, order or constraint. The problem is not wickedness, but incoherence and senselessness. The notion of a culture with no constraints on its language formation or on its practices and accepted patterns of behavior, its way of life, is simply incoherent. If it were arbitrary, the 'language' would be no language. Without shaping forces and constraints it would be an arabesque of sound and no more. If it were arbitrary and unconstrained, there would be no connection with the life and world of the people. There would be no meaning for its words and no sense in its institutions, rituals and practices. The notion of sense would have evaporated.

There is something here that bears on whole cultures in a way that has analogies to, but is different from, the way the 'private language argument' bears on individuals. Many Wittgenstinians have concentrated only on the fact that the individual confronts the social as part of a shaping environment which through its constraints makes possible significant speech and action. But, though whole cultures don't face the social constraints of the sort that confront the individual, there are, nevertheless, a whole range of shaping forces that, in being recognized and responded to by the culture, give weight and substance and point both to its language and to its social forms and practices. The adequacy or inadequacy of a culture's response to those forces it comes to recognize, and the tension between its responses to different forces, will give the culture a history. In some cultures that history may be slow-moving and almost imperceptible and, in others it may be so fast-moving that one generation can hardly recognize the world of the next, or know how to operate in it.

But understanding the externality' of those forces and constraints facing a whole culture is difficult enough and we may be tempted to what looks like a simple, natural and even necessary solution -- that of making their externality absolute and timeless, something that stands them outside the whole of humanity, outside of humanity as such, humanity not considered as a collection of definite individuals belonging to definite cultures at particular times, but humanity as some abstract and timeless universal. What is proposed as standing opposite such an abstract and timeless, abstract and universal 'humanity' will necessarily be an equally timeless and abstract set of 'constraints' and 'forces'. What we can't understand is how such abstractions are meant to act on one another, or what either of them have to do with actual concrete individual human beings, nor can we see how they are meant to produce actual recorded history. What we can't understand is what role they are meant to have in the understanding of anything.

Every definite, historical culture faces constraints that are not of its own choosing, but it is not helpful to imagine these as something entirely separate, external, abstract and timeless, something in fact transcendental and lying outside their world and its history. To picture the constraints in that way is to mystify them entirely. We can give no intelligible account of the existence, the nature nor the manner of operation of those transcendental abstractions that are pictured as separate from the human world and separate for all eternity. How would such abstracted and separated things carry out their constraining and affect our choices?

We can make sense of those constraints if we drop that picture of them. The 'many and the wise' of any culture are made up of concrete individuals who have grown

## Philosophy and Mystification

up within the culture and are constrained by its history, its historically developed language, its accumulation of skills, of artifacts, its social structures and ways of looking, its moral formation, its traditions and its devotion to those traditions, or its ability to accept change, and the pressures of environment which may call for change.

And in our own time we have to see that perhaps the most important feature of the environment of any culture will be the possibility of the destructive intrusion of another powerful and dominating culture that can change the landscape of its life overnight, turning peasants, for example, into wage workers supplying the needs of the developed world and hankering after its 'goods', while at the same time it may turn the culture's artifacts and sacred relics into commodities and emptying its rituals of sense.

Those are actual and concrete constraints that can be identified and located, not in the sky, where they become mysterious, but in the concrete historical situation of a people, where those constraints can be understood. And we can see too how the world-views, the institutions and the ways of talking are a part of the way a culture interacts with its environment. In part they collectively define and limit the world of the people of that culture, but in a way that allows modification of language, world-view, institutions and way of life through the interaction of all of those elements. And if we start there amongst those concrete and identifiable constraints we can make sense of the notions of progress and development without being entangled in the unintelligible picture of progress as an approach to some 'goal' which, because ideal and transcendental is neither attainable, nor, if we think about it carefully, even approachable. (That notion of progress gets analyzed more fully in Chapter Eleven, 'On Misunderstanding Science.')

