Chapter 8

THE TERMINOLOGY
The Problem of Defining One’s Terms

1. FACT-LADEN CONCEPTS

One writer has argues on behalf of scepticism that we cannot be certain of the meaning of the words in which we conduct our communicative business on thought and discourse. Even with the Cartesian “I think, so I exist”—so he asks—how can one be categorically certain that that I refers to myself and that exist means “to have being” rather than say—‘to endure over time in the face of obstacles.” But this argumentation is a decidedly dangerous sword that cuts two ways. For if I refrain from a pre-commitment to the idea that the words I employ mean what they standardly do—that in speaking or thinking of mice I mean those little animals that squeak rather than those big ones that roar—then I just cannot coherently conduct the business of thinking in language. In being sceptical about the meaning of the very words I employ in my musings and discourse I plunge into regions altogether disconnected from coherent thought. The sceptic who inclines to this sort of view cuts off the limb on which he sits, unable to achieve a meaningful articulation of his own position—the very one he meant to consider. That in using the language we mean what we say is an indispensable presumption not just for truth but for coherent meaningfulness as such. And the moment that hermeneutical scepticism exerts its corrosive influence upon language it self-destructs as a defensible and indeed even as a coherently statable position.

Moreover, philosophers cannot just make up the meaning of words as they go along. By and large the meaning of the terminology that one employs in philosophical deliberation is not a constant by a given. Words are not our slaves—we cannot force them to do our will. And so we have to come to terms within certain crucial realities:

1. Philosophers cannot (re-)define their terms: They are tied to the terms of reference of ordinary language.

2. Yet these terms do not really meet their needs.
3. But they do keep our feet on the ground. Tied to the world’s operative realities.

The problems of philosophy—those big questions about life, the world, and the human condition—are rooted in the questions that we pose in the language of our everyday experience and discourse. And if they are to be answered satisfactorily, they must, in the end, be answered in these ordinary terms. But ordinary language—our familiar instrument of everyday communication—is designed for practical purposes. It is a medium for the transmission of opinion and sentiment about the workaday world of our everyday experience developed across generations thanks to the necessity and desirability of communicating with one another about the world we live in. And it thus embodies the assumptions and presuppositions built into our commonplace view of things reflective of the common course of our experience.

The conceptions we generally employ in everyday life inhere in a language that is designed with a view to its application to reality. Their very reason for being is to enable us to categorize, describe, and explain what goes on in the world about us. They are predicated on beliefs and assumptions geared to reality as we experience and interpret it, enabling us to orient ourselves cognitively in our world. If this concept-machinery were not adjusted to the real—if it were not fitted to our experience of the world about us—it would be much useless baggage which, for that reason, would have been abandoned long ago even if, per impossibile, it had evolved in the first place. The linguistic mechanisms of ordinary discourse thus have to reflect the general course of our shared experiences because they would not exist as such if they did not do so. The link of our language to our experience is a precondition of its very being.

The familiar and prominent concepts we find enshrined in the language are literally mundane in that they reflect our beliefs as to how matters stand and how things work. And, in particular, they are bound to reflect the normal, ordinary course of things in which various theoretically separable factors actually go together. It is a truism that life consists primarily of the ordinary and commonplace. And the obvious corollary is that the conceptual instruments we devise for handling our experiences—which are initiated, developed, and transmitted precisely because they fit the requirements set by our communicative needs—are, in consequence, geared to the ordinary, commonplace, and normal.
This state of affairs endows our concept with a certain imprecision that always leaves room for conflict and incompatibility. In consequence of this, the conception of non-rigidly standardistic generalizations provides a powerful tool for philosophical problem solving. For philosophy arises not so much from wonder as from puzzlement. Many—if not most—philosophical problems root in aporetic situations where we face a hard choice among individually plausible but collectively inconsistent contentions. Consider, for example, the following aporetic cluster of individually plausible but collectively incompatible theses:

- Promise breaking is morally wrong: promise breakings are always moral transgressions.

- It is never morally wrong to do what we cannot possibly help doing: doing something one cannot help is never a case of moral transgression.

- In some circumstances one cannot help breaking a promise (for example: when circumstances beyond one’s control preclude one from honoring it).

It is clear on purely logical grounds that these three plausible-seeming theses are collectively incompatible—one or another of them must be rejected. And, considering that the third thesis is simply a fact of life, it results that, to all appearances, considerations of mere logical consistency constrain us to abandon one of those two initial contentions. But of course if one is willing to give those initial two generalizations a standardistic (rather than rigidly universal) reading, the incompatibility at issue at once vanishes. By softening these generalizations we preserve their tenability. Here, as often, the edge of conflict can be blunted by a standardistic construction of our generalizations, enabling us to retain what we wish to maintain substantially intact in the face of collective inconsistencies. And there is good reason of general principles why philosophical generalizations should be softened in this sort of way.

