

## TRUTH IN PHILOSOPHY

TIBOR R. MACHAN\*

### Can a Philosophy be True?

I WILL HERE ADVANCE SOME IDEAS in the field of meta-philosophy. What I want to explore is whether there could be any truths in philosophy.

The question of the nature of truth itself is at the crux of most philosophical systems and methods. However, when a reader first encounters philosophy, usually many philosophical positions will be presented. This is unlike in other fields. Thus, the question of the possible truth of these various positions on numerous topics arises quite naturally. Is there freedom of the will or can none of us help what happens to us? Is nature composed of matter alone, or, if not, is it entirely spiritual? Is pragmatism or subjectivism or empiricism the correct epistemology? What about ethics—is altruism, utilitarianism or egoism right? Should we take pleasure as our highest goal or should we serve the will of God? Is communism, socialism, feudalism, the welfare state or libertarianism the correct political solution for human beings?

Encountering so many different, often contradictory ways of thinking about the world can be discouraging, even disturbing. It should awaken most of us to the realization that often we do not know where we stand. The resulting perplexity might lead one to the view that philosophy is useless and possibly even destructive, so why not cast it aside and attend to more manageable matters? This view is itself a position within philosophy, so we are back to the same puzzle again: what is right or true in philosophy?

It is pointless to wait for the “united association of philosophers” to come out of hiding and settle the issues. In other fields of inquiry we seem to find it acceptable enough to come up with answers that are both perfectly

---

\*Tibor R. Machan ([tmachan@gmail.com](mailto:tmachan@gmail.com); <http://tibormachan.blogspot.com>) holds the R.C. Hoiles Chair in Business Ethics and Free Enterprise at the Argyros School of Business & Economics, Chapman University, Orange, CA. He is Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

CITE THIS ARTICLE AS: Tibor R. Machan, “Truth in Philosophy,” *Libertarian Papers* 3, 8 (2011). ONLINE AT: [libertarianpapers.org](http://libertarianpapers.org). THIS ARTICLE IS subject to a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License ([creativecommons.org/licenses](http://creativecommons.org/licenses)).

sound and quite open to revision, modification, and updating. It is best not to expect from philosophy something that cannot be promised in any other area, namely, a final settlement of a problem. Instead, one would probably do well to take up the task alone, with help from those who have been doing work in the field over the centuries, and ask in earnest whether there are any right or nearly right answers to the questions raised in philosophy. Reading all the books in philosophy will not do the job. Yet, even after a brief survey one might attend to the task just for a little while. To assist in this endeavor, I will suggest where *I* have ended up thus far in my own investigations concerning the matter of truth in philosophy.

### **The Subject Matter of Philosophy**

The proper, valid subject matter of philosophy is the basic features of reality and our essential relationship to them—not, however, the various special domains studied in other fields of inquiry. Metaphysics studies basic facts; epistemology asks what knowledge is; ethics considers how human beings should live; and politics addresses the problem of how human communities should be set up. These, briefly, are the central issues treated within the various branches of philosophy. Among the many branches and sub-branches of human inquiry it is philosophy that considers these issues; however, they pertain to us all.

To make some headway toward coping with the issue of whether there can be truth in philosophy, it will help to consider that the purpose of philosophy is not itself a philosophical issue, although many philosophers discuss it. The knowledge of what philosophy studies is not philosophical knowledge—to be more precise. In any area of study the field must be well enough known; it must be distinguished from other fields and assimilated into the broader categories, such as sciences, arts, and humanities, before work can begin *in* it. This is a gradual process in human evolution, but when we think the matter through for ourselves, it is noticeable enough that whatever philosophy amounts to, this is not itself the consequence of philosophical inquiry. That would amount to having things upside down. People can have a good deal of understanding of philosophy without having obtained philosophical understanding. Moreover, it is quite likely that this knowledge about philosophy is hidden; that is, people are not aware that they have it.

Once we have some knowledge about philosophy, we can begin to develop a more rigorous, systematic approach to reaching some answers in the field. The realm of existence studied in philosophy is crucial in determining the character of good judgments in the field. What is being

studied requires that it be studied in certain distinctive ways. In a pluralistic world studying one subject matter in the fashion proper to another can seriously sidetrack one. Sometimes this can pay off, but more often the transplantation of methodology produces serious omissions. Methods used in chemistry are not all appropriate to the study of psychology, even though certain features may be common to both fields. Standards of good judgments emerge in the light of what we are investigating. Thus, physics develops its own tests for checking whether judgments in the field are good guesses, reliable estimates, firmly supported beliefs, or knowledge.

