TOWARD A METAPHILOSOPHY

WHAT is philosophy? Where can it begin, and how can it proceed? Does it in any sense reach an end? How is it related to other disciplines, to life, to its own history? These questions and others like them about philosophy itself are all intertwined with one another, and usually they occur to the philosopher together. But recently one specific question in this tangle has been given particular attention under the name of "metaphilosophy." Hence the word suggests a specific lead to be followed up in the philosopher's self examination.

I would formulate the metaphilosophic question and clarify the data to which it refers in the following way. How can we explain the lack of consensus among philosophers? Philosophers whose competence is hardly questionable, even philosophers whose greatness is generally acknowledged, do not agree with one another, and this lack of agreement is not limited to a few questions. No, in philosophy disagreement appears to be pervasive. Still philosophers seem to one another to be demanding agreement in a manner that befits those who are expressing truths equally accessible to others. Yet when such a demand is made by one philosopher, it is seldom honored by very many others. And when it is not, apparently there are no principles accepted by all philosophers through appeal to which the differences can be settled.

Hence working philosophers are not permitted to forget for long the questions about philosophy itself, for these questions regularly arise in particular philosophic disagreements as soon as the reasons for disagreement are sought, much as accepted presuppositions of other disciplines come to light when, due to a radical disagreement within a particular field, attention is focused upon the sources of agreement and disagreement within that discipline.

As my title suggests, what I have to say this morning about metaphilosophy is only provisional. In this area careful studies of the data are no less needed than they are in philosophy of science or of art. Yet I think there is also room for a prelim-

inary, dialectical investigation. And that is all I am attempting here. But I hope it will lead to a good discussion, and will stimulate more careful, detailed studies.

To call the investigation of the question of non-consensus among philosophers "metaphilosophy" may strike you as the mere addition of a new alias to an old item on the philosopher's blotter. But I think this would be a mistaken impression. True, most philosophers have had something to say concerning philosophic disagreement, but they have considered the question mainly in connection with their own disagreements with other philosophers. Consequently, to quote from Professor Yves Simon's Medalist's Address of five years ago, " It seems that the reasons why philosophers disagree have never been analyzed and set forth adequately. Many of these reasons are but confusedly suspected." Recent investigations by the special detail who call themselves metaphilosophers have aimed at settling this case by concentrating attention on it—that is, by making inquiries which at least initially are restricted to this question, while setting aside other matters which normally would fall under philosophic scrutiny.

When investigated by itself, the question of philosophic disagreement immediately takes on a complexion which it does not have otherwise. For it would seem that if the mystery which led to this inquiry is solved, and if philosophy on the whole passes muster well, then perhaps philosophers can proceed with renewed confidence to attack the underworld of intellectual apathy, stupidity, and sophistry which preys upon mankind. In other words, the hope arises that consensus and concerted progress in philosophy will at last become possible in virtue of the expected satisfactory solution of this question.

Of course there is a danger that the investigation will fail to get to the bottom of the matter. Surely, if it is to succeed, this investigation above all must be disinterested, and no one's position can remain above suspicion. Past certifications of honesty and good conduct count for nothing now.

Less metaphorically, the very act which takes up the metaphilosophic question as one to be studied in isolation, itself places all disagreeing philosophic positions—that is, all past and present philosophic positions—in a problematic context. This general

question, " Why do philosophers not agree? " implies not only, " Why do *they* not agree with *me?* " but also, " Why do *I* not agree with *them?* " Consequently, while one obviously begs the metaphilosophic question by answering it bluntly, " Philosophers do not agree because the rest of them do not agree with us," one also and as surely begs it by answering it with an analysis which appears impartial but which really is allied with his own philosophy. For whether one's philosophy is true or not, it is one of those that disagree. Impartiality among them must be observed, and any response to the question that either presupposes or implies a position peculiar to any of the parties involved in existing disagreements inevitably will beg the question rather than honestly face it.

It follows that if it is to be adequate, a response to the metaphilosophic question must itself be able to win agreement from most philosophers; if it is to be satisfactory, an analysis of why philosophers disagree will have to alter the data from which the question arises. Now this is not surprising; a question raised by an unsatisfactory state of affairs normally is answered only when something comes to light which might improve matters.

However, if this is true, could we not use our efforts just as well by working on other questions which might be more basic and perhaps simpler? Would not any philosophic conclusions that could win agreement from the philosophic community at large also settle the metaphilosophic question? It would seem so.

But, on the contrary, it is plausible to suppose that philosophers might reach some consensus without gaining leverage on the bulk of philosophic issues if the limited point in which agreement first is established does not include the principles of philosophic agreement and disagreement. For then would not philosophers have come into agreement without knowing how they did it? Surely, they could not have learned the reasons for their agreement without also learning why they had disagreed previously.