Attuned in the first instance to the requirements of practical purpose and the needs of efficient communication in real-life conditions, our concepts are geared to factual presuppositions—and, above all, to factual assumptions as to how things normally and ordinarily run in the world. Not that philosophy as such is a standardly empirical inquiry. Its deliberations are
basically conceptual and the empirical aspect comes in through the back door, as it were. The salient point is that the concepts it addresses operate in such a way as to incorporate a view of the empirical facts. One cannot satisfactorily elaborate their conceptual relationships without taking account of the empirical facts in which they are predicated. With the fact-oriented concepts of philosophical relevancy, semantical and factual considerations become intertwined: pure analysis can at best sort them out—it can bring to light the factual aspect of the concept, but it can in no way mitigate or remove this empirical aspect of reference to a factual background of experience. Where our concepts have factual presuppositions, any prospect of a neat dichotomy of “empirical” vs. “conceptual” goes by the board. At such points, the two issues become fused into a seamless whole. And philosophizing itself then becomes a (partially) empirical enterprise—notwithstanding its basic nature as “conceptology”.

2. PHILOSOPHY IS GEARED TO THE CONCEPTIONAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE ORDINARY COURSE OF LIFE

In the course of their explanatory efforts philosophers invoke generalizations. Either explicitly or by way of interpretative attribution they deploy theses like:

- All factual knowledge originates in the senses: *nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu*.

- All duties are rooted in rules: Whenever $X$ has an obligation to do $A$, this is so in virtue of an appropriate general rule $R$ stipulating that in $X$’s circumstances $A$ is the obligatory thing to do.

- All existence is substance-connected: whatever exists is either a substance (a *thing* of some sort) or else a property or feature of things.

Generalizations of this sort constitute the heart and core of philosophical doctrines as we generally have them. But need they—nay, *should* they—be taken as strictly universal contentions? Or might it make better sense to construe them as stating not how things *must always* be rather than as maintaining how things *do normally* stand?

The motivating rationale for such a change of approach to philosophical generalizations lies deep in the nature of the concerns of this discipline.
The complex spiders’ webs spun in philosophical theorizing are always attached to “the real world” of everyday life and its scientific refinements. Even a superficial look at the various subdivisions or branches of philosophy shows that they are virtually always rooted in matters of pre-philosophical, everyday life concern. The materials of “human experience”, in all the manifold senses of this conception, constitute the raison d’être of our philosophizing. The reflexive, second-order discipline of metaphilosophy aside, the issues of philosophy revolve about extra-philosophical concerns. Preeminently, philosophical questions arise in terms of the concepts of common life. The central concepts of philosophy (“mind”, “matter”, “causality”, “nature”, “reality”, “truth”, “knowledge”, “agency”, “personhood”, “good”, “right”, “justice”, etc.) are importations from the thought-world of everyday life where they serve us in the cognitive manipulation of everyday experience. When philosophers deal with truth, or beauty, or goodness, or justice, they are concerned with these ideas as they function in our everyday discussions and deliberations, they are certainly not proposing to address technical conceptions that are disjoint or distinct from the ways in which we ordinarily deliberate and talk about the issues. To be sure, they may be seeking a “rational reconstruction” of everyday usage in the manner of Carnap. But here too the nature of the usage one is attempting to reconstruct remains the focal point. Philosophy—after all—addresses itself to problems that arise out of our attempts to make sense of the world as our experience presents it to us.

Now, the basic concepts in whose terms we transact our experiential business are in general infused with our understanding of the world’s facts. These concepts are not designed for use in “every possible world”, but for use in this world. They arise from the need to handle communicatively the materials of our experience, and are geared to the realities that we encounter and manipulate in the course of everyday life. Their import and their applicability relate to how matters do stand, and not to how they might conceivably stand by some “stretch of the imagination”. They are concerned with our understanding of the world’s actual arrangements and their component elements are connected by contingent rather than necessary linkages. Even when philosophers deliberate normatively about how things should be (in contrast to how they actually are), they are nevertheless concerned primarily with some aspect of the real (with how you or I should behave, and not how the nonexistent individuals of some nonexistent world should comport themselves). In consequence, philosophical deliberations
rest on a basis of reality-oriented fact or supposition, connected to the world as our experience indicates it to be.5

The concepts we standardly use to think about the arrangements of the real—and which accordingly lie at the basis of our philosophical reflections—are of an essentially composite character. But rather than representing a combination of elements united by purely theoretical considerations, the concurrence involved in such concepts rests on a strictly empirical or experiential foundation. Their unity is a unity of experience—as the following illustrations show.

(1) Our concept of PERSONAL IDENTITY views the sameness of persons through a fusion of bodily continuity (tracking through space and time) and continuity of personality (memory, habits, tastes, dispositions, skills, etc.). (Moreover, each of these is itself composite.)

(2) Our concept of PERSONS involves the conjoining of mind and body, and preserves a mutually accordant functioning of mental and bodily activity, thus manifesting two very different sets of characteristic powers and dispositions.

(3) Our concept of VALUE (in the sense of “social justice is something he values”) fuses three sorts of factors: covert (“mentalistic” thought, motivation, rationalization), transitional (verbal behavior in affording vis-à-vis others some defense, explanation, or justification of one’s acts), and overt (actual physical behavior).

(4) Our concept of BELIEF coordinates mentalistic dispositions to think and overt physicalistic dispositions to action.

