



ARTIGOS – ARTICLES

Some reflections on the methodology of philosophy

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Abstract: The metaphilosophical thesis is put forth that the three main areas of any serious philosophical reflection are: ontology, epistemology, and (philosophical) semantics. To some extent, they can be dealt with independently from each other, but on a certain level of sophistication in the analysis, their mutual relationships have to be taken into account.

Keywords: Metaphilosophy. Ontology. Epistemology. Semantics.

Reflexiones sobre la metodología de la filosofía

Resumen: Se defiende la tesis metafilosófica de que las tres principales áreas de cualquier reflexión filosófica son: la ontología, la epistemología y la semántica (filosófica). Hasta cierto punto, ellas pueden ser tratadas independientemente las unas de las otras, pero a partir de cierto nivel de complejidad en el análisis, hay que tomar en cuenta sus relaciones mutuas.

Palabras clave: Metafilosofía. Ontología. epistemología.

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I feel particularly honored by the fact that the editors of this *Festschrift* dedicated to Nelson Gomes on the occasion of his 80th anniversary have asked me to contribute to this volume. For many decades, since our times as Doctoral students at the University of Munich, Nelson and I have maintained a firm friendship, which has endured despite living on different continents; and although there has not been an opportunity to see each other again for a long time, we have remained in epistolary contact regularly, sharing our hopes and concerns, not only with respect to philosophy, but on other subjects as well. I hope that these methodological reflections that I dedicate to Nelson, although perhaps not fully shared by him, will be of interest to him as well as to the other contributors to this well-deserved tribute, and in general to readers interested in matters philosophical.

I think that, from a methodological point of view, the three fundamental pillars of any systematic philosophical endeavor may be subsumed under the usual labels of “ontology”, “epistemology”, and “(philosophical) semantics”². These three areas are indeed essential to a full understanding of the genuine nature of any systematic philosophical enterprise, and I myself have dedicated my efforts for decades to contribute to a greater or lesser degree to these three pillars of philosophical work. I have done this in particular in my book *Pluralidad y Recursión*³. The pages that follow represent, in a sense, a continuation of the analyses I undertook in that work.

Now, these three pillars of any genuine philosophical endeavor are not independent of each other, but they are rather mutually intertwined. That is, dedicating oneself to ontology (if we want to do it fruitfully and in a well-founded way) implies at the same time dedicating oneself to epistemology, and this in turn has to do with (philosophical) semantics. Let's look at these interconnections by considering a particularly notorious example from the history of philosophical ideas.

The question "Does God exist?" is a typically ontological question (although, of course, it is not posed only by and for philosophers). Now, this

² The latter area could also be labelled, following the Aristotelian tradition, “hermeneutics”; however, since in time this term has become rather the name for a particular philosophical school, and not for a research area, in the following I'll use exclusively the denomination “semantics” for what I have in mind.

³ See C. Ulises Moulines, *Pluralidad y recursión – Estudios epistemológicos*, Madrid: Alianza Universidad, 1991.

question is obviously correlated with the epistemological question "How can we know whether God does indeed exist or not?", which in turn presupposes that we have answered the semantic question: "What exactly do we mean by the term 'God'?"

It is true that, throughout the history of philosophy, the ontological questioning has sometimes predominated, as in the Aristotelian tradition; at other times this was the case for the epistemological approaches, as in the case of British empiricism and the Kantian tradition; and in others finally the semantic inquiry dominated the philosophical discussions, as in the analytical tradition in philosophy from Frege and Wittgenstein up to present times. These different emphases are historically and psychologically understandable, and we cannot reproach an author for having concentrated on one branch of philosophy more than another, as long as that author is aware that, strictly speaking, the main branches of philosophy cannot be sharply separated. We could speak here of a "division of labour", but not of true conceptual independence.

At this point someone might think that my substantial characterization of genuine philosophy as a whole in which ontology, epistemology, and semantics participate in an interrelated manner is still too abstract and general, and that it would be convenient to specify what the objects of study of philosophers are, or should be. That is, the objection may be raised that there is an additional question that should be answered with respect to philosophy, namely the question of the nature of the objects under philosophical study. Our critic could argue: "Okay, as philosophers we can make an ontological, and/or an epistemological, and/or a semantic analysis of a certain object of study. But what is the nature of those objects of study that concern a typically philosophical investigation?" At first glance, this seems to be a justified question that a non-philosopher can pose to a philosopher. Indeed, the non-philosopher may raise the following challenge to the philosopher: "I have some idea of what the objects of study of mathematicians are, namely numbers, geometric figures, and similar abstract entities; I also know that physicists study material particles and the structure of space and time; and that biologists study the phenomena of life. But what are the specific objects of study of philosophers?". I repeat that, at first glance, this seems like a justified question.