Furthermore, we cannot exclude in advance the possibility that philosophers will never reach consensus until they come to an understanding about the reasons why they have not agreed previously. The fact noted earlier that all the philosopher's questions about philosophy itself are related to particular philosophic controversies as the accepted presuppositions of other

disciplines are related to radical disagreements within their par-
ticular fields—that is, as if they were higher authorities to whom
issues which cannot be settled at lower levels are appealed—at
least suggests that a resolution of the metaphilosophic question
is a necessary condition for reaching general consensus concern-
ing the substantive questions of philosophy.

By this time, however, it may have occurred to you that you
do not feel as strongly as I that the present situation in philoso-
phy is unsatisfactory. If so, you will not necessarily disagree
with what follows, but you will differ with me, either by not
raising the metaphilosophic question at all, or by not formu-
lating it in terms of disagreement and consensus. However, I
think that some reflection on the status of philosophy in a plu-
ralistic society may persuade you to share my interest in the
question and to accept my formulation of it.

If the expression " pluralistic society " is used in the sense
in which it refers to a polity, such as our own, whose members
enjoy equal rights without respect to their religious beliefs and
philosophic positions, then there is an evident relationship be-
tween the metaphilosophic question and the problems of plural-
istic society. For in a polity like ours philosophy should be able
to flourish, since political wisdom is supposed to provide a shel-
ter for philosophizing without ever using political power to put
the philosopher's house in order.

But of course this is only an imperfectly realized ideal, and
in practice the relationship between philosophy and politics often
is quite different. To the extent that philosophy affects other
aspects of our lives, philosophic disagreements are reflected in
many of the political controversies which arise in a politically
united but philosophically divided society. Consequently, the
position we take on the metaphilosophic question has an indirect
but important influence on the way we view and deal with polit-
ical issues.

But the controversies in which we engage here in America,
important as they are, amount to nothing in comparison with
the struggles of international politics. And philosophic disagree-
ments affect these struggles too, not only indirectly but even
directly. If, then, you not only consider the significance of
philosophic disagreement for domestic politics, but also medi-

tate upon the relationship between the political divisions which imperil mankind and the almost universal warfare which characterizes philosophy in its present condition, I do not believe you can remain complacent about it; this warfare too must be abolished.

There are two extreme positions with regard to the metaphilosophic question which must be considered first. One is that the disagreements of philosophers raise no question, since one philosophy simply is correct, at least on the whole, while the rest in so far as they diverge from it are mistaken, and constitute so many false philosophies. The opposite extreme is the position that philosophic disagreement is completely diverse from all other disagreement, for in philosophy there necessarily are many positions which in principle are able neither to agree nor to overcome one another's claims to philosophical legitimacy.

What shall we think of the first position—that all philosophies but one are mistaken? Stated so simply, the position obviously is not an adequate response to the question of metaphilosophy, since anyone can say the same thing on behalf of his own philosophy without casting any light on disagreement, and the collision of blunt assertions of almost universal error merely provides one further striking example of the data of the question. Yet many of us surely have held this view in our hearts, even if we were diplomatic enough not to utter it with our lips. Why? I think because we had not asked ourselves the metaphilosophic question. We were merely reasserting our own general position in the face of disagreement without even beginning to reflect upon the fact of disagreement.

Now how did this come about? I think that there were two causes. First, it was possible to become engaged in philosophy without knowing in their own terms even as many as two philosophies, since in a sheltered environment the adherents of *any* philosophy may yield to the temptation to induct neophytes into their own school rather than to introduce fellow seekers into the human quest for wisdom. Second, it is inevitable in the course of the philosopher's development that he hold at first an unexamined reserve of extra-philosophic certitudes which influence, and may even determine, his initial position without his clearly realizing it. The domain termporarily exempted from criticism

may be that of pragmatic common sense, or it may be that of a science, an art, a special social role, or a religious faith.

To develop the position that our own philosophy is correct and that the rest are simply mistaken into an adequate response to the metaphilosophic question, we at least must show how the others have gone wrong and that we can admit whatever is sound in their efforts. But to show this much, we would have to find some place in our own scheme of things for the causes of mistakes. In other words, to say that philosophies other than our own are simply mistaken is no response to the question unless we can offer an adequate theory of philosophical error.

Nevertheless, the position that most philosophies are simply mistaken has had wide currency among Catholics, and even today is accepted by many. For we believe that although philosophy is a work of reason, unaided human reason in the state of fallen nature is incapable of doing its own work well. From this it seems to follow that most philosophers have made fundamental errors because they proceeded without the light of true faith.

I shall not question this inference. However, this theological position provides no theory of philosophical error; it does not tell us the specific causes of the philosopher's mistakes. Furthermore, if this position were a philosophical one advanced as a response to the metaphilosophic question, it would beg the question rather than answer it, since most philosophers do not accept the premises from which the theological conclusion is drawn.