Let us consider just one example in detail. Observe that both key factors at issue in belief mental disposition and overt behavior in appropriate circumstances—must come together before it is proper to speak of believing. His mental condition alone does not establish that actually X believes that a bomb is shortly to go off in the room if his every act belies this (under suitable conditions—e.g., he has no wish to commit suicide). But evasive behavior alone will not clinch the matter either, if there is sufficient evidence that X’s every thought—tacit and professed—indicates that he is nowise under an impression that a bomb is present. Both sets of factors—mind states and action dispositions—must be suitably coordinated before we can
unproblematically speak of X’s having a belief. Otherwise, we could not appropriately say that X believes that P, but would have to use some complex circumlocution, “X, while not accepting P is the case, acts as though it were”, “X, while maintaining that P is the case certainly does not behave (say, by betting) in an accordant fashion”, or the like. Both of these factors—cognitive and behavioral dispositions—come together in the composite idea of a belief. Their consilience and consonance is not a matter of logic, however, but rather one of fact—of how experience shows us what things do in the world.

And this case is typical. For the fact is that all of those various philosophically critical concepts are both multicriterial and fact-coordinative:

(i) They are multicriterial because in each case a plurality of (in principle separable) components is involved, for example, in the case of personal identity, both bodily continuity and continuity of personality play a pivotal role.6

(ii) They are fact-coordinative because in each case the theoretically separable but concept-joined criterial factors are held together in an integrative fusion by facts or purported facts—that is, by our view of how the world actually works. (Thus in the case of personal identity we find that bodily continuity and continuity of personality generally and standardly go together.)

Concepts of this fact-coordinative sort conjoin factors whose unity is a matter of experience. They rest on presuppositions whose content is factual, reflecting a view of how things go in the world. They are empirically conditioned, being developed and deployed against an experiential backdrop—a Weltanschauung, or rather some miniscule sector thereof. The crucial contribution of such an empirical basis is to underwrite the de facto conjoining of a plurality of factors that are in principle separable from one another. Because these factors are thus coordinated, we are spared any need to make up our mind as to which of them is ultimately determinative or decisive for the concept’s applicability. Experience assures that certain purely theoretical possibilities are of no effective practical concern because the things they split apart actually go together.

In our philosophizing, the concepts in whose terms theses and theories are articulated are accordingly fact-laden through their gearing to “the domain of experience”—that is, to the way in which things usually and nor-
mally go. Such conceptual machinery hinges on “the ordinary course of things” as we actually encounter it. It reflects our experience of the world by indicating how things standardly go in the domain of what comes to our notice. And this feature of its conceptual frame of reference must inevitably inform and condition the way in which we can transact our philosophical business. It means that we must—or should—recognize philosophy’s commitment to “the real world”, albeit in a way very different from the commitment of classical science and traditional philosophy.

3. THE COGNITIVE STANCE OF SCIENCE VS. THAT OF ORDINARY LIFE

Throughout the sphere of our cognitive concerns there is an inherent tension between generality and security. Increased security can generally be purchased for our claims at the price of decreased accuracy and precision. We estimate the height of a tree at around 25 feet. We are quite sure that the tree is 25 + 3 feet high. We are virtually certain that its height is 25 + 10 feet. But we are completely and absolutely sure when the item at issue is indeed a tree, that its height is between 1 inch and 100 yards. Of this we are “totally sure” and “certain beyond the shadow of a doubt”, “as certain as we can be of anything in the world”, “so sure that we would be willing to stake our life on it”, and the like. For any sort of plausible claim whatsoever, there is always a characteristic trade-off between its evidential security (or probability), on the one hand, and, on the other, its contentual definiteness (exactness, detail, precision, etc.). The prevailing situation is as depicted by the concave curve presented in Display 1. Throughout the range of our information-gathering inquiries, the epistemic lay of the land is such that it is in effect impracticable to make one’s generalization at once both highly interesting (i.e., general) and highly safe (i.e., secure). And in philosophy, above all, the price we have to pay for achieving tenable theories is to curtail their sweep.

Traditionally, science seeks to operate at the top of the diagram. It foregoes the security of indefiniteness, in striving for the maximal achievable universality, precision, exactness, and the like. The mathematically precise law-claims of natural science involve no hedging, no fuzziness, no incompleteness, and no exceptions—they are strict: precise, wholly explicit, exceptionless. When investigating the melting point of lead, that physicist has no interest in claiming that most pieces of (pure) lead will quite likely melt at somewhere around this temperature. (Even where science deals in prob-
abilities, it deals with them in a way that characterizes exactly how they must comport themselves.)

