# 1 Introduction: what good is metaphilosophy?

> 'What do you do?'; people sometimes ask me. 'I am a philosopher.' If I am lucky, the conversation ends there, but often it continues: 'Well, I suppose we are all of us philosophers in our different ways; I mean we all have our own ideas about the purpose of life. Now what I think …' Or else: 'A philosopher: I envy you in these difficult times. To be able to take things calmly, to rise above the petty vexations that trouble us ordinary men.' Or again: 'That must be fascinating: really to understand people, to be able to reach their souls. I am sure you could give me some good advice.' Or, worst of all: 'What *is* philosophy?'[1]

Most students and practitioners of philosophy, we suspect, have felt something of the unease Ayer expresses in this quote. Sometimes we would prefer no one asks what we do. And if we cannot avoid that, then at least we would like the topic dropped after the confession, 'I am a philosopher'. But often, to our discomfort, it continues in one of the ways mentioned by Ayer.

Of the possible continuations of the conversation Ayer imagines, one is, perhaps, less frequent nowadays, whereas the other three are very common. It isn't clear that many people today associate philosophy with the ability to remain calm in the face of adversity. Indeed, this conception of philosophers and philosophy has long been lampooned, from Shakespeare's 'For there was never yet philosopher. That could endure the toothache patiently' to Oscar Wilde's 'Philosophy teaches us to bear with equanimity the misfortunes of others'. Nevertheless, the broader idea that philosophy can help us to deal with life's problems is still current. A book published a few years ago whose title echoed that of medieval philosopher Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy* received enthusiastic reviews

[1] Ayer 1969: 1.

from non-philosophers.[2] Even philosophers, reviewing the book much less favourably, did not question its presumption that philosophy can and should affect our lives.[3] Instead, they cast doubt on whether it should do so by way of consolation rather than by revealing possibly painful truths we must learn to live with. Much more common than this conception, however, is the popular assumption that the activity of philosophising consists mainly in expressing one's opinion on matters related to life and death or right and wrong. Or people associate it vaguely with the 'Mind, Body and Spirit' section in airport bookshops. Or indeed, perhaps most commonly of all, they have no clear idea of what philosophy is.

That people have misconceptions about what philosophy is and what philosophers do is not peculiar to philosophy. Some people don't know what a dermatologist is, and many have wrong ideas about the astronomer's profession. What may be peculiar to philosophy, however, is its practitioners' feeling that the request for clarification is, as Ayer puts it, the 'worst of all' – worse than the common misunderstandings. If a dermatologist is asked what she does, she is unlikely to feel particularly embarrassed. Nor will she feel uncomfortable if her interlocutor follows up with the question 'What is dermatology?' The astronomer might well become irritated by requests for horoscopes, but, again, he will hardly experience the embarrassment so well known to the philosopher, and is in fact likely to feel relieved if someone asks him to clarify what he does so that he can dispel any misconceptions. Why is the situation so different for the philosopher?

In part, this may have to do with the nature of philosophy. It is no easy matter to explain what we do, and this has to do, inter alia, with the fact that it isn't obviously the case that there is a particular region of objects (like stars and planets or diseases of the skin) that philosophers make it their special business to study. Even if we say we study the nature of right and wrong, the relation between mind and body and so forth, it is not clear what, if anything, draws such topics together into a single subject matter. Furthermore, while it may be evident that what philosophers do in studying them is not comparable to the kind of observational activity that dermatologists and astronomers engage in, what philosophers actually do seems hard to communicate except by getting people to do some

[2] de Botton 2000. [3] Skidelsky 2000.

philosophising themselves. But this is only addressing the question of what philosophy is by demonstrating it in practice, not by giving an answer the recipient could use to pick out examples for himself or herself.