But even for the believer himself, the substitution of this position for an adequate response to the metaphilosophic question entails difficulties. In the concrete, the believer cannot make this position an immediate criterion for judging philosophies without using a philosophy as an instrument, since a measure must be homogenous with what it measures. But fundamental philosophic disagreements also exist among those who are true believers—for example, between Aquinas and Scotus.

Moreover, if faith is to serve as a general criterion for evaluating philosophies, the question which arises is: " Whose faith? " We may not notice that this question does arise, for it sounds to us a question that only an unbeliever would ask. However,

as a matter of fact, the faith which Catholics individually hold does vary considerably, and these variations become significant when faith plays a role in argument. Just recall what happens among our theological colleagues when philosophical differences have theological implications. It usually does not take long for material differences in faith to appear, and frequently there is an exchange of charges of doubtful orthodoxy, if not of heresy.

I note in passing that there is today special reason for us Catholics to seek philosophical means for settling philosophical disagreements, because at least to some extent the differences among sincere Christians, which we now have fresh hopes of resolving, are grounded in philosophical disagreements which along divergent paths of theological development have entered into the doctrines which divide the Christian confessions.

Having said this much, I must introduce one caution in order to obviate misunderstanding. I do not at all believe that the pluralism of philosophy and of religious faith are on the same footing, nor that we should regard them in the same way. As a believer I am not moved by the existence of incompatible beliefs in the same way the non-consensus of philosophers moves me as a philosopher. As a believer I regard myself as the recipient of a special gift by which I am set apart from those who do not believe. I cannot expect everyone to share my faith, but I believe that disagreements in matters of faith which arise among Catholics can be, should be, and are resolved by the Church. But as a philosopher I regard myself as one who follows a human profession which requires only specifically human abilities and instruments, and so I must face the question of philosophic disagreement on a ground and by means which are accessible to all other philosophers.

By employing the notion of a perennial philosophy, many Catholics and some others have tried to support the position that one philosophy is correct and that those which diverge from it are mistaken. The theory holds that there is a philosophic tradition in which substantial consensus among some group of great philosophers has been achieved, although along with this tradition many aberrant views keep cropping up.

Notice, however, that even if fairly large groups of philosophers do reach consensus among themselves, this fact alone does not resolve the metaphilosophic question. For the question does

not presuppose that all individual philosophers disagree; it presupposes, rather, that no single philosophy has been able to gain acceptance in the philosophic community at large. So long as important divergent philosophies are defended by significant philosophers whose competence cannot be denied, the question will remain. From the point of view of a philosopher who finds himself outside the perennial philosophy, however it is defined, the position of the proponents of this theory is unacceptable. Consequently, considered as a response to the metaphilosophic question, the notion of perennial philosophy is inadequate, for it begs the question rather than fairly answers it.

Moreover, the general notion of perennial philosophy provides no theory of philosophical error, although some of the particular theories of a perennial philosophic tradition have attempted to provide one. Unfortunately, however, the special theories of perennial philosophy do not agree with one another.

Furthermore, if we were to consult the teachings of those philosophers whose greatness is generally acknowledged, I do not think that the results would be encouraging to the proponents of the idea of a perennial philosophy. Of course, I cannot discuss this matter in detail, but I shall suggest what I think the outcome of careful study would be. Let us admit for the sake of argument that there would be no metaphilosophic question if there were substantial agreement among six of the greatest philosophers—Plato and Aristotle, Aquinas and Scotus, Kant and Hegel.

However, it seems obvious that there is no general consensus among these six thinkers. Moreover, the second member of each pair considered himself to be in fundamental disagreement with his eminent predecessor. Of course, there is room for argument about whom we should include on the list of great philosophers. Still, even with revisions, the prospects for eliminating disagreement do not seem bright unless the final list is to be limited to a single name.

With regard to the metaphilosophic question itself, the teachings of the great philosophers do reveal a kind of consensus, for all of them seem to accept the position that one philosophy is fundamentally correct and that all divergent views are mistaken. Yet they disagree about which philosophy is to be regarded as correct, each proposing his own.

However, the great philosophers all do seem to agree that one who begins to ask philosophical questions is likely to encounter certain natural pitfalls, and that in philosophy it is much easier to make mistakes than to arrive at the truth. Erroneous positions can be simple and immediately plausible, while the truth is bound to be complicated and implausible to an unsophisticated mind. If I am correct in thinking that the great philosophers have taken this view of the matter, we will hardly dare disagree with them.