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Display 1

THE DECLINE OF SECURITY WITH INCREASING DEFINITENESS

Note: Given suitable ways of measuring security ($s$) and definiteness ($d$), the curve at issue can be supposed to be the equilateral hyperbola:

$$s \times d = \text{constant}$$

By contrast, the ground rules of ordinary life discourse are altogether different. Here we operate at the right-hand side of the diagram. When we assert in ordinary life that “peaches are delicious”, we mean something like “most people will find the eating of suitably grown and duly matured peaches a relatively pleasurable experience.” Such statements have all sorts of built-in hedges and safeguards like “more or less”, “in ordinary circumstances”, “by and large”, “normally”, “if other things are equal”, and the like. They are not laws in the usual sense, but rules of thumb—a matter of practical lore rather than scientific rigor. In natural science, we deliberately accept risk by aiming at maximal definiteness—and thus at maximal informativeness and testability, but in ordinary life matters stand quite differently. After all, ordinary-life communication is a practically oriented endeavor carried on in a social context: it stresses such maxims as “Aim for security, even at the price of definiteness”; “Protect your credibility”; “Avoid misleading people, or—even worse—lying to them by asserting outright falsehoods”; “Do not take a risk and ‘cry wolf’.” The aims of or-
ordinary-life discourse are primarily geared to the processes of social interaction and the coordination of human effort. In this context, it is crucial that we seek to maintain credibility and acceptance in our communicative efforts—that we establish and maintain a good reputation for reliability and trustworthiness. In the framework of common-life discourse, we thus take our stance at a point far removed from that of a mathematically precise “science”, as this domain was traditionally cultivated. Our concern is not with the precise necessities but perforce with the looser commonalities of things.

The crucial fact for present purposes is that in this matter of definiteness vs. security, as in others, philosophy stands on the side of everyday life. The issues are so large and complex and the data we have are so tenuous in their bearing, that we have little realistic choice but to compromise definiteness (generality, precision, universality) for the sake of security (tenability, plausibility). If we are not content to join the sceptic in leaving the arena of deliberation empty-handed, we have to be prepared to be realistic about what the deliberations of philosophy can actually accomplish. If we wish to achieve tenable answers to the deep and far-reaching questions that we pose in this domain, then we simply have to be prepared to abandon an unrealistic demand for universality and necessity and be prepared to settle for the more qualified and tentative suppositions that the data of experience are in a position to underwrite. In this domain, we have to be prepared to do the best we can with the resources at our disposal here and now. Foregoing all unrealistic demands for an unrealizable perfection in our philosophizing, we have to make the most we can of the possibilities that are, in a realistic sense of the term, actually available to us. Rather than hankering after abstract connections that hold exceptionlessly for any imaginable world, we are to look to what is standardly (normally) true in the actual world we live in.

Aristotle’s biology and physics was full of general rules to which there are sporadic exceptions. The rules say how things go “on the whole” (hôs epi to polu: in general); the exceptions “prove” the rule. But this points towards a pre-modern conception of science that the necessitarianism of early modern (i.e., pre-statistical) science simply abandoned. And in science we may indeed be able to get by with the dichotomy of either strictly universal or merely statistical. But in philosophy we cannot. For better or worse the spirit of Aristotelian science is still with us here.

Standardism provides our best practicable route to security in philosophical generalization. Humans—and indeed whatever intelligent beings
there may be in the cosmos—are innovative beings, capable of a deliberate introduction of novelty. Through intellectual insight and practical ingenuity, intelligent agents are able to bring into being things that have not previously been in existence, and, in particular, to achieve new knowledge about old issues. Such innovation—be it in intellectual or physical matters—is by its very nature a venture in pattern breaking. It alters the landscape of what has heretofore been the case. But while innovation, and the broadening of horizons generally alters what has always been the case, it is less likely to change what is normally the case. Clearly, the fabric of standardist (rather than universalist) generalizations is far less susceptible to being disturbed by novelty.

In philosophy, our most promising pathway to reasonable security lies by way of curtailing the “scientific” pretensions of our claims. When we generalize in the manner of saying that people pursue life, liberty, and happiness we do not achieve rigid universality but operate on a standardistic plane. What standardism would accordingly have us do is to forego—or at least radically curtail—our aspirations to necessitarianism in philosophy. 7

4. THE DANGER OF ASKING TOO MUCH

Its insistence on avoiding dogmatism by refusing to lay down rules beyond the prospect of exception—this very rule itself included—is what characterizes standardism and sets it apart from the fixation of traditional philosophy on what is rigidly necessary and strictly universal. The salient feature of standardism is its relaxed approach to generalizations—its willingness to contemplate what is normally so, instead of hankering after what must be so invariable and exceptionlessly. It is content to let us talk about how matters stand “in the first approximation” rather than strictly and solely “in the final analysis”. Standardism is prepared to pursue the process of generalization in a manner that is more “realistic” and “relaxed” than anything that traditional philosophy is prepared to contemplate.

