

Günter Figal

Philosophy as Metaphysics



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The Torino Lectures

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For A.M.E.S. – also beyond metaphysics

Contents

Acknowledgements	IX
I. Before Beginning	1
II. How to Philosophize	4
III. Truth	32
IV. Being	43
V. Being-ness	67
VI. Appearance	109
VII. Twofold Truth	130
VIII. Beyond Metaphysics	158
Bibliography	173
List of Persons	177

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I. Before Beginning

The following explorations are not intended as a contribution to the history of philosophy. They are not 'about' philosophy, but rather philosophical, and, as such an attempt of philosophical self-clarification. Investigating constitutive philosophical questions and problems, they seek to find out what philosophy essentially is and thus to explore basic possibilities of philosophizing. According to this program, non-contemporary conceptions of philosophy will not appear as historical, i.e., as something that is, at best, only indirectly relevant for today's philosophical thinking. Whenever such 'past' conceptions are discussed systematically, they belong to contemporary thinking, and their historicity, though not to be neglected, has become accidental. For the systematic importance of philosophical conceptions it is irrelevant whether they were elaborated a few years, a century, or even two thousand years ago.

Discussing philosophical conceptions systematically always requires critical distance to particular philosophies. Philosophizing is incompatible with dogmatism, and accordingly conceptions already established should not be simply adopted, but critically examined. Someone really philosophizing cannot just be a 'Platonist' or an 'Aristotelian', just as little a 'Kantian', 'Hegelian', 'Nietzschean', 'Husserlian', 'Heideggerian' or 'Wittgensteinian'. The conceptions indicated by these names do

not even need repeated representation as if they were canonical doctrines. They are sufficiently represented by their inaugurators. Also, such mimetic representation would be difficult, since philosophical conceptions have no definite content that could be devotedly communicated. Though fixed in manuscripts or books, they are too complex for strict repetition. Rather, every attempt to articulate a particular philosophy will be an interpretation and thus a more or less significant modification of its content; interpretations of particular philosophies will always be 'colored' by the interpreter's philosophical capacities and interests. So philosophical conceptions are nothing that could once and for all be described as or like a matter of fact. No particular discussion of a particular philosophy will be able to grasp this philosophy completely, but rather, in case of success, offer a possible version of it.

Interpretations of philosophical conceptions are also challenged by the fact that philosophies are not isolated from each other. Their respective insights, descriptions, and arguments are connected with those of other conceptions in many ways. They are dependent on others, allude or explicitly refer to others, and they do so both in affirmation and objection. Though interpretations may concentrate on one single philosophy, they cannot really avoid becoming involved with others. So they are more or less to discuss particular topics, not only as those of a singular philosophy, but rather as belonging to a philosophical discourse or tradition or even to philosophy in general. Philosophical interpretations of particular philosophies must also always discuss problems not restricted to these philosophies precisely because they are 'philosophical problems'. Particular philosophies more or less open

up the very possibility of philosophizing, and accordingly explorations of such philosophies can, and often will, also discover philosophy as such. There is no way to philosophize outside of philosophy as it is already established. Though philosophizing is not necessarily bound to particular philosophies, it cannot avoid taking place within the realm of philosophies that, in its entirety, can be called *the space of philosophy*. Encompassing all particular attempts to philosophize and enabling, but never completely determining them, the space of philosophy allows philosophizing to constantly begin anew, though never absolutely anew.

The philosophical exploration of philosophy elaborated in the following chapters has a special perspective. Its intention is to investigate philosophy *as* metaphysics. This perspective is only justified if philosophy really is as such metaphysical – not necessarily in every respect, but of necessity in such a way that it cannot be understood neglecting its metaphysical character. Accordingly, attempts at the philosophical self-clarification of philosophy are well advised not to ignore this metaphysical character. However, if philosophy is not metaphysical in every respect, such a self-clarification will also have to determine the limits of metaphysics. And so a complex image of philosophy will emerge; an image, however, that, if these introductory considerations are plausible, is appropriate to the complexity of philosophy.

II. How to Philosophize

Reflecting on 'philosophy', one may first discover that the subject matter thus indicated is difficult to discern. Philosophy is manifold. During its more than two-thousand-year long history, many different ways of how to philosophize developed, and, again and again, questions arose that had not formerly come up. Nevertheless, all different kinds of philosophy must have something in common, provided that the name 'philosophy' is not just a name. In this case there would be nothing like philosophy at all.

What makes philosophies philosophical, however, is not easy to determine. As one soon will realize, it cannot be just a peculiar topic. Philosophy shares many of its topics with other intellectual endeavors, for instance with the sciences, the humanities, with law, and religion and art too. Philosophers often do what scholars in other disciplines also do: they articulate what they have experienced, they develop arguments, and, like philologists or theologians, they give interpretations of texts.