Nevertheless, this common view is too general to serve as a response to the metaphilosophic question, for it suggests no theory of philosophical error. Of course, the great philosophers provide more or less explicit leads from which such a theory could be worked out. But I fear that these leads would presuppose or imply many other positions peculiar to each of the philosophers, with the result that their developed theories would disagree with one another and would seem to beg the metaphilosophic question.

Hegel, for instance, proposes a fairly explicit theory of philosophical error, but it is thoroughly Hegelian. Even if Hegel were to return from the dead to handle the popular objection that philosophy did not end with his work, I am sure he would respond to it in an Hegelian way, and the fact would remain that western philosophy since Hegel has been practically nothing but a series of violent reactions to him.

We ought not to be surprised that Hegel and the other great philosophers did not answer the metaphilosophic question very well. For, as I said earlier, this question as we are facing it today is one which they did not even raise. Still you may ask why the notion of a perennial philosophy has been so persistent if there is truth in what I have said about it. I think there are several reasons.

First, it is easier to deny the data of a difficult question than to attempt to deal with it, and this holds true especially if the reality is unacceptable emotionally. But the extent of disagreement in philosophy induces in all of us a certain disquiet, for we fear we may find ourselves isolated in the midst of the philosophic free-for-all. Hence we want reassurance, and the notion of perennial philosophy suggests that we can seek wisdom in the friendly company of the greatest minds.

Then too, if one does not examine this history of philosophy too closely, there not only appears to have been more agreement than there now is, but also more than there ever really was. Removed from their context, many questions and positions of philosophers do coincide to a much greater extent than do the arguments which relate the two, and the complete philosophies from which they were extracted. Now a non-philosophic interest in philosophy is more likely to focus upon questions and answers than on arguments and whole philosophies, which philosophers nonetheless seem to consider important. Hence it is possible for someone who does not read philosophy as philosophers do to employ an extra-philosophic criterion—for example, faith—to compile a kind of catechism of perennial philosophy.

Finally, there must be some unity in philosophy, since otherwise philosophers could not disagree, for they would not even agree in being philosophers. I think this point is sound and important; philosophy is not so divided that argument cannot continue. But the proponent of perennial philosophy may draw the illicit inference that those who agree in being philosophers agree in philosophy. Hence he may assume the reality of consensus without reflecting on the data of the metaphilosophic question.

Earlier I said that there are two extreme positions that have been taken on the metaphilosophic question. The first was that disagreement among philosophers raises no question, since one philosophy is correct while the others are simply mistaken. Now let us turn to the position at the opposite extreme. It is that philosophic disagreement is completely diverse from all other disagreement, for in philosophy there necessarily are many positions which in principle are able neither to agree nor to overcome one another's claims to philosophic legitimacy.

Unlike the first position, which was favored by those who had not raised the metaphilosophic question, this one has been adopted recently by many of those who have faced it. Unfortunately, although they agree in the general position, which may be called "pluralism in principle," they disagree, sometimes violently, about how to explain and defend it. Consequently, any brief treatment of the position is bound to seem inadequate to its proponents.

This position generally is developed in a way that glosses over an important and rather obvious distinction. Two positions may not agree either because they are simply different and irrelevant to one another, or they may not agree because they are relevant to one another and incompatible. The former yields real diversity but only relative opposition; if disagreement appears, it is due to a misunderstanding. The latter yields absolute opposition; disagreement is real, and can be resolved only if one or both parties changes his position. Of course, some pluralists in principle may not admit this distinction, but if they reject a criticism of their position on that account, they will merely provide the ground for a demonstration that they have begged the metaphilosopic question in favor of a philosophy which includes a different logic of opposition.

According to the distinction I have proposed, it seems that pluralism in principle must mean that philosophic oppositions are either relative, or absolute, or that there are some of each kind, but that in any case the resolution of disagreements in philosophy is impossible.

Whatever alternative the pluralist in principle takes, his position appears to be incompatible with the data of the question. For when philosophers disagree, they certainly think that truth may be at stake, and this implies that it is possible to be mistaken. Hence not all oppositions are relative; some philosophic conclusions are incompatible with others. Still, sometimes philosophers can come to agreement merely by adding to their positions without changing them. Hence, not all oppositions are absolute either. But, further, philosophers constantly criticize one another's work and offer arguments for and against positions which they disagree about. It is clear that they hope their communication will be successful and their arguments effective, and in their own judgment these expectations are sometimes fulfilled, for sometimes apparent disagreements which involve the misunderstanding of a relative opposition are overcome by increased insight, and sometimes real disagreements which involve an absolute opposition are overcome by argument.

Pluralists in principle in their role as metaphilosophers may disagree with these assertions, but if so they will be claiming in effect that most philosophers do not even know what they are trying to do, and are regularly mistaken about their own success

and failure. Moreover, as philosophers, and metaphilosophers are philosophers too, pluralists in principle behave like all other philosophers. They criticize other positions, and they explain and defend their own with arguments. Then too, as I noted before, pluralists in principle disagree among themselves as well as with defenders of other responses to the metaphilosophic question, and an examination of particular versions of pluralism in principle will reveal that each proponent of the position allies it with other philosophic positions peculiar to himself, and so begs the metaphilosophic question.