But just why should we draw in our philosophical horns in such a manner? Why should one abandon the science-imitating universalist/necessitarian line of traditional philosophizing in favor of the generalistic/normalistic formulations of a more relaxed, humanistic approach? Primarily because we ought to be realistic. For their rooting in the inherently normalistic concepts of everyday discussion requires philosophical issues to be addressed in standardistic terms. Philosophy, after all, takes its departure from a concern for our workaday human affairs: even its concern for “the world” is
(unlike that of natural science) anthropocentrically us-oriented, ultimately preoccupied with the bearing of the issues on our concerns—on our knowledge, our role, our prospects, etc. Preeminently, philosophy’s concern with logic is as an instrumentality of our reasoning, and with cosmology as a means to understanding our universe. And this focus upon the human dimension has important ramifications. For universal generalizations in human affairs are almost invariably undermined by its essentially chaotic aspect—by the ineliminable role of chance and luck in matters of human concern. The general rules that can be laid down to characterize our situation—be it in ethics, in epistemology, in metaphysics, or wherever—have to align with the general course of things because unusual and unforeseeable confluences and complications can almost always intrude to upset the apple cart. But this means that at the level of our philosophical convictions, chaos, so to speak, can and often does intervene to call off all the usual bets, abrogating the usual order of things to which our generalizations are—and must be—attuned.

The obvious difficulty of universalistic and necessitarian philosophizing is its commitment to uniformity and universality—to the idea that the relevant relationships can generally be captured in one unrestrictedly exceptionless rule. This contemplates a conceptual tidiness that may indeed be present in pure mathematics, but is very questionable in matters of philosophy. For—as noted above—the issues we deal with in philosophy take root in the concepts of everyday life. The factors at issue are not technical artifacts projected for their own abstract interest, but must always be representable in terms of the commonplace descriptive machinery of our everyday communication. Accordingly, they simply do not admit of a purely theoretical systematization that abstracts from the experienced course of things.

In philosophical matters, our prospects of establishing rigorously universal theses are unpromising. Reluctant to face this fact, however, philosophers have generally striven to answer their questions in terms of claims regarded as universal, necessary, and a priori. Traditionally they look to the exact sciences—and generally are the exact formal sciences, logic and mathematics—as their model. But as the history of the subject shows all too clearly, these programmatic ambitions have produced great problems. By asking too much, philosophers have in consequence obtained too little. Their demands for a conjoint realization of high definiteness and high security has put them “off the curve” of epistemic feasibility, so that they are in the end destined to failure. A not insignificant part of the reason for philosophical controversy and dissensus lies in the effective impossibil-
ity of securing an adequate probative/evidential basis for the sort of exag-
geratedly ambitious claims that are traditionally projected in this domain.
The nature of philosophical issues is such as to pose the ever-present threat
that if we will only be satisfied with theses that are absolutely universal
and necessary, we shall wind up with having nothing at all.

A standardistic focus upon the usual (rather than necessary) course of
things accordingly becomes a sensible and realistic proposition. For stan-
dardism enables us to achieve various important desiderata:

1. An increased security for our theses, enabling us to feel a firmer
ground under our feet.

2. An improved methodological grasp—it being far easier to spot how
things generally go than to establish that they must always and in-
varily stand in a certain wise.

3. An enhanced persuasiveness for our position—it being much simpler
to convince people that things standardly and normally stand X-wise
than to convince them that they must be so inevitably.

It is, in sum, not insignificantly to the advantage of standardism in philoso-
phy that with respect to the large issues of the field normality is incompara-
rably easier to secure than universality, seeing that an appeal to commonal-
ies of people’s experience, to their sense of the ordinary and primitive
course of things, is something both straightforward and convincing.

The overly ambitious nature of classically necessitarian philosophy
makes it effectively impossible to provide resolutions to the problems that
readily convince people of their acceptability. An empirical approach, by
contrast, offers promise of greater effectiveness in the realization of more
limited objectives. It offers the prospect of achieving a plausible resolution
for issues that we would otherwise simply be unable to resolve satisfacto-
ry. Accordingly, an empirical approach that is satisfied with theses geared
to how things stand generally and usually (rather than universally and nec-
essarily) affords our best promise for retaining answers to our philosophi-
cal questions in a way that is at once informative, defensible, and adequate
to the problem-situation of the philosophical domain.

By asking for more—by insisting on principles that are absolutely uni-
versal and necessary—we would effectively assure ourselves of getting
nothing at all. The problems are so intricate, the issues so complex, the
evidence so tenuous, that by demanding theses of a high degree of contem-

tual precision and definiteness we render it impossible to evidentiate any-

thing with a degree of security adequate to the realization of intellectual

comfort. In philosophical contexts, we can (generally) do no better than to

support theses regarding how matters stand in general with respect to the

questions at issue; in this domain, strict generalizations are (generally) not
cogently substantiable. Insofar as we want viable answers—insofar as the
security and tenability is a goal of ours—we are well advised to proceed
conservatively, staking our philosophical claims in a way that is cautious
and qualified. And so, standardism comes into its own.

Historically, philosophers have all too often seen philosophizing as a
labor of pure reason, holding with Spinoza, that “It is not in the nature of
reason to regard things not as contingent, but as necessary” (Ethics, II, 44).
They construe philosophizing as committed to necessitarian aspirations by
its very nature as a venture in rational inquiry. But the ample course of our
experience with the discipline indicates that this position is altogether un-
availing—that in philosophy, as elsewhere, reason without experience is
blind. And once we accept this, and acknowledge that philosophizing too
has an experiential dimension by virtue of which its deliverances become
to some extent contingent and vulnerable to the cold winds of experiential
change, then we must also acknowledge that the deliverances of philoso-
phy will not stand secure against novelty of circumstance, but will be frag-
ile and defeasible in the light of the altered conditions unfolding in a world
where chance and chaos play a significant role. A philosophical doctrine
must be flexible—it cannot stand fixed and unchanging but must, like all
else that has life, learn to adapt—or else die.