Partly, however, our embarrassment at the question of what we do may also reflect the fact that, to put this a bit provocatively, *we do not know*. We may know, to take some notions employed in philosophy, what a quale is, what disjunctivism is and what the doctrine of double effect states, but are we equally certain that we know what philosophy is? Perhaps not. For the question 'What is philosophy?' is very different from the question 'What is disjunctivism?' and much more like the question 'What is the structure of perceptual experience?' The former asks a question about a notion in philosophy to which there is a (more or less) definite answer; the latter is a difficult question philosophers ask themselves. So is 'What is philosophy?'

'What is philosophy?' is itself one of the fundamental questions of philosophy. It is a question in philosophy partly because philosophy asks a range of analogous questions about subjects of study that aim to provide us with knowledge or understanding of the world and of ourselves. It asks 'What is science?' or 'What is history?' not just to get the sort of answer a scientist or historian might give, but because we philosophers want to know what kind of knowledge or understanding such subjects might provide. We want to know as philosophers what knowledge and understanding are and how to attain them. Thus we ask the same sort of question about philosophy itself. That this is itself a philosophical question means, among other things, that there is controversy surrounding the correct answer to it.

On the other hand, one would imagine that even controversial answers can be given without too much embarrassment. Asked about the nature of perceptual experience, a committed disjunctivist can simply reply, '*I* believe such-and-such, but of course there are those who disagree'. There are two reasons, we think, why an answer of this sort isn't a very attractive option in the case of 'What is philosophy?' First, when you come to think of it, it is really rather odd to admit that you can only offer a controversial view of what people in your profession do. Astronomers and dermatologists – or for that matter plumbers and economists – rarely find themselves in disagreement with other members of their respective professions about what they do. And if historians or sociologists, say, disagree

about what they do, on whether, for example, they are or should be putting forward theories that can be tested in the same way as theories in the physical sciences, then perhaps they are really airing a philosophical disagreement about the nature of their subject, for the reason just mentioned. They can disagree on this and still offer an uncontroversial answer about their subject matter and basic methods. Shouldn't such an answer about philosophy also be possible? Surely we need the ability to identify uncontroversially what it is that there is a disagreement about. Yet matters are not so simple. Even if they agree on what represents clear examples of philosophy, philosophers often disagree on what it is that makes them so. But the controversial nature of philosophy can hardly provide the source of the sort of embarrassment Ayer describes. Philosophers generally can cope with controversy, and those who cannot are probably in the wrong line of business.

The second reason that 'I believe philosophy is such-and-such, but of course there are others who disagree' isn't likely to prove an adequate reply is that, while philosophers work intensively on questions such as 'What is the structure of perceptual experience?', 'What is a just society?' or 'What is science?' in their ongoing research, they tend to all but ignore 'What is philosophy?' Metaphilosophy – the inquiry into the nature of philosophical questions and the methods (to be) adopted in answering them – is, as Colin McGinn puts it, 'perhaps the most undeveloped part of philosophy'.[4] In the words of another recent writer on metaphilosophy, it is a 'rather neglected' philosophical discipline.[5] If this simply reflected the obviousness of the right answer to the question 'What is philosophy?', then there would be little cause for worry: a quick look in a philosophical dictionary would settle the matter. However, as already pointed out (and as McGinn and Rescher both emphasise), metaphilosophy is no less fraught with controversy than other branches of the subject. So the second reason philosophers may find it awkward or difficult to offer even a controversial view of the nature of philosophy is that this isn't a topic to which they likely have devoted much serious thought. They may have thought a lot about how they should go about doing philosophy. But they may have thought very little about what it is they are doing when they are doing it, which is odd, because usually we need to know what it is we are trying to

[4] McGinn 2002: 199. [5] Rescher 2001: 1.

do before wondering how we should get it done. One consequence of this neglect is the fact that this book is, as far as we know, the only available introduction to metaphilosophy.

## Does the question matter?

Our occasional discomfort during a dinner party conversation aside, however, is there any reason we *should* know what philosophy is? Perhaps it is for a good reason that metaphilosophy remains undeveloped. Is 'What is philosophy?' an important question? Not everyone thinks so.