A popular form of pluralism in principle which often is proposed by non-philosophers is that philosophy simply has nothing to do with truth. Either it is all nonsense, or it is merely a kind of poetry conveying subjective impressions. An inadequate exposure to philosophic work presented in a popular history of philosophy or in a philosophy course taught by one who is not a philosopher himself is likely to promote this view. Such a presentation not only may neglect the precise questions philosophers are investigating and their actual arguments with respect to those questions, but it also may fail to engage the reader or student himself in the philosophic quest. Hence to him all philosophic statements will seem to be verbal formulae having a uniform function: to express what a philosopher is thinking, that is, his opinion. The linguistic and extralinguistic contexts which make the philosopher's statements fully meaningful, and which may render them more than mere opinion, never come into play.

Of course, this popular form of pluralism in principle is not an adequate answer to the metaphilosophic question. In holding that philosophy has nothing to do with truth, it denies the data of the question. Moreover, even this popular view is a kind of philosophy. Its origins in common sense suspicion of abstract argument and popular faith in empirical science sometimes rise to the surface of the discussion. Then it appears for what it is: another way of begging the metaphilosophic question, which it answers on grounds peculiar to its own anti-philosophic position.

Philosophic versions of pluralism in principle usually put the principle in knowledge, in language, or in choice.

One view, which puts it in knowledge, claims that philosophers

do not really disagree, but rather that they have different positions which are incommunicable, because they think always in the light either of differing fundamental intuitions or of differing total experiences.

Of course, communication among philosophers is imperfect, but its success extends at least as far as such a position's knowledge of its imperfection extends. We never know that a mutual misunderstanding exists, only that there has been one, for we come to know misunderstanding only in escaping from it. Even the suspicion of misunderstanding only arises when it is in the process of giving way to more adequate communication.

Moreover, this version of pluralism in principle also begs the metaphilosophic question, since it rests on doctrines of intuition or experience which most philosophers do not share. Of course, its proponents can argue that when they explain the nonconsensus of philosophers in this way they are only stating how they see things from the point of view of their own particular intuition or experience. But then we might fairly ask them how they know that their intuition or experience does differ from ours, and they seem to be in for an infinite regress.

Similar criticisms can be made against those philosophic versions of pluralism in principle which place the principle in language or in choice.

Those who place it in language, by asserting that philosophers must differ because each has his own language, sometimes recognize that their position is incompatible with the occurrence of absolute opposition in philosophy. However, they write off the working philosopher's view of the situation as confused, because they have unlimited confidence in recent work in linguistic philosophy.

However, they too have their disagreements, and then they talk out of the other corner of their mouths. Moreover, they often seem to make a mistake by supposing that language is atemporal, like a mathematical system or a certain edition of a dictionary, and that there are never unprecedented developments in it. They forget that living languages are systems which develop, share with one another, and undergo mergers, all of which occur when one engages in a philosophic dialogue. Such dialogue would never take place if every philosopher had his own language.

Of course, proponents of the view can respond that such dialogue would not be necessary if all philosophers had a completely common language. I think that this is true, but it merely implies that there are some differences among philosophers which have not in fact been overcome, and I know of no one who would disagree. But " in fact " and " in principle " do not mean the same thing, and if pluralists in principle really only want to point to a fact, not to offer a general theory about it, then they will have no grounds for rejecting the ideal of philosophic consensus in a final, common truth.

Those who place the principle in choice, by saying that philosophy begins from a commitment which involves opting for one among possible positions, make a mistake like that of their linguistic brethren, although they make it in a slightly different way. For they forget that choice is compatible with detachment —that is, with a full appreciation and admission of alternatives —and that sometimes options between which we must choose are incompatible only under conditions which happen to hold at a given time. Thus they do not notice that while we cannot work out two positions simultaneously, even though they are compatible with each other, we need not deny the truth of the one which we do not choose to think about at a given moment.

Moreover, this position presupposes that there can in the end be no rational justification for a choice. Now, of course one can begin thinking from a completely arbitrary assumption, but if this is to be allowed in philosophy as a matter of principle, an opponent of this position can avail himself of the privilege it grants to him.

What is more, the apparent modesty of some proponents of this position, who claim to possess only a " personal knowledge," loses its charm when you realize that they are claiming to possess a truth as absolute as truth can be, for they do not admit the possibility of any knowledge which is not personal, but instead reject the argument of anyone who defends absolute truth and who refuses to elect choice as a philosophic principle.

