WHAT ARE PHILOSOPHICAL SYSTEMS?
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PREFACE

In every discipline the order of exposition tends to reverse the order of inquiry. I began my own inquiry about philosophical systems by reminding myself of what every historian of philosophy knows: namely, that philosophers are divided and that no part of the philosophical enterprise has ever been the object of common agreement. Neither Kant’s critique of metaphysics nor the so-called ‘scientific method in philosophy’ has been successful in bringing peace, or even armistice, to the battlefield. Granting the truth of these statements, I had to seek the reason behind them by examining the nature and origin of philosophy. The systematic form of philosophy was elaborated to answer the ontological question posed by the advent of axiomatics when it jolted the unified world of myth, moulded as it was, by natural language. But all collective communication requires a formal recognition of the material that is perceived by means of the linguistic signs (what Saussure called the ‘signifier’). Thus, the question ‘How does language make the unity of the sensible world possible?’ came to be followed immediately by a question about the structure which is already given at the level of our animal perception.

In this essay my exposition reverses the order of my inquiry. The first chapter will deal with perceptual organization, and the second with language and the sensible world. In the third chapter I shall inquire into the nature and the systematic form of philosophy or rather of philosophies by analysing the relations that ontologies bear to axiomatics. The fourth and last chapter will introduce a classification among philosophical systems whose observed plurality was the starting-point of the inquiry.

The order of exposition, then, deals with a hierarchy of successive achievements, each of which is for the following one a necessary but not a sufficient condition. The forms of perceptual organization give language its building materials, and the first use of language is to communicate perception. But the machinery of communication and publicity produces possibilities which are beyond the power of perception, and there is more in the categories of language than in the forms of perception. Next come the philosophical principles. They will be found to have to the categories of language a relation which is analogous to the relation which the categories of
language have to the forms of perception. Philosophical principles are fashioned from linguistic categories and from the primitive elementary sentences by which they are expressed, but on the two conditions that these linguistic categories and sentences should be entitled to claim a universal power of explanation and that they should stand the test of logical consistency. Such great demands make an important difference. In so far as the primitive sentences, various as they are, are spontaneously used, they may be assigned truth-values independently from each other. This does not apply to the philosophical principles that immediately enter into competition with one another for the highest and exclusive prize. This explains why there have been and there are many incompatible philosophical systems. History and present experience suggest that no agreement has been or ever will be reached. But though polemic is still raging in the field, there are none the less some signs of peace, a peace obtained by resignation rather than by victory. Some philosophers have shown themselves to be fully prepared and even quick to change their systems. Others, while they preserve their faith in their proclaimed principles, are more eager to scrutinize and delimit their domain of validity than to criticize rivals. A last effort of classification thus remains to be made. Can all philosophical systems be brought under a finite number of ultimate classes or, in other words, do the philosophical principles enter into a classification as do the primitive elementary linguistic sentences? It is clear that if the latter classification works, applying the ontological and logical transformation which changes the primitive elementary linguistic sentences into philosophical principles will suffice to obtain the new classification that is put forward in this book.

The reader familiar with contemporary analytic philosophy will be surprised that, on the four issues at stake, I contradict widespread views by implication, without discussing them. I deny in the first chapter that language shapes perception, since perception precedes language. In the second chapter, despite the relative autonomy of linguistic organization with respect to perceptual organization and though its collective conceptual stability expresses and embodies, for each particular society, a determinate Weltanschauung, i.e., a collective code of classification, I deny that a Weltanschauung is a philosophy, since publicity entails neither consistency nor a wish for consistency. In the third chapter, because philosophy and science have a common origin in the discovery of antinomies and in the development of axiomatics, I deny that strong continuity between philosophy and common sense which is advocated by many philosophers of natural language. Finally, when in the last chapter I arrive at the question of philosophical truth, I give my fellow-philosophers the slip and leave them to
go further than I do. While they argue for a unique scheme of philosophical truth, I am content with saying what all of these possibilities of truth are. Nothing is worse than off-hand manners in a philosophical debate. However, I have, in a rather involved argumentation, aimed at clarity and concision. I have had therefore to limit myself to positive reasons. Where I could not escape negative justifications, I have put them in the notes. As to philosophical truth, it is clear that, if my prudence is justified, the plurality of philosophies makes the concept of philosophical truth inadequate and inappropriate, at least if the word truth is used in its ordinary sense. I have not, however, settled this fundamental question; I have not even explicitly brought it up. In the end I have nothing better to offer my reader than a prudence fraught with risks and further queries.

I am grateful for the assistance, especially with the English, given to me by Jasper Hopkins, Michel Blais, Thomas Morran and Gilles Granger. Their patience was sorely tried by the progress of my manuscript.