> I believe that the function of a scientist or of a philosopher is to solve scientific or philosophical problems, rather than to talk about what he or other philosophers are doing or might do. Any unsuccessful attempt to solve a scientific or philosophical problem, if it is an honest and devoted attempt, appears to me more significant than a discussion of such a question as 'What is science?' or 'What is philosophy?' And even if we put this latter question, as we should, in the slightly better form, 'What is the character of philosophical problems?', I for one should not bother much about it; I should feel that it had little weight, even compared with such a minor problem of philosophy as the question whether every discussion or every criticism must always proceed from 'assumptions' or 'suppositions' which themselves are beyond argument.[6]

The question we should ask here, of course, is how we are going to measure the importance of the question 'What is philosophy?' Compared with the search for a cure for cancer, surely our question will seem of little importance, but so will most other questions of philosophy. What we must ask is to what extent the question is *philosophically* important. Interestingly, Popper thinks the questions 'What is science?' and 'What is philosophy?' are alike in this respect. According to him, neither question is of any particular importance. But 'What is science?' is certainly a question that has traditionally been considered philosophically (if not scientifically) important. Presumably, Popper thinks otherwise since he makes no essential distinction between empirical science and philosophy. Both are in the business of solving problems. And the problems of philosophy owe whatever importance they have to matters vital to science and human life

[6] Popper 1968: 66.

in general. 'Genuine philosophical problems', writes Popper, 'are always rooted in urgent problems outside philosophy, and they die if these roots decay'.[7] When we ask what truth is, whether the mind can be regarded as just a part of nature or why we ought not to commit murder, our questions presumably have relevance to human life beyond the philosophical armchair. That link, it seems, is severed when we engage in metaphilosophical inquiry. Here philosophy turns its back on the world in idle navel gazing. To pause to think about what we are doing or might be doing, therefore, is merely a waste of precious time. In Popper's words, 'a philosopher should philosophise: he should try to solve philosophical problems, rather than talk about philosophy'.[8] Many philosophers have expressed somewhat similar sentiments. Bernard Williams writes that 'philosophy is not at its most interesting when it is talking about itself',[9] and Rorty sounds a note of scepticism regarding the utility of metaphilosophy: 'questions about "the method of philosophy" or about "the nature of philosophical problems"', he suggests, 'are likely to prove unprofitable'.[10] Ryle, finally, delivers the verdict that 'preoccupation with questions about methods tends to distract us from prosecuting the methods themselves. We run, as a rule, worse, not better, if we think a lot about our feet'.[11]

Popper's rejection of metaphilosophical inquiry as unimportant clearly presupposes a particular metaphilosophical view: a particular view of what genuine philosophical problems are and of what the activity of the philosopher consists in, or ought to consist in. In other words, Popper takes a particular metaphilosophy *for granted*. He does not produce arguments for one. But is this necessarily a problem? We all take certain things for granted without ever subjecting them to careful philosophical scrutiny. Perhaps some metaphysicians or philosophers of mind even take for granted particular political philosophies without ever having subjected these to the scrutiny to which they subject positions in their field of research. Perhaps some moral philosophers hold naïve realist views of perceptual experience without ever having seriously considered the problems associated with the view. We cannot all do serious research on *everything*, and can thus be excused for focussing on the problems that strike us as the most important ones. If this invariably means taking certain views or

[7] Popper 1968: 72. [8] Ibid.: 68. [9] Williams 2006: 169.
[10] Rorty 1992c: 374. [11] Ryle 2009b: 331.

positions – philosophical or otherwise – for granted, then so be it. If this is right, then Popper's taking for granted a particular metaphilosophical view is only a problem if it can be shown that metaphilosophical questions are questions he should have recognised as important.