What makes philosophy philosophical can neither be defined as a particular style. There is no single philosophical style – there are various styles, differing remarkably from each other. Though many philosophical writings, like Aristotle's, are treatises, not only they are considered philosophical, the lines of a poem by Parmenides or a Platonic dialogue are too. However, philosophical texts are not necessarily neatly elaborated works. As the example

of Aristotle shows, they also can be notes for lectures or manuscripts used as a basis for teaching. Neither are Husserl's, Heidegger's, or Wittgenstein's notes and manuscripts any less philosophical than treatises or works with obvious artistic ambition like Plato's dialogues or Nietzsche's collections of aphorisms. However, if writings of such diverse style can be philosophical, they must have something in common that is independent of their respective style.

What may be common to all philosophies might tentatively be called an *intention*, or, more precisely, an intention different from those of poets, scientists, theologians, philologists, or historians. Since philosophy is so varied, such an intention would very likely be realized in many different ways. These variations, however, possibly result from the intention itself; if so, no prescription would exist of how the intention could be realized best. So the different ways of philosophy may indirectly disclose the intention that essentially determines philosophy. Understanding why philosophers disagree about how to philosophize may lead to an understanding of what philosophy as such is about.

In order to further develop these considerations it may be helpful to adopt a distinction put forward by Peter Strawson. In the introduction of his book *Individuals*, Strawson sketches a basic alternative of performing the intention of philosophy. In doing so, however, Strawson introduces a general characteristic of philosophy – the one leading these investigations – speaking not of philosophy, but of “metaphysics.” Strawson does so without further explanation, and thus seems to take for granted that philosophy as such is metaphysical. As to this, however,

one should not merely follow suit, and so, before discussing Strawson's basic philosophical alternative, it will be helpful to say something about 'metaphysics'.

The term, 'metaphysics' is *prima facie* no clearer than the term 'philosophy', and, taken simply as a word, it is even less significant. Whereas 'philosophy', φιλοσοφία, means 'love of wisdom' as of real and prominent knowledge, the term 'metaphysics' is not as profound in its origins as one might suppose. There is good reason to assume that the word's original meaning was just an editorial one. It goes back to the Greek τὰ μετὰ τὰ φυσικὰ βιβλία. Andronikos of Rhodos is thought to have coined it in the first century before Christ when establishing a collection of Aristotle's writings. Because he had no distinct title for a particular collection of manuscripts, he simply named it after the place he assigned it to in the sequential order of his edition. Being placed after the books on φύσις, nature, the collection received its name from this position. But even if the title does not originally indicate a move 'beyond the physical', it has obviously been tempting to associate it with an inquiry of the supernatural in whatever way already during the time of later Greek philosophy.

Presupposing this emphatic meaning of 'metaphysics', it might be strange to call every philosophy 'metaphysical' and thus include philosophies solely oriented to 'the physical' and, as a consequence, denying or rejecting any 'metaphysical' aspirations. However, in adopting a critical attitude to metaphysics in an emphatic sense, such philosophies would be closely related to it. They cannot avoid discussing 'metaphysical' questions and thus continue the discourse of metaphysical philosophy. Since they are not

metaphysical in the emphatic meaning just mentioned, and also since the emphatic meaning of ‘metaphysics’ might be all too restrictive, it should be more reasonable to use the term ‘metaphysics’ in a specific though not emphatic way and to reserve it just for the type of philosophy Andronikos could not easily designate in reference to its particular topic – philosophy as articulated in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and also in philosophical works of similar intention.

Even without a concrete account of the content of Aristotle’s papers collected by Andronikos, one may say that without them the tradition of philosophy would not be what it is. Philosophy after Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is more or less dependent on the basic questions and investigations developed in this book. It is to these questions and investigations the book provides with a kind of philosophical standard that as such also determines critical, ‘anti-metaphysical’ attitudes. Anti-metaphysical conceptions would then not be metaphysical as such – apart from if they were based on implicit and unacknowledged metaphysical presuppositions. They would nevertheless be philosophical only in dependence on the standard of philosophy. Intellectual endeavors without any reference to this standard, however, would not be philosophical at all. Metaphysics cannot be philosophically overcome as Nietzsche and, most prominently and effectively, Heidegger believed. There is no ‘post-metaphysical’ philosophical thinking, but only philosophical thinking with a more or less affirmative attitude to the metaphysical standard of philosophy. As a consequence, however, it might be more productive not to argue against metaphysics, but rather accept it as the standard of philosophy. Critical discus-

sions of basic metaphysical assumptions are thereby not excluded. Revisions of metaphysics are normal even, having belonged to philosophy almost from its outset. This is confirmed by Strawson's already-mentioned distinction.

Strawson, however, does not discuss the content or subject matter of metaphysics, but rather two different ways in which metaphysical thinking can be performed. He thus indirectly introduces what metaphysics is about. According to Strawson, 'metaphysics' can be "descriptive" or "revisionary,"¹ and, as one may add, it can be so in a more or less radical way. As Strawson writes, descriptive metaphysics attempts "to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world,"² and even without knowing what that precisely means, one might immediately think of an example for such a descriptive attitude. As Wittgenstein writes in his *Philosophical Investigations*, philosophy "must not interfere in any way with the actual use of language, so it can in the end only describe it." And, as he adds, philosophy "leaves everything as it is."³ As author of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, however, Wittgenstein can also serve as an example for "revisionary" metaphysics – as a kind of philosophy that, according to Strawson, "is concerned to produce a better structure" of our thought about the world. Another example for such an attempt could be Heidegger, who, in

¹ PETER F. STRAWSON, *Individuals. An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, London 1959.