The same is true in philosophy. Here, as in other fields, the methods to be employed have developed alongside the greater and greater curiosity and work being devoted to the subject matter. One might think that there is a chicken-or-egg problem here; which came first, the subject matter or the method? Yet this is like asking what came first, reality or our knowledge of it? It is safe to suggest here that in the case of every individual the two come hand in hand—but reality has been around (at least) prior to any of us. Whatever the result of philosophical inquiry shows here, for our purposes the only crucial point is that because of philosophy's very broad scope of inquiry, and its concern with such basic issues, its primary tool of investigation is logic—the most general method of inquiry discovered by human beings. All criticism invokes at least logic. Even where nothing else is presupposed, where one looks only at some theory's internal features, it is usual to criticize on grounds that some view is inconsistent, leads to contradictions, or reduces to incoherence. Examples may clarify issues in philosophical exposition, but they never can be decisive. This is because philosophy itself studies the issue of what counts as an example. How do we tell whether something does exemplify a particular principle, definition, or theory? The criterion of logical propriety is virtually universal; even those who reject its universal applicability argue for their views by means of its extensive use. This is as it should be. Logic is a methodology that accommodates the character of reality itself. The subject matter, which is reality, or the very essence of being, gives rise to the method of inquiry. The field that studies this subject matter must make use of logic first and foremost.

### **The Ground of Philosophical Knowledge**

In philosophical inquiries, the arguments, theories, and even most esoteric issues can be traced to the basic problems in the field; these give each nuance its philosophical significance. All major and minor philosophical issues are traceable to the first or main question of philosophy: what is it to be something? This issue is dealt with in metaphysics. If the questions of that

field can be given correct answers, then some guidelines may be available for purposes of proceeding, with promise of success, to other areas and problems in the field. In reference to the question raised earlier about the perplexing problem of whether there are truths in philosophy, we can now see how there might be. Exploring this question itself leads back to the central question of metaphysics. To have identified a basic fact of reality, a metaphysical fact, is to have provided oneself with some point of departure. That's, after all, the point of calling such facts basic. But we must now recall what it would be to be such a fact. What would characterize a metaphysical fact? To this question I provide only a reminder that if what one believes to be basic facts of existence really are such facts, then one will find them to be fully capable of integration with the rest of what one knows and, indeed, to be implicit in everyone one knows to be the case.

To put this briefly, basic facts must be very generally, broadly, or *universally* applicable—facts found everywhere and at any time—with no exceptions. The test of whether one has identified a metaphysical fact is whether it squares with everything to which it is meant to apply—to *all of reality!* It must, therefore, square with any meaningful statement and with any realistic possibility (as specified in other branches of knowledge). Only after a good sampling of these has shown that in each and every case, without exception, some principle or fact has been exemplified do we have firm grounds for claiming that a basic fact of reality has been identified. It is not enough, of course, to find any kind of statement or judgment to which everything can be fitted.

Thus, a claim such as “If anything is a unicorn, then that thing is horned” is without any contradiction from nature. But these sorts of claims are hypothetical. A metaphysical fact, being a fact, can only be related by way of a categorical or existential claim—to the effect that something *is* the case, not that *if it is*, then something else follows. If such facts exist and can be identified, then it is possible, however difficult that could turn out, to obtain answers to other philosophical questions. Keeping very much in focus the metaphysical facts of reality, it is possible to proceed by the use of logic, careful perception, and sometimes extensive analysis, and draw conclusions, in various areas of philosophy, that are as true as true can be. This is all that can be expected. To require that a person obtain a completely finished philosophy or theory is to ask for nonsense.

The brevity of these comments should not lead the reader to conclude that it is easy to come up with solutions. It is an enormous task to make sure that one has come up with correct ones. Many great minds have tried and failed in several areas, even by their own admission. Also, in human history many people have accepted beliefs for which no support existed. Or for

which they offered incredibly weak or even spurious support. Many philosophers have come to think of themselves as morally responsible never to encourage confidence in one's conclusions, theories, or values.

Some philosophers believe it to be their exclusive professional obligation to raise the most outlandish, fantastic objections to some proposed idea, just to make sure that conclusions are not accepted hastily. This, in turn, has led to philosophical meekness, which may account for why people have, now and then, turned away from philosophy to such occult fields as astrology and the less analytic areas such as religion to obtain solutions to problems within the philosopher's domain. The answer here lies in striking a balance—a suggestion well worth taking in numerous areas of life. An extremely, fruitlessly demanding standard of truth is as unjustified in philosophy as anywhere else, but careless conclusion-chasing can be even more harmful. The reader has every reason to conclude for now that much more work is needed to obtain philosophical knowledge. My purpose here is to indicate that such knowledge is not impossible. Nothing has been done to entitle anyone to think that here it has been reached.