We might, however, wonder whether Popper can seriously think the question 'What is science?' has little or no philosophical importance. After all, he states elsewhere that 'the critical inquiry into the sciences, their findings, and their methods … remains a characteristic of philosophical inquiry'.[12] How is this different from a critical exploration of the question 'What is science?' – an inquiry into what scientists 'are doing or might do'? Yet if 'What is science?' is allowed back in among the respectable philosophical questions, and it is hard to see how anyone could seriously refuse this, then surely, 'What is philosophy?' is rehabilitated as well. This ought to be particularly obvious for anyone who, like Popper, views philosophy as something that never ought to be, and indeed 'never can be, divorced from science'.[13] But the point should really strike anyone as valid: if 'What is science?' and 'What is art?' are genuine philosophical questions, then 'What is philosophy?' must be as well. Nor will this then be mere navel gazing for reasons mentioned earlier. It will be part of a general philosophical investigation of the nature and possibility of knowledge and understanding.

Let us agree with Stanley Cavell, then, that 'philosophy is one of its own normal topics'.[14] Yet it still does not follow that lack of metaphilosophical reflection, beyond being the cause of occasional social awkwardness, is itself a philosophical shortcoming. For we still haven't given sceptics such as Popper a reason to consider such questions philosophically *important*. Thus, the core of Popper's objection remains intact: why not just get on with the business of solving philosophical problems and stop worrying about philosophy itself? A reply, however, is to hand. Traditionally it has been thought that we can tackle philosophical problems just by ruminating about them. In an episode of the popular British TV series *Inspector Morse*, virtually the only thing a potential suspect has been doing for several hours while sinister events have unfolded is 'thinking'. When Sergeant Lewis relates this to Morse, the latter reacts with an incredulous

[12] Popper 1975: 53. [13] Ibid.

[14] Cavell 2002: xxxii. Timothy Williamson also insists that 'the philosophy of philosophy is automatically part of philosophy' (2007: ix).

stare. 'Well', Lewis explains, 'he *is* doing a doctorate in philosophy'. But if critics of the traditional methods of philosophising, such as the 'intuition sceptics' we discuss in Chapter 4, are right, then the way most of us go about solving philosophical problems is in fact radically inadequate to the task. In other words, if the critics of the standard methods of philosophising are right, then this *affects philosophy across the board*: epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of science, moral and political philosophy and so on and so forth are all affected insofar as philosophers working in those areas employ the methods under criticism. Surely, any criticism that affects philosophy across the board in such a way is philosophically important, indeed crucial. However, to attempt to answer this question – to reflect on the methods of philosophising – is to do metaphilosophy. And once you have opened the discussion of philosophy's proper method(s), questions about what philosophy is or should be arise as well, since, as we said, to judge the appropriateness of a method we need to know what it is a method for.

But it is not only because metaphilosophical problems affect all of philosophy that metaphilosophy constitutes an important part of philosophy. Philosophy, however it is to be characterised more generally, has always been thought to include the critical examination of the forms and methods of human knowledge and understanding. Since philosophy is itself, at least on the vast majority of metaphilosophical views, a contribution of some sort to human knowledge or understanding, the philosophical project remains radically incomplete unless the critical light is directed at philosophy itself. Indeed, Sellars goes as far as to state: 'It is this reflection on the place of philosophy itself, in the scheme of things which is the distinctive trait of the philosopher,' so that 'in the absence of this critical reflection on the philosophical enterprise, one is at best but a potential philosopher'.[15] Whether or not that is an overstatement, it seems to us that Timothy Williamson is right – *pace* Ryle – to maintain that 'Philosophizing is not like riding a bicycle, best done without thinking about it – or rather: the best cyclists surely *do* think about what they are doing.'[16] Metaphilosophy is not just a part of philosophy, but an *important* part.

This still leaves the worries – articulated in the quotes from Rorty and Bernard Williams – that perhaps metaphilosophy is less interesting or

[15] Sellars 1991: 3. [16] Williamson 2007: 8.

profitable than other areas of philosophical research. Yet whether some areas of philosophy are more or less interesting than others surely depends on who you ask. And the charge that metaphilosophical discussion is likely to prove 'unprofitable' is hard to evaluate. The question to ask here is, 'Profitable in terms of what?' In terms of effecting social or political change, say? In terms of clarifying important philosophical questions? Or are metaphilosophical discussions unprofitable because it is unlikely that they will lead to agreement and progress? But how much progress has been made in *other*, more developed parts of philosophy?