Consider just one example. Historically, positivism came to grief be-
cause its champions could no longer defend the distinctions pivotal to its
articulation (analytic/synthetic, conceptual/factual, etc.) against the chal-

lenges and objections that could be—and were—made against such pro-
crusteane dichotomies. Both the supporters and opponents of positivism saw
such distinctions as being absolutely hard and fast—universal and absolute.
The idea of a standardistic softening of these dichotomies—of linking their
applicability to normal issues and ordinary circumstances—did not occur
to any of the parties to the dispute. But once this prospect arises, matters
look very different. Take the analytic/synthetic distinction between what is
true on conventional and what is true on factual grounds. To investigate the
tenability of “All (unbroken) knives have blades” it would be foolish in-
deed to inspect the knives in our kitchen drawers—or our museums. Lin-
guistic usage suffices—if an implement does not have a blade we just do not call it a knife. Statements like “Knives have blades” are thus clearly analytic. On the other hand “No Minoan knives were made of steel” cannot be investigated on the basis of linguistic usage alone—we have to go out into “the real world” and examine artifacts. Such statements are clearly synthetic. The distinction involved—the line between analytic and synthetic—is clear enough for the standard situation of normal cases where it is possible to understand and implement the issues in a more or less straightforward way. It is only if we seek to operate by means of universal rules that are to apply rigidly all across the board in an altogether hand-and-foot way that the analytic/synthetic distinction runs into trouble. Had the positivists been prepared to approach their concerns in the more relaxed manner of a standardistic approach, their doctrine would have taken on a more flexible and vastly more tenable guise. It is after the course of medicine—and kindness to a philosopher’s generalization in standardistic rather than universalistic terms.

It could, of course, be objected that this diminishing of demands is incompatible with the very nature of philosophy—that whether one likes it or not, many or most philosophers have in fact been committed to the pursuit of the strictly universal necessary. But, of course, it is one thing to ask for something and another to obtain it. The merit of standardism’s lowering of demands lies exactly in the fact that this affords a better prospects of achieving meaningful answers to our philosophical questions and providing for viable resolutions of the problems of the field.

Its seeming weakness is actually the basis of philosophical standardism’s strength. For given the complexity of the issues, it is clear that such an “empirical”—that is, experience-oriented—approach that rests satisfied with theses geared to how things stand generally and usually (rather than universally and necessarily) affords our best prospect for obtaining answers to our philosophical questions in a way that is at once informative and defensible. When we address those “big issues” of human nature and action in their natural and social context, our chances of securing viable answers are vastly improved by looking to the usual course of things rather than pursuing the will-o’-the wisp of abstract general principles in a quest for strictly exceptionless universality. The aspirations of a standardistic philosophy may be more modest, but they are for that very reason also much more realistic. If we indeed want answers to our philosophical problems we have to be prepared to accept them as they are in practice attainable.
5. WHY PHILOSOPHY CANNOT SIMPLY ABANDON THOSE “IMPRECISE” CONCEPTS OF PRE-SYSTEMIC DISCOURSE

Given that the ordinary concepts in whose terms we communicate about our everyday experiences cannot serve traditional philosophy’s idealized demands, why not simply abandon them altogether in this domain? For good reason. To abandon them in favor of other concepts would have the serious drawback that in taking this course we effectively leave the traditional arena of philosophical discussion. For those “imperfect and imprecise” concepts provide the raw materials for philosophy and are an essential part of its concerns. The issues with which our philosophizing begins, and for the sake of whose understanding and elucidation it carries on its work, are taken in the first instance from the realm of experience. Those pre-systematic concepts characterize the ways in which we conceive of the experience which is the stuff of life—and thus ultimately the stuff of philosophy as well.

The concepts that figure centrally in philosophical discussions are always borrowed from everyday life or from its elaboration in science. The discussions of philosophy always maintain some connection to these pre-or extra-philosophical notions; they cannot simply rid themselves of those standard conceptions that are the flesh and blood of our thinking in everyday life. The philosopher’s “knowledge” and “ignorance”, his “right” and his “wrong” must be those of ordinary people—or at least keep very close to them. His “space” and “time” and “matter” must be those of the natural scientist. In abandoning the concepts of our pre-philosophical concerns in favor of word creations of some sort, the philosopher thereby also abandons the problems that constitute the enterprise’s very reason for being. To talk wholly in terms of technical concepts that differ from the ordinary ones as radically as the physicist’s concept of work differs from the plain man’s notion is in effect to change the subject. And whatever appeal this step may have, it is not one that we can take within the framework of the professed objective of a clarificatory analysis of philosophical issues. It is neither candid nor helpful to pass off the wolf of concept abandonment as the sheep of concept clarification. It would be a deeply mistaken procedure to practice conceptual “clarification” in such a manner as to destroy the very items we are purportedly clarifying.