### **Knowledge and Philosophy**

It is, of course, extremely difficult to suspend whatever philosophical orientation we have in life. We all grow up with ideas on human freedom, the soul, values, God, knowledge, and politics. We use these ideas to make sense of things we come upon in our lives. No matter how attached we are to such views, we will gain considerable independence by taking a fresh view every now and then. Even once independent investigations have led to some well thought-out conclusions, it is wise to renew the policy of rechecking our premises.

I am not suggesting pathological self-doubt, only intelligent caution. I am not suggesting an attitude of neutrality, only the effort to be objective in the broad sense of avoiding as much as possible resting our beliefs on prejudices, tastes, wishes and so forth. The recognition that we may make mistakes should be coupled with the knowledge that we can be right, as well.

The fact that in philosophy, specifically, it is somewhat difficult to provide controlled tests makes it crucial that we commit everything to careful scrutiny by way of logical analysis. The seriously advanced and carefully elaborated theories of other philosophers deserve attention—not primarily because we owe their authors respect, but because we should never neglect valuable help in our search for understanding. These other perspectives should, when possible, be considered at their best. For example, we should ignore those who distort the views of Marx in their fear that without

distortion they might have to admit there is something of value in that outlook. One should reject the quick and shallow caricatures of communism, capitalism, and fascism. Most important, it is advisable to confront ideas not just with their own internal shortcomings but also with the competing ideas that are available for scrutiny.

Even after numerous difficulties have been identified with various positions, we may still find that without a fully developed better idea, one of the flawed theories has to suffice. In the natural search for solutions that so many people undertake, the absence of a correct theory can easily prompt us to return to make reparations on ones found lacking. At times people reject the prospect of solving some problem on grounds that previous philosophical efforts have failed. Here, too, care should be taken not to demand too much of the short history of humanity. The time could not be spent, even with the best of efforts, just on settling philosophical problems. Nor is it necessarily true that simply because according to current opinion these problems were left unsolved, this is in fact the case. Perhaps it is wrong to view all proposed solutions as bad even if no consensus has emerged about their truth.

In general, some patience is certainly advisable in one's attempt to solve any problem, including philosophical ones. Even if a person does not wish to embark on the solution, it need not be concluded that no solution is possible. One should remember that seeking philosophical understanding is not very different from seeking any other kind. In more specialized fields we try to "get it together" before we are satisfied with the result. On each occasion when new generations set out on the journey, the aim might well be to get it together once again.

Gradually, if one wants to find answers in philosophy, one can begin to investigate and try to discover which answer makes more sense, which squares with one's own experiences, seen in a cool, calm light (without any wishful thinking injected!). With even more work, with the major philosophies in contention thoroughly studied, a person could well come to have philosophical knowledge. Very good ideas of what is right at least in certain narrow areas will be possible. One might wish to study the free will/determinism issue; or the existence of God; or skepticism; or the nature of perception. In each case one could keep an eye on other important work being done and eventually make the careful advance to a reasonably solid conclusion. The problem is often that people are very impatient about obtaining philosophical knowledge. Most of us take it for granted that learning about the psychology of monkeys or the orbits of a subatomic particle would be very difficult. Biology, physics, computer science, and

horticulture—all these require hard work. Then, maybe, some knowledge will have been obtained.

Something like this happens in philosophy, too. Since all of us deal with philosophy, unlike chemistry or farming, in virtually all our waking moments, judging what it amount to exist, seeing whether there can be knowledge, making decisions about what is the best standard of right conduct, etc.—it appears at first that not much work is needed here to find out what is true and what isn't. But that is wrong.

To understand and come to grips with philosophy, and then perhaps find some answers in the field—all these are very difficult tasks. Many people, for example—as already noted—deny that knowledge is possible, not to mention philosophical knowledge. This last would be knowledge of some philosophical fact, some claim one could support as true within the area of philosophy. But in a sense, of course, they are claiming to know something when they offer this view. So when we consider their views together with all the others, we find that there is a lot to choose from.

The question is raised again, Are there philosophical truths; is there philosophical knowledge? To put it differently: Is there a correct philosophical position, or could there be one?

### **On the Correct Philosophical Position**

The possibility of formulating a correct philosophical position has not mainly about whether there *will* be agreement about it. Not everyone is interested in finding a correct philosophical system or answer. Some people are bogged down with other problems and have no time for philosophizing. Even among those involved in philosophizing, many reject the very idea of a correct philosophy from the start, so their disagreement is assured. Then even if the bulk of philosophers and people were to see eye to eye on some philosophy, it is doubtful that they would all express their position in similar words. Finally, there are philosophers who do not want to *solve* philosophical problems, just as there are other professionals who are counterproductive.