In his 2009 book on metaphilosophy, Gary Gutting suggests that two features have been responsible for making metaphilosophy particularly unprofitable and uninteresting:

> a dogmatic attitude that derives the nature of philosophy from controversial philosophical doctrines (e.g., idealist metaphysics or empiricist epistemology) and an abstract, overly generalized approach that pays no attention to the details of philosophical practice.[17]

Insofar as Gutting is right that metaphilosophy has been disproportionately characterised by these shortcomings, it is indeed hard to avoid the conclusion that it has been less satisfying and interesting than other parts of the subject. But unless there is reason to think it inevitable that metaphilosophy is marred by dogmatism and overgeneralisation, then the conclusion to draw from this is not that we shouldn't do metaphilosophy, but that we should strive to do it *better*.[18] Perhaps when good metaphilosophy replaces bad metaphilosophy, this part of philosophy will become as interesting and profitable as other parts of the subject.[19]

## The aims of the book

This book is an introduction to metaphilosophy or 'the philosophy of philosophy', as it is also sometimes called. In it, we provide an overview of the central questions philosophers have asked about philosophy, we discuss the answers they have given to them and we suggest some of our own.

[17] Gutting 2009: 2.

[18] This, of course, is Gutting's conclusion as well.

[19] The criteria for profitability of any philosophy constitute a central metaphilosophical topic, which we discuss in Chapter 8.

Some philosophers, including Cavell and Williamson, have expressed dissatisfaction with the term 'metaphilosophy' because they think it suggests that the latter isn't itself a part of philosophy, as metaphysics is not, or at least not obviously, a part of physics.[20] When we have chosen to stick with the word 'metaphilosophy', it is not because we welcome the connotations of, in Williamson's words, looking down on philosophy 'from above, or beyond'. We agree that metaphilosophy is straightforwardly part of philosophy in the same way metaphysics or normative ethics is. 'Metaphilosophy', it seems to us, is simply the term most widely used for this particular part of philosophy.[21]

Introductions to (parts of) philosophy are always, explicitly or implicitly, opinionated – they are never entirely neutral. Our book is no exception. In fact, since it is an introduction to *meta*philosophy, it presents an interesting complication. Suppose one could write, say, an introduction to the philosophy of mind which presented all the major positions and their strengths and weaknesses in a balanced and fair manner. Such a book would not be opinionated with respect to any particular discussion within the area (philosophy of mind) covered. Yet it *would* express a particular *meta*philosophical view. By either excluding or including neuroscientific or other experimental research, for example, the book would express a particular view of the relation between philosophy and the empirical sciences. The same would go for books on epistemology, ethics and all other parts of philosophy.

The interesting thing about a book on metaphilosophy is thus that the very topic covered is the one on which it seems impossible not to take some sort of stand, however tacitly or implicitly. So our approach to the topics of metaphilosophy reflects a particular conception of the nature of philosophy – that is, a particular metaphilosophy. As will become obvious, we have not approached our topic in a 'naturalised' manner. That is, with one or two exceptions, we have not conducted or consulted empirical studies of the behaviour of philosophers, relations of influence among them, how philosophical theories get accepted, citation patterns in journals and so on and so forth.[22] If someone were to point out that this shows our sympathies

[20] Cavell 2002: xxxii; Williamson 2007: ix. See also Glock 2008: 6.

[21] There is even a respected journal called *Metaphilosophy*. In the first volume of *Metaphilosophy*, Morris Lazerowitz – a student of Wittgenstein – claims that he coined the term 'metaphilosophy' (or 'meta-philosophy') in 1940 (1970: 91).

[22] To get an idea of what such 'naturalised metaphilosophy' would be like, see Morrow and Sula 2011.