Of course, philosophers are free to invent their own language and to introduce their own technical terminology. But if they are to use it for communicating with the rest of us, they must explain it to us, and this is some-
thing they have to do in a language that we can understand, in our lan-
guage—the language of everyday life. It is gearing to the normal, ordinary
course of things means that the concepts of everyday life—and those of
philosophy with them—resist the introduction of surgical precision. They
lack that merely abstract integrity of purely conceptual coherence that
alone could enable them to survive in the harsh light of theoretical clarity.

The issues that constitute philosophy’s prime mission are not—at bot-
tom—technical matters domestic to the field itself. They are issues that
arise in the conditions of everyday life and in the sciences; question not, to
be sure, within but rather about these domains of experience. Without
them, philosophy would lose its point, its very reason for being. The tech-
nical issues of philosophy are always a means toward extra-philosophical
ends. We address philosophical issues to resolve further issues that enable
us to resolve yet further issues, and so on, until at last we arrive back at
questions posed in the pre-philosophical *lingua franca* of experience. What
makes philosophy the enterprise it is is its connectability to the pre-systemic
issues of our experiential world, that are the very reason for being of our
philosophical concerns.

All philosophical deliberation—theoretical and practical alike—are
rooted in the pre-theoretical standards (cognitive, practical, moral, etc.). By
their very pre-theoretical nature the fundamental ideas involved are them-
selves not up to the demands of theoretical precision. However, task of phi-
osophical elucidation is not to abolish these but to clarify them and to
harmonize them in the best realizable way. Such explanations enable us to
become self-comprehending—we now know better what before we saw
only through a glass, darkly. It clarifies, energizes, and to some extent ra-
tionalizes and reforms our pre-systematic ideas, beliefs, and commitments,
but it does not—cannot—abrogate them. (Nor can it provide them with an
external, altogether “presupposition free” basis or foundation for their jus-
tification.)

The philosopher cannot at one and the same time practice his craft and
forsake the everyday and scientific conceptions that provide the stage set-
ing of his discipline. The philosopher is thus caught between a rock and a
hard place—unable to accept those experientially biased conceptions of
pre-philosophical usage wholly at face value, and yet unable to live with-
out them either because the core problems of the field take their root and
draw their life from them.

If the deliberations of philosophy were not interconnected with those of
human experience through a process of conceptual interlinkage, then they
would become *pointless*. The philosopher’s claim to address the problems that arise and are initially posed in our pre-philosophical conceptions would ring hollow if the results he achieves had no discernible relationship to them. To cease to ask about the value of the world, about humanity’s place in the scheme of things, and about our interrelations with our fellows is to give up the very project at issue. To abandon those big questions that arise in the context of our empirical interaction with the world is to abandon philosophy itself. The very reason for being of the philosophical enterprise lies in its historic mission of making us to resolve our questions about the world as they actually arise—in terms of the concepts and categories of everyday life. To abandon this enterprise is to “change the subject”—and while positivistically minded philosophers have, in all times and places, advocated just this, it is a course that is at odds with the palpable interest and importance of the issues.

Technical philosophy accordingly no more *abolishes* that ultimate level of pre-philosophically experiential issues than scientific medicine *abolishes* those pre-scientific symptoms and disabilities toward whose management its efforts are ultimately directed. Philosophers need to have recourse to the terminology of experience in everyday life and in science since this provides the ultimate terms of reference for philosophical deliberations. Maintaining connection with these pre-systemic issues (and thereby with the conceptual framework in whose terms they are articulated) is essential to the project of providing a basis for understanding the world we live in. For philosophical deliberations to lose their bearing upon the issues that can be posed in the pre-systemic *lingua franca* of human experience would be to become *irrelevant*.

In its explanatory endeavors, philosophy is thus continuous with the empirical domain of ordinary experience from which its issues ultimately emerge. And to connect with these experience-oriented questions of science and quotidian life, we must keep in contact with the concepts in whose terms they are posed. Of course, as its work gets well under way, philosophy eventually becomes increasingly specialized and technical. It turns to issues needed to address further issues themselves arising out of those critical concerns. And so it distances itself from the concepts in whose terms we discuss our pre-philosophical experience of things and only talks about matters required for talking about matters needed for talking about things. At the level of doctrine—of contentions and answers—there is eventually an increasing remoteness and thus little if any overlap between the discourse of technical philosophy and that of ordinary life. But
at the level of question-resolution some thread of substantive linkage, some filiation of relevancy to our pre-systematic concerns, will always be present. The relevance of philosophy as a source of useful insight into the problems regarding the world we live in hinges crucially on this connection with the familiar world of our experience, on this realistic intent to deal—in the final analysis—with the issues we ordinarily encounter in experience.