These, then, are the extreme positions. What would be the characteristics of a safe middle course? It must not conflict with the data of the question. That is to say, it must allow for the facts: that philosophers do not agree, that truth is at stake in philosophy, that misunderstandings and mistakes do occur,

but that clarifications and arguments are sometimes effective. Moreover, it must not be allied with any particular philosophy, but must be impartial with respect to every philosophic disagreement, for otherwise it would beg the question. Finally, it must throw some light on the reasons why philosophers disagree, and so offer some promise of promoting a more satisfactory situation in philosophy.

Let us begin charting the middle course by noticing what would be conceded generally concerning the sources of absolute oppositions—that is, those in which there is real disagreement due to the clash of incompatible positions. Such oppositions can arise only if at least one party to the disagreement is mistaken, for if neither is mistaken, there is nothing in principle to prevent their positions from standing together.

Now everyone grants that there can be errors in reasoning—at least, in anyone else's reasoning—and that some such errors can creep into even a careful philosophical work. The possibility of catching and eliminating such errors is always present and sometimes realized, and opponents in philosophic argument occasionally concede a mistake when it is pointed out. In each such case, one absolute opposition is eliminated or prevented. More attention to our reasoning, and care to avoid or discover errors in it, is in order.

Errors in the conclusions of philosophic arguments surely sometimes also arise from the acceptance of false premises or the admission of merely apparent evidence, but the examination of this source of disagreement is a more difficult matter. I can offer only a few observations.

For one thing, a philosopher may accept a position as true and use it as a starting point merely because it is granted by someone against whom he is arguing. Yet even if the premise fulfills its promise as a weapon against the adversary, it may be false, since it is quite possible for two incompatible positions both to be false together.

For another thing, philosophers who are trying to make a fresh start at the opening of a new historical phase in philosophy may accept as sufficiently examined a position which had been common to all the parties to recent disagreements. It may be that the position is partially understood and partially misunderstood—think, for example, of the acceptance of doctrines on sub-

stance and idea from the medieval heritage by classical modern philosophy. Thus a sort of philosophical faith can lead to the acceptance of false opinions, which by mating with unquestionable truths bring forth plausible but mistaken conclusions. Hard work toward clarifying his opinions and toward reducing them to sources of knowledge which do not depend on any authority, even that of de facto consensus, sometimes leads a philosopher to detect himself in this kind of mistake, and occasionally you can help a partner in a dialogue or move an opponent in an argument to do this work. Thus, again, some philosophic disagreements are resolved, and more efforts of the same kind would seem to be a promising way of attacking others.

However, sad to say, it is not impossible that some absolute disagreements among philosophers arise because of a careless willingness or a malicious desire to assert the false. This ill will may be motivated by pride in holding a unique position, by impatience for achievment, and by fear or even hatred of the truth. Such disagreements will be only verbal, but if a false philosopher is a skillful liar, philosophic non-consensus is maintained and extended.

I do not suppose any philosopher would deny that every philosopher should strive to be responsible and sincere, but the formulation of the professional ethics of the philosophy profession, and of the intellectual life in general, has hardly been attempted. Even if such a project were successful, and I would not scoff at the idea, a great deal more than ethics is required to convert ill will into good will, but a discussion of this topic would lead to a whole treatise in ethical theory.

Apart from these factors which give rise to absolute oppositions among philosophic positions, there also are a number of respects in which philosophies may differ without really disagreeing.

Two philosophers may use the same expressions with important differences in meaning. Such differences readily lead to misunderstandings and apparent incompatibilities, but clarification sometimes can eliminate such lack of agreement. Everyone admits that there can be such differences in concepts, that communication is imperfect, but that it can be improved. However, the formation of philosophical concepts is a large topic which hardly has been explored in general at all.

Differences in concepts are often obvious when one is tracing the course of the history of philosophy. When a philosopher is familiar with the works of his predecessors and understands them well, he notices developments in the meaning of an important philosophical expression and takes them into account.

But often philosophers who are contemporaries inhabit intellectually quite different periods, since the contexts in which they learned their philosophical language were different. In such cases misunderstanding is likely to occur, because they are not expecting it. But language is a flexible instrument, and living discussion maximizes its possibilities, so the same techniques which help us to understand the history of philosophy should help us to improve communication among contemporaries, provided we proceed on the working hypothesis that discourse will not yield up its treasure of meaning without digging on our part.

Another way philosophical works or parts of them may differ is in the specific ends which they have in view. Proof, the certification of the truth of a position, is only one end a philosopher may seek by his exposition and argument. To assume that nothing else ever is intended will lead us mistakenly to suppose that many actually defensible positions are on unsound ground.