Once they are defined out of reach as absolutes and transcendentals, notions such as 'reality' and 'truth' can no longer even define a direction. They can be made to look as though they define a direction only by appeal to the sort of analogical reasoning that theology uses to 'reach out to' God. But in a secular context, this appeal merely misleads us because those idealized notions are in fact being characterized by just that already sensed direction which they are pretending to characterize and define. These matters are discussed in several places in what follows, again, particularly in Chapter Eleven.

But our present purposes are understanding the particular role of 'the many and the wise' in the Aristotelian dialectic as a good starting point for a discussion of any topic, a starting point that is in no way privileged and a foundation but is subject to correction, modification and improvement. The important point that we have to hold onto is that we can make sense of those notions of improvement and correction without the attempt to appeal to transcendental, eternal and separated 'ideals' and goals.

It is in this sense, and for this language-forming reason, that the views of 'the many and the wise' cannot be rejected out of hand. But this is not to say that they may not be modified, as a language may be modified, and a culture may develop. Modifications need not come only from large historical changes in the culture and its practices, but may come even from the kind of critical analysis that a philosopher might undertake. Aristotle forged a vocabulary which reflected, but at the same time modified, ways of talking current in his time, and that vocabulary of 'substance', 'nature', 'cause', 'matter', 'axiom', and many other terms, has had its influence down to the present, even (unfortunately) in the inverted and mystified versions that were set before us in the Seventeenth Century.

In the case we have just been looking at, the word *arché* ('beginning' or 'starting

## Philosophy and Mystification

point') in this context means for Aristotle 'the place where we begin' in our investigations or the place where our analysis ends. His *arché* is not an 'absolute foundation' taken as 'the place where all things begin' or all knowledge begins, the absolute origin of existence or of knowledge. The latter was the sort of starting point which was being sought by the Rationalists and the Empiricists. That notion of an 'absolute foundation' or starting point is a theological notion, one which necessarily reaches outside the world and all that is in it<sup>2</sup>. Only something which is essentially transcendental and mysterious, and not to be known with secular knowledge, will fill that particular bill. And this is my justification for using the word 'mystified' to describe the fate which overtook the Aristotelian vocabulary in the Seventeenth Century.

In more than one place below I discuss the mystification of the notion of Nature in the Seventeenth Century through the theological role which was given to it then. That theological role was explicitly recognized by Spinoza in his repeated phrase '*Deus sive Natura*'. Some of Spinoza's contemporaries saw the equation of God and Nature in the opposite sense, as bringing God within the world rather than as exporting Nature out of it, and branded him a 'pantheist'. But it is pretty clear that the role that was given to the notion of Nature at that time had the effect of projecting it out of the world, making it into a mysterious, quasi-theological entity that stood 'over and above' the world. The talk of 'Nature's Laws' gives us that. These were thought of as 'absolute and inviolable' and not subject to the change and development which characterizes the things of this world<sup>3</sup> And that metaphor of 'laws' suggests a separation of 'governor' and 'governed' which places the governor outside the world, as Christian theology had God standing outside the world and governing according to His Plan. That mystified, theologized notion of 'Nature' and its metaphorical 'Laws' has caused its share of confusion down the centuries.

Perhaps one further sketched example of what I would describe as 'mystification' will be helpful not only in understanding what I mean by that term but in seeing what I have been trying to do in the discussions that follow, by way of 'demystifying' a number of notions. Another notion that got mystified in the Seventeenth Century as the result of being given transcendental or theological work to do is that of substance.

Aristotle had forged the notion as part of an attempt to provide a perspicuous vocabulary to give order to our talk about change, among other things, and the distinction that we make between change and destruction. Where there was change, and not

---

<sup>2</sup> The transcendental and essentially mysterious character of the Empiricist starting point, experience, is not so obvious since experience can seem such an ordinary thing, known to all. There is such an ordinary notion. But it won't do the work the Empiricists require. Their notion is abstract and mysterious both in its nature and in its origins. Locke thought he could appeal to the language of physics, the talk of 'impacts' to reach outside the enclosed world of 'experience' to what is, from that point of view, an 'external' and 'transcendental' world of ordinary things. But of course, the language of physics will have to be unpacked in the same way as everything else, in terms of just those enclosing experiences he is trying to transcend. Locke might as well make Descartes' appeal to God to get him out of his bottle

<sup>3</sup> It was in this moment that the so called 'problem of the uniformity of nature' was born.