One should not, to be sure, try to maintain this sort of conceptual conservatism in science. Why then should the situation be so different in philosophy? For the simple and sufficient reason that in philosophy it is *understanding* pure and simple that is of prime concern to us (gaining insight with respect to our pre-systematic questions), while the characterizing concerns of science is very different, something that lies in the range of *praxis* in focusing on the issues of successful prediction and interaction—or cognitive and operational control. This difference between our “merely epistemic” and our “largely practical” concerns is of paramount significance in amounting for the difference between the position of the philosopher and that of the scientist. (And it explains, for example, why in quantum physics one is perfectly happy—and perfectly entitled—simply to turn one’s back on the principles of our ordinary, everyday conception of the world’s *modus operandi*, something that the philosopher is simply not in a position to do.)

There is, of course, the prospect of ceasing to bother about those pre-systematic concepts. A theoretician of “enlightenment”—or of consciousness elevation—may indeed urge us to abandon those everyday concepts as somehow misguided and misleading. Such a step could perhaps be urged on grounds of shifting our ideas onto a less conservative, more sophisticated plane. But it could certainly not be taken in an effort to persuade us to improve the practice of philosophy and to help us to engage in its pursuit in a more rigorous and cogent way. For in abandoning those pre-systematic concepts we also take the more radical course of abandoning philosophy itself, seeing that the mission-definitive questions of the field are formulated in their terms.

To be sure, this radical prospect of abandoning philosophy exists—a prospect which sceptics have urged upon us since classical antiquity.¹₀ But this is an option whose price is not inexpensive. The fact is that we humans have a very real and material stake in securing viable answers to our questions as to how things stand in the world we live in. In situations of cognitive frustration and bafflement we cannot function effectively as the sort of creature nature has compelled us to become. Confusion and ignorance—
even in such “theoretical” and “abstruse” matters as those with which phi-
losophy deals—yield psychic dismay and discomfort. The old saying is
perfectly true: philosophy bakes no bread. But it is also no less true that
man does not live by bread alone. The physical side of our nature that im-
pels us to eat, drink, and be merry is just one of its sides. *Homo sapiens*
requires nourishment for the mind as urgently as nourishment for the body.
We seek knowledge not only because we wish, but because we must. For
us humans, the need for information, for knowledge to nourish the mind, is
every bit as critical as the need for food to nourish the body. Cognitive va-
cuity or dissonance is as distressing to us as hunger or pain. We want and
need our cognitive commitments to comprise an intelligible story, to give a
comprehensive and coherent account of things. Bafflement and igno-
rance—to give suspensions of judgment the somewhat harsher name they
deserve—exact a substantial price.

The quest for cognitive orientation in a difficult world represents a
deeply practical requisite for us. That basic demand for information and
understanding presses in upon us and we must do (and are pragmatically
justified in doing) what is needed for its satisfaction. Knowledge itself ful-
fills an acute practical need. And this is where philosophy comes in, in its
attempt to grapple with our basic cognitive concerns. The impetus to phi-
losophy lies in our very nature as rational inquirers: as beings who have
questions, demand answers, and want these answers to be as cogent as the
circumstances allow. Cognitive problems arise when matters fail to meet
our expectations, and the expectation of rational order is the most funda-
mental of them all. The fact is simply that we must philosophize; it is a
situationally imperative for a rational creature such as ourselves.

Philosophy thus cannot simply abandon these pre-philosophical every-
day-life concepts that have emerged to reflect our experience. And its need
to retain them militates powerfully on behalf of standardism. For those
concepts and categories are deeply entrenched in our view of how things
normally go in the world. There is no viable alternative to accommodating
the presuppositional needs of our everyday concepts in the deliberations of
philosophy. Given the origin and nature of its questions, philosophy just
cannot escape coming to terms with the commitment of our concepts to the
ordinary and normal course of things as experience presents it to us. The
development and the interpretation of a philosophical position has to un-
fold against the background of what constitutes an experience in the
broader and more inclusive sense of this term.¹¹
NOTES


2 The reasons for this situation and the modalities of its management is examined in detail in the author’s *The Strife of Systems* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985).

3 Some of the considerations of this section are dealt with in greater detail in the author’s *Metaphilosophical Inquiries* (Princeton, 1993).


5 This is least clear with respect to those philosophical theories that address issues of “pure” mathematics and logic—those at work meta-mathematics and meta-logic, and those appertaining to regions very far removed from our everyday experience of the physical world. But they are not, of course, comparably removed from the realm of our conceptualizing experience. The objects of mathematics (numbers and structures) may have no “natural history”—but this is clearly not the case with respect to our conceptualizing thought about such objects.


7 A standardism true to its own spirit cannot, of course, insist on the rigid impossibility of ever securing necessary truths.

8 Not only have all attempts at providing such “absolute” foundations failed, but they are in fact predestined to fail. Any attempt to articulate such a validating theory can make sense only in the setting of a pre-established standard of adequacy and thus widen the framework of those very pre-theoretical standards that we are allegedly trying to validate. We can neither theoretically validate those pre-theoretical standards nor yet dispense with them, and recognizing this status of affairs is a part of what philosophical wisdom is all about.

9 On these issues see the section on “Ideal Language Philosophy versus Ordinary Language Philosophy” in the introduction to Richard Rorty’s anthology, *The Linguistic Turn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

10 For a more recent version see Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

11 For further detail in some of this chapter’s issues see the author’s *Philosophical Standardism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994).