Sometimes argument is only a test of the consistency of two or more suppositions, and such argument may be sound without establishing the truth of any position. Again, an exposition containing elements of argument may be offered only to gain a clarification of the meaning of words or positions. In the latter case, the truth of the position may be assumed or in some way established beforehand, or the one who engages in it may hope that clarification itself somehow will indicate or reveal a truth without proving it. Again, a philosopher may try to provide some sort of explanation of a truth or fact, and he may or may not claim that the explanation arrived at is adequate or exclusive of alternatives.

Some philosophers are primarily, or even exclusively, interested in one of these specific ends of exposition and argument, while others concern themselves now with one, now with another of them. If these differences are overlooked or the intent of an author in a particular place is misunderstood, then a difference without incompatibility can seem to be an absolute disagreement. The likelihood that this transformation will occur is

increased by what seems to be one of those pitfalls the great philosophers agree in noting, a natural tendency to oversimplify, for it is easy to suppose that different clarifications or explanations are necessarily incompatible. For example, if one finds that there is some explanation of human behavior in terms of heredity and environment, he may assume that there cannot also be an explanation of it in terms of values and freedom. And yet neither view may require that the other be excluded. Also, since the purpose intended by thought to some extent shapes language, differences of intent can lead to and be mixed with shifts and changes of meaning which we are discussing just now in connection with differences of conceptualization.

Still another way philosophers may differ is in regard to the subject matters with which they concern themselves. It is obvious enough that an investigation of the problem of causality and an examination of the notion of certitude are not primarily concerned with the same thing, although they are not necessarily unrelated. Either could lead into the consideration of the other, but still keep its own criteria of relevance. And, again in this case, ambiguous words may make the difference into an apparent disagreement.

The false appearance of incompatibility is hard to avoid if the different subject matters are separated by a line which divides different modes or orders of entity. Of course, philosophers divide reality in different ways, and at present I do not wish to insist on any particular division of it. Nor do I wish to take a position on the question whether divisions of reality are discovered by philosophers or created by them, or perhaps introduced in some way which is neither discovery nor creation. However, to exemplify the point, consider the division which Aquinas introduces among four orders of entities: the natural, the intentional, the moral, and the artificial. It is quite possible to begin a philosophic inquiry into one of these orders, and then to bring to bear factors from one or more of the others. Many words which are important in philosophy are predicated ambiguously—or, without error, analogously—in such a context, and yet in such predication there need not even be different concepts.

One further way philosophers may differ is in their methodologies—the procedures which they follow and the sorts of fac-

tors they recognize as limits of the philosophic process. An analytic process may be employed to reduce a complex whole to some sort of elements. Or a process of synthesis may be pursued to unite a variety of some kind within or under a single factor which comprehends the multiplicity in a unity. Again, a series of factors successively connected one to another, in one or more ways, may be traced back to some factor which is not similarly connected to anything further. Also, the philosophic work itself may be undertaken as an action intended to make a difference in its data.

Professor Richard McKeon has devoted a great deal of effort to examining and clarifying differences among philosophies in this respect. Other discriminations of philosophical methods and principles are possible, and perhaps this one is incomplete, but study of the history of philosophy does seem to indicate inductively that there are some such differences at work in philosophy, and that they lead to diverse, but only apparently incompatible, systems by producing a kind of ambiguity in argumentation.

In this case, the truth-value of a position in so far as it depends on the context of argument can vary according to the methodology which is being followed, although the meaning and truth-value of the same position apart from the context of argument may be invariant. Consider, for example, the simple truth that you are now seeing words on paper. Apart from the context of argument, every philosopher would accept this fact as an evident truth. But its truth-value within epistemology is subject to a great deal of variation, and at least a part of this variation seems to depend upon the diversities in systematic context which different philosophic methods give to obvious facts about knowledge and perception.

The last two respects in which philosophies may differ—subject matter and methodology—have provided the point of departure for a number of recent theories of philosophic difference and non-agreement without absolute opposition. These theories have proposed that different philosophies have different root metaphors or basic analogies, for it is observed that at least in some cases philosophers develop their thought by extension, from a limited subject matter and the methodology appropriate to it, to the more extensive domain of all reality. In so far as

such theories are supported inductively by the history of philosophy, and so long as they do not become pluralisms in principle, I think they throw some light on philosophic differences, and they may suggest techniques for reducing apparent disagreements. The same may be said of other theories which are similar to pluralisms in principle, but which stop short of that position; each of them can point to actual difficulties in communication due to some of these respects in which philosophies may differ without disagreeing.

It should be noticed also that in many of these respects in which philosophies can differ there is some room for choice. For example, merely because of psychological limitations, it is not possible for us to consider every subject matter at the same time, nor is it possible to work with every end in view simultaneously, nor to proceed at once according to every methodology. Hence the view that choice underlies philosophic disagreement is justified to the extent that at least some observed differences do depend on choice, although it is not justified if it claims that this fact supports pluralism in principle or precludes the reduction of differences and the elimination of disagreements by a rational process.