## Philosophy and Mystification

destruction and disappearance it has to be possible to identify something which changed and therefore something which could be identified through and after the change and to which the change could be attributed.

In his proposed vocabulary there were, firstly, ‘substances’, the particular things that underwent change: this horse that got trained, that schedule that got changed, the house that got enlarged, the child who grew up, the city that was bombed and rebuilt. (Though Carthage was destroyed, ploughed up and the site sown with salt, and so it disappeared.) In contrast to this, there were the aspects of the thing which changed. These simply disappeared and were replaced: the wildness of the horse, the chaos or injustice of the schedule, the immaturity of the child, the uninhabitable desolation of the bombed city that disappeared with rebuilding.

This prompted a distinction between the enduring thing that changes and the attributes which have no separate existence from the thing to which they were attributed and whose disappearance and replacement constitute the change. Attributes (this temperature, that shade of green, the sweetness) disappear absolutely with the change. That to which they are attributed is something on which they are dependent for their existence, something which, by contrast has an existence that is independent of the attribute. (“Well! I’ve often seen a cat without a grin,” thought Alice, “but a grin without a cat!”) Despite Lewis Carroll’s fancy, and Alice’s dream, when the cat leaves off smiling, there is no smile left to leave behind.

But the independence of the cat from the attribute of smiling is not an absolute independence of the kind that was being sought by the new Seventeenth Century philosophers (the ‘Reformers’, Leibniz called them). It is certainly true that Aristotle made it a mark of being a substance that anything identified as a substance could not be attributed to anything else. A substance was in some sense ‘primary’. But an Aristotelian substance was primary only in relation to its attributes. Its primacy was not absolute. He was pointing out that those attributes depended for their existence on the substance to which they were attributed. The cat’s grin required the cat and could not be parted from it. The grin could not be transferred to another cat, or to a crocodile or a human. Only in joke or in a fanciful manner of speaking could we talk about the grin passing to another face.

So the substance (the cat) is independent of the attribute (the grin) and the attribute dependent. If we stick to the Aristotelian usage which applies the word ‘substance’ to the myriad of individual things that can be identified through a change of attributes, we will stay on firm ground with a useful and intelligible vocabulary. But the Seventeenth Century philosophers (for reasons I try to make out in Chapter Fourteen) had another project to which they wanted to recruit the notion of substance. That was the project of finding foundations, and absolute ones. They were not content with trying to find a perspicuous vocabulary with which to talk about the things of this world. They wanted to talk about this world ‘as a whole’, to find the basis of the whole, its origins, the stuff of which everything was made, to find the beginnings of everything. (The belief which some cosmologists have that this is a sensible project, and a scientific one into the bargain, gets discussed later.)

My claim is that this is essentially and necessarily a theological project (taking the word ‘theological’ as being used to refer to what lies outside the world as a whole, to the transcendent.) I argue in Chapter Four that the attempt to talk about ‘the world as a

## Philosophy and Mystification

whole' is already to engage in a theological project, that the notion of a whole makes sense only from a position outside. In addition, I would go on to say that it is the recruitment to this essentially theological project of the search for absolutes that has mystified the once useful Aristotelian vocabulary of 'cause', 'substance', 'matter', 'nature', and the rest.