Assuming, however, that a philosophical position is identified and found to be right—assuming someone's philosophy does indeed answer all philosophical questions correctly, solves all philosophical problems, it still would not close off the business of philosophy. Perhaps because many believe this is *not* so people have rejected the very idea of such a correct philosophical position. In a way it seems that philosophical positions get reintroduced over and over again, just as people are born over and over again.

Because philosophical concerns are so basic to human life, each generation may be facing the same questions anew, so that the many ways of approaching life get introduced and tested again and again. Within the various philosophies of the world some ideas are probably better, some worse, some even true, but the task isn't every quite put aside of seeing what is true. This is a bit like finding a job: because one's parents have, it doesn't mean one will and that one's own offspring will. It is, as it were, a renewable challenge.

Sometimes a philosopher's way of bringing together good ideas, those that do best at solving problems and answering questions, is more successful than another's. And it is possible that occasionally a philosopher produces a correct philosophical system. Clearly this system would not have to be one that produces *final* answers to all philosophical questions; the world hasn't reached its end so that everything related to an issue could have been fully canvassed.

As in the sciences, a correct philosophical position would have to be *the system of best answers* within the field. Such answers would rest on a clearly identified foundation on some (or one) metaphysical principle or fact and have all areas of inquiry and answers fully integrated. Some (very few) features of such a system would have to have a claim to at least provisional finality: in metaphysics only those answers can be right which are right pertaining to all of reality, including the future, so the challenge is immense. But because of the scope of this most basic area of philosophy, whatever is right here would have to apply to all concerns. Is this possible, in the light of what was noted above and the need to revisit all philosophical issues? Perhaps, if it is impossible to think of any future issues without some basic points having been settled.

But not all of philosophy deals with metaphysics. So final answers need not be required of a successful system, in all the branches of philosophy.

What I am suggesting would appear to reflect most people's lives. Some values or life plans remain reasonably firm for each of us but we must make decisions in most areas time and time again. Problems facing us now may be given the best or a mediocre, or the worst answer within the available batch of suggestions. Tomorrow we might find a better solution, but if we cannot wait, today's best is indeed *the* best. In considering the task of identifying the best or correct philosophy, one can view the matter somewhat analogously. We can expect to find clear and firm answers in some areas, ones that will hold forever—or, as Ludwig Wittgenstein put it, “stand fast for us”—and others that we have very good reason to consider correct, barring only minor modifications as we learn more and more about reality. Yet some areas may

really require much better familiarization before answers to the questions that we face there can be obtained.

This approach to the issue of the prospects of truth in philosophy, whether even some entire system of philosophical thought might be correct, appears to make sense. Our knowledge tends to develop in all areas, both in our individual lives and in human history, although it is also possible that in some epochs we lose sight of what others have discovered earlier.

Concerning truths the English philosopher J. A. Austin's essay, "Other Minds," in his book *Philosophical Papers* (1970) looks to me to make the best sense. Knowledge need not be predictive—what we know today may need to be modified later without it losing its status as *bona fide* knowledge. It is just not the kind that will hold fast for us forever.

Reality itself undergoes changes, sometimes even crucial ones. As Adam Frank writes in *Discovery* magazine (April 2010), "For many years we have assumed that the laws of the universe have never changed and never will. But what if that is not so? What if evolution is at work not only in biology but also in the cosmos?" (p. 32) We are reasonably sure that this situation obtains in science. There, however, only some people become very upset with the results and disputes, whereas in some branches of philosophy everyone could get excited.

At any rate, even while we admit that further work is warranted in all areas of inquiry, we still could have very good reasons for drawing firm conclusions. If our research has been thorough, it is sensible to admit also that our conclusions merit support and even some partisanship. In areas such as morality and politics this can lead to the institution of policies and cultivation of practices and habits, as well as to serious conflicts and sometimes even wars.

One the one hand, to stick to one's conclusions stubbornly is hazardous in any domain but especially so in these last. One should be ready to consider honestly motivated and carefully advanced persuasion, and even yield to sound arguments and criticism, so as to avoid dogmatism, the attitude that makes learning impossible.

On the other hand, wishy-washiness can lead to the neglect of crucial values in life; therefore, indiscriminate open-mindedness (often advocated by the unprincipled as "civilized tolerance") should be rejected as a viable alternative.

However obvious or pedestrian, these considerations may appear to be, it is probably most appropriate for anyone to approach philosophical positions, especially those concerned with values, accordingly.