Furthermore, a philosopher may receive a certain position from his predecessors without observing some of the relevant differences between their philosophies and his own. In this way all of these sources of philosophic differences can indirectly become partial causes of the acceptance on philosophical faith of false positions.

What is more, a philosopher may accept one of the alternatives opened by these several respects in which philosophies can differ, and then needlessly try to exclude all alternatives to his position. It may be that one is predisposed by his native temperament and by his training to prefer some alternatives to others. And he may yield to the temptation to become attached to the alternatives he prefers, although in themselves they do not exclude the others.

Of course, I do not intend to claim at present that there must never by any exclusion. However, the view which is common to the great philosophers, that mistaken philosophies are not complicated enough, suggests that attempts at exclusion often are unjustified. Hence the rational process in which philosophic dis-

agreements are overcome may require an increasing detachment from one's own work, because the limitations of one's own work may be what best characterize it.

I proposed a little while ago to try to indicate a middle course for metaphilosophy, a course which we could follow safely between the extremes of dogmatism and pluralism in principle—which also is a dogmatism—a course which would meet all the requirements whose neglect has led to the breaking up of those positions on the shoals of argument. And now I have said all that I can, done my best to carry out the proposal. Even these cautious indications may be more than other philosophers will accept; I shall not have to wait long now to begin to find out.

But how can I hope you will be satisfied with the result, even if you accept it? It really amounts to nothing more than that philosophers should try to avoid making mistakes themselves and should help others to correct theirs, that they should do their best to understand their colleagues and to make themselves understandable, and that they should fight against temptations which would destroy their responsibility and sincerity as seekers of wisdom. Didn't we all know these things before metaphilosophy ever appeared on the scene? Indeed we did, but we also thought we knew a number of others things which we did not know, and our metaphilosophic voyage has not returned without some records of unexpected observations, even if the ship is riding high in the water.

Still, the result does seem unsatisfactory. It provides no golden master key to unlock at once all the doors which divide philosophers from one another. But what right had we philosophers to expect to find a way of knowing all things merely by coming to know why we do not agree with one another as we should like? That would only be coming to know ourselves, and although philosophers have a great hero who described his work as an effort to do just this, he continually asserted that he did not know anything. Socrates was aware that man cannot step directly from his self to reality, for he knew that whatever reality is, it is certainly greater than man.

Did we expect to find a universal solvent for universal disagreement in philosophy? We have found some general reasons, but if we want a solvent for disagreement we shall have to deal with it in particular; like any solvent, the one effective on dis-

agreement does not work in general on stains in general, but only here and now on this one or that one. For if we want to know why we disagree in particular, it seems the only way to do it is by finding out how to agree in particular, and that does not seem to be possible unless we come to know better just that particular about which we disagree.

Did we expect to find a philosophical position which would be able to arbitrate the differences among all philosophical positions? If so, we have failed. But how could we have succeeded? Only a position identical with philosophy itself could judge all philosophical positions. *But philosophy is not a position, it is a quest; it is the persistence of reason.* If our minds were not rational, we would not have got to different positions, for a mind which was not rational would not have been able to move. If we will not go on being rational, we will be isolated in our different positions, for a mind which had ceased to be rational would be one which had stopped dead rather than to change its course.

Consequently, a man with his reason must try to follow the landmarks of experienced things, dim shapes half visible in the light of a wisdom which itself remains invisible. Trusting his own wisdom, he must orient himself as best he can for his journey through time. He must guage his ever-shifting relations to his fellows from his estimate of his own heading and from their undependable communications. And so, finally, he must judge their positions and arbitrate the differences for himself. A man cannot escape the responsibility, imposed upon him by the fact that he has a rational mind, of judging for himself and of criticizing his own judgments. This responsibility is to truth, not to a position, not to other men. The more perfectly our responsibility to truth is fulfilled, the more probably will consensus be achieved.

I think that there is hope for achieving such a consensus that, although differences may remain, disagreement will become a thing of the past. But this is a further question, not the one I have been considering. And so all I shall say to it is that we should not give up hope now merely because history is disheartening. Rather we ought to believe that there lie before man, even in his transit of this temporal world, much better things than he has left behind. For man in his whole life, as well as

in that aspect of it which is the quest for human wisdom, has never enjoyed the cordial unanimity he longs for, but he should no more despair of reaching philosophic consensus than he should surrender his hope for peace on earth.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

One of the needs in metaphilosophy is a thorough topical bibliography. The following is not an attempt to supply this need, but is merely a list of materials studied or consulted in the preparation of this paper. However, much of the content of the paper is derived from discussions in which I have participated with teachers, colleagues, and students over the years.

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