But if we dwell a little on the historical course of philosophical thought, we will soon see that it is not so. Indeed, the objects of study of philosophers have been, and continue to be, all kinds of entities. By way of examples, here is a short list of things that philosophers have been dealing with for more than 2,500 years: Apart from the aforementioned idea of God, we can mention man, being, time, life, knowledge, numbers, work, death, Newtonian mechanics, the *summum bonum*, art, law, mind, language, the meaning of history, different political systems, truth, induction, nausea, ... and, of course, philosophy itself. In short: an incredible hodgepodge.

Now, the non-philosopher may further ask us: If it is not the type of objects of study that characterizes the work of the philosopher, what is it that characterizes philosophy? The answer is that it is not that which is studied by philosophy that characterizes it, but the *way* it does it – at least when it comes to a philosophical enterprise that we can take seriously. This mode was described by Wittgenstein in an insurmountable way, as succinct as it was accurate, by the phrase of the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*: "*Alles was sich sagen läßt, läßt sich auch klar sagen*". ("Everything that can be said, can be said clearly.") Wittgenstein himself did not always abide by this principle, but this is another matter. In any case, this principle contains the supreme methodological norm of good philosophizing, namely: "Say at the outset of a discussion whatever you want to say, but say it clearly. For only in this way can you and your interlocutors control the content of what you express. Any other attitude amounts to an idle joke."

Now, at this point the question arises: Of what kind is that clarity that we suppose characteristic of good philosophizing? It is quite simple to find out if the water contained in a bottle, or the air around us, are clear or not. But what is the criterion of clarity in the case of philosophy?

For some time, some philosophers, from Leibniz to Carnap through Frege, held the idea or, rather, the hope that the definitive criterion for philosophical clarity would be found in the application of logic (in a broad sense of the term "logic", which would include mathematical logic *sensu stricto*, as well as set theory, and the so-called "philosophical logics"). The idea was that any postulated philosophical thesis should be as clear and as precise as a mathematical theorem. Philosophical discussions would therefore not take

the form "*Disputemus*", but "*Calculemus*". And this would be facilitated by the instruments of logic in the broad sense indicated. Now, we know that today there is no longer anyone who maintains that hope. In the meantime we have come to know the limits of logic very well. This does not mean, of course, that logic is useless to philosophy. On the contrary, logic in the broad sense indicated, which includes philosophical logics and set theory, is the most valuable instrument available to philosophers in those cases where it can be applied, and therefore the different branches of logic must constitute a central part of any philosophy teaching program. But we must be aware that it is an instrument that has its limits and that cannot always be applied to philosophical studies.

So, if logic alone will not always provide us with the desired philosophical clarity, what other instrument could help us in that undertaking? The answer is that there is no univocal answer to that question. The extra-logical conditions of clarity will be different depending on the case – depending on the topic dealt with, or on the thesis defended, or on the approach developed. We may say that these conditions are "intuitive". Any of us (at least as a philosopher) has a certain intuition about the conditions that a proposed philosophical approach has to fulfil in order to be clear and well-founded. But precisely because it is an intuition, it will not always take the same form for all people. There is no universally and uniformly applicable criterion of "intuitiveness". Therefore, philosophical discussions, leaving aside cases in which logic can strictly be applied, take the form of a *never-ending process*. This does not mean that every philosophical discussion always moves in a circle, and that there is no progress in philosophy. There is certainly a certain form of progress in philosophy, but it is not a linear progress, rather it is, so to speak, a "spiral" motion. It is a progress that, throughout history, has proved to have two essential features: First, it leads to increasingly complex, and ever more nuanced approaches; secondly, it is a progress that proceeds to some extent in a *destructive* way. Indeed, casting an honest look at the history of philosophy, we see that there are a number of philosophical theses from past eras that no one accepts anymore today. For example, no one believes at present that the motion of physical bodies is an illusion, i.e. that motion is unreal; nobody believes now that the human soul was once in a *topos uranos*,

or that the existence of God can be proved by simple reflection, or finally that physical bodies are nothing but agglomerates of sensations. In short, philosophical progress is determined by two general factors: firstly, by an increase in complexity and control in the discussion, and secondly by the overcoming of errors or absurdities.

Here, then, to end this brief exposition, are the four general conditions of good philosophizing: clarity, intersubjectively controlled argumentation, increase in the complexity of thought, and the overcoming of errors.

Auxerre, France, September 2021