Let's return briefly to the mystification of the notion of substance. It was of course that relation of independence and dependence which made the substance/attribute distinction a natural target for takeover and incorporation into the new project of finding absolute foundations. To receive that role of absolute foundation for existence however, the word 'substance' had to be wrenched loose from its Aristotelian reference to the ordinary, the particular and the concrete. With him, to say that the cat is independent of the grin is to say no more than that the cat need not be grinning, that grinning is not part of our way of identifying the cat. And to say that the grin is not independent of the cat is to say no more than that this cat's grin cannot be transferred to some other cat, that we cannot identify the grin through the fanciful 'transfer' in the way that we can identify the cat through its change from grinning to scowling. There is nothing mysterious in all that. But we have to be clear that the cat as a substance, is not an absolutely independent being. The cat has come into being and is continually dependent on air and water and food, on not being run over or thrown into the lake. That sort of 'substance' would hardly answer the requirements of the new project.

To use the term 'substance' for the new purposes, it had to be made into a purely abstract notion identified by that relation of dependence and independence alone. And the substance/attribute distinction had to be abstracted and detached from the context of change and the understanding of change in which it had been forged and from which it drew its sense. It had to be taken, that is, out of the context in which it was meant to function and had its point. The new conception could not be allowed, like the Aristotelian notion, to refer to concrete individuals identifiable through change. Those concrete changing individuals could hardly fulfil the role the Seventeenth Century philosophers had in mind for 'substance', namely, that of underpinning the whole of existence. It is important to take note of the fact that the role of underpinning the whole of existence was one that had in scholastic theology been reserved to God<sup>4</sup>.

In this transformation, the notion of substance shared the fate of the notion of nature, which had also been transformed and made to take over another role that the scholastics had assigned to God, that of external source of order and development in the world. Needless to say, Aristotle never talked of any such external source of order or change. His concept of nature was of something internal to the individual changing thing,

---

<sup>4</sup> It is for this reason that we get those baffling definitions of 'substance', definitions with a theological flavor that reflects the theological use to which the notion was now being put. 'Substance is that which needs no other to exist' or is 'Causa sui'. Those definitions succeed only in making us dizzy. We have no idea what to make of the phrase 'needs no other to exist'. And 'cause of itself' can be given no sense that accords with any normal use of the word 'cause' or is even connected legitimately with our ordinary senses of that word. We have no idea what to make of the word 'cause' in that phrase.

That is where the vertigo begins.

## Philosophy and Mystification

(internal to it, however, only as belonging to some particular species). But of course Aristotle was not trying to answer theological questions with his notion of nature.

The scholastics on the other hand, were asking theological questions, questions about an external and transcendent source of the order which we seem to find in the world. The new philosophers of the Seventeenth Century took on board the scholastic question and felt that it had to be answered, but answered in a new way that took it out of the hands of the theologians and the scholastics. They thought that by offering the name 'Nature' in answer to that question about an external source of order, they were secularizing the question and handing it over to study by the sciences, which were just then emerging.

But that move was capable neither of secularizing the question about an external source of order, nor of handing that question over to the scientists for study. The sciences have no means of studying what is 'external to the world', and they have no means of studying how that proposed external source of order is meant to operate, how it is supposed to bring about the order within the world, of which it is being offered as the source and the 'explanation'. As I suggest later in the book, any scientist who proposed studying the means by which nature or its 'laws' enforced an order on the world, would soon find himself shown the door (perhaps one he couldn't open from the inside.) We are dealing with a picture only, a metaphor, and not with a genuine explanation. In so far as this has not been understood, the notion of nature has simply been mystified, given a role it cannot play and status it cannot have. (More is said about this in Chapter Twelve.)

The discussions that make up this book have three chief aims: one is the demystification of that vocabulary which was transformed and mystified in the Seventeenth Century. The second is to try to understand how those notions came to be mystified in the first place, what the project was that forced impossible roles onto them. Finally, and most controversially, the aim is to try to see historically how that project came to seem possible, sensible and necessary to the founding fathers of modern philosophy.

I have done what I can to avoid or to explain technicalities so that the discussions will be available to non-specialists who are willing to put in the work to follow their arguments. The view of philosophy that informs this work is that philosophy is not a specialist subject separated off from life and history. On the contrary its conceptions and its problems have historical roots and historical consequences that are the concern of us all and affect our ability to think clearly about the world around us.