² STRAWSON, *Individuals*, 9.

³ LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*. The German text with an English translation by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, 4th revised edition by P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, London 2009, 124.

Being and Time, claims a new beginning of philosophy as retrieval of its beginning in Aristotle's thinking. Heidegger radicalizes his claim in his *Contributions to Philosophy*, dreaming of a new and "differently beginning beginning" of philosophy. And in his late essay *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking*, Heidegger states the necessity of overcoming philosophy as such in favor of a new and completely different way of thinking that he just calls "thinking." Thinking understood in this way is an *absolute* revision of philosophy and thus, as Heidegger thinks, no longer philosophical but radically different from philosophy.

With his characterizations of the two versions of metaphysics, Strawson also characterizes metaphysics as such, namely as a description of the structure of our thoughts about the world. This characterization surely needs further clarification. Though its key terms – "structure", "thoughts," "world" – are not unintelligible, they are nevertheless unclear. One may have a vague understanding of what they mean without being able to discern their meaning explicitly.

This, however, is not a disadvantage, but rather something essential for philosophy. As one may easily see, philosophical thinking in general is not at least an attempt to clarify terms like the ones mentioned – terms that are basically intelligible without being clear. A paradigm for this is Augustine's reflection on time in the eleventh book (XI, 14) of his *Confessions*.⁴ As Augustine says, he knows what time is so long as no one asks him.

⁴ AUGUSTINE, Confessionum Libri XIII, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina XXVII, ed. by Lukas Verheijen, Turnholt 1981.

Being asked, however, and attempting to explain his knowledge, his ignorance about it emerges. The nature of all relevant philosophical questions is perhaps such. The particular ignorance described by Augustine is the beginning of philosophizing. The original philosophical impulse consists in realizing that terms taken as familiar prove to be unclear when reflected on. This impulse, however, leads to philosophizing only if one does not let the vagueness of terms intuitively intelligible rest, but rather makes attempts to clarify them.

Accordingly, metaphysics as Strawson understands it would be confronted with the intelligibility and vagueness of the terms 'world' and 'thought'. What is 'the world', what does it mean to have 'thoughts' about the world, and what is the 'structure' of both? As a consequence of Strawson's characterization, these are obviously 'metaphysical' questions, as are all that are of the same kind as Augustine's question concerning time.

However, if Strawson's characterization is correct, then 'metaphysics' is not sufficiently characterized by its questions. Rather, it is decisive that metaphysics can be practiced in two different ways, namely 'descriptive' and 'revisionary'. This alternative, again, very likely results from the particular character of metaphysical questions. They do not, then, prescribe how they are to be answered. The attempt to answer them philosophically or metaphysically must figure out how such answers are possible – either in simple orientation to the world as it can be described and with descriptions that basically rely on the descriptive force of ordinary language, or solely on the basis of the assumption that one has to disclose something that is hidden by the surface of the appearing

List of Persons

- Aalto, Alvar 105
Ando, Tadao 105
Andronikos of Rhodos 6
Arendt, Hannah 170
Aristotle 4–7, 9, 17–30, 34,
37–42, 46, 64–106, 111, 123,
125–126, 128, 130–132, 145,
147, 150, 161–164, 166
Augustine 9–10
Derrida, Jacques 158
Gadamer, Hans-Georg 153*
Hegel, G.W.F. 158
Heidegger, Martin 5, 7–9, 20,
27–28, 40, 45, 57–58, 70,
106–107, 124, 126, 129,
132–142, 148, 158, 166,
171
Heraclitus 14–15, 20–21, 60
Husserl, Edmund 5, 28, 52,
57–58, 70, 89, 95, 111, 116,
118, 128–129, 156
Kant, Immanuel 146, 170
Kirkeby, Per 89
Levinas, Emmanuel 166, 169
Magritte, René 54–55
Meister Eckhart 164–165
Mies van der Rohe, Ludwig
105
Nietzsche, Friedrich 5, 7,
21–23, 39, 158, 165, 169
Parmenides 13–18, 20–23, 30,
42–45, 47–49, 51, 59–62,
158, 161, 166
Plato 5, 15–18, 20–23, 25–28,
30, 33, 42–43, 45–48, 51,
54, 58–59, 61–62, 65, 72,
75, 80, 82, 92–94, 102, 107–
109, 128, 161–162, 166
Polanyi, Michael 57*, 142*,
144
Protagoras 63
Socrates 17, 20, 33–35, 37,
45–56, 59–63, 67, 75, 78,
82, 102, 107, 109–110, 119,
121, 127, 144, 149, 156, 165
Strawson, Peter F. 5–6, 8–11,
20, 69–70, 76
Valéry, Paul 119, 121, 127,
156, 159
Wittgenstein, Ludwig 5, 8,
166–169
Wright, Frank Lloyd 105

* indicates mentionings in footnotes.