Chapter 4

THE AGENDA
What Issues Are to Figure in Philosophical Deliberations?

1. UNEXAMINED ISSUES AND AGENDA CONSTITUTION

The agenda of philosophy has undergone a massive transformation in the course of the 20th century. But philosophers themselves have taken little note of this. It seems that everyone has been so preoccupied with their own particular bit of philosophizing that they have seldom looked to see the collective ground shifting under their feet.

Any domain of informative deliberation or discussion gives rise to two major sectors: the procedural and the substantive. The former consists most prominently of the agenda, the range of problems, questions, and issues that are addressed. The later consists primarily of its position—the range of answers, theses, doctrines that are proposed with respect to the problems. Both sectors are crucial to the overall enterprise, but the former question-oriented realm is, if anything, even more so because one only reaches the second, answer-oriented realm through its mediation. This generally pervasive state of affairs obtains in philosophy as decidedly as everywhere. For in base of any philosopher’s doctrines and contentions (duly supported by reasons and arguments, as the nature of the subject demands) there lies the matter of the range of problems and issues addressed.

Aristotle’s extensive writings have little to say regarding the philosophy of history and the epistemology of historiography. Descartes tells us nothing about the proper organization of the state and the constitution of a just society. Various philosophical issues simply do not figure in the writings of certain philosophers.

What is one to make of such silence? It can, clearly occur for very different sorts of reasons, among which the following are prime prospects:

• In the philosopher’s day the issue had not yet been invented as a topic for philosophical discussion. (Political philosophy did not exist in Pre-socratic thought prior to the Sophists.)
• The philosopher lacked time or interest, regarding other issues as being of higher priority. (Kant did not discuss the philosophy of medicine, e.g., the ethics of cloning.)

• The philosopher believed that the issue does not deserve consideration, being pointless, meaningless, or otherwise inappropriate. (Hume maintained silence on most issues of traditional metaphysics.)

In the work of individual philosophers, particular issues can accordingly be unrecognized (unseen), unprized (discounted), or dismissed (abandoned).

The first mode of issue neglect is the least interesting since its rationale is wholly extra-philosophical, entirely rooted in the contingencies of history. It is all too obvious that an issue, like an artifact, cannot be manipulated before it is invented. But the other two—discounting and dismissal—are philosophically more interesting. For they stand in need of defense. They would, ideally at least, call for taking an explicit and deliberate stance on the part of a conscientious inquirer. The question of just what is to figure on the agenda and what the relative priority of these items should be is itself clearly an appropriate, nay ultimately inevitable subject of philosophical deliberation. Moreover, knowing what question is being addressed—and its wider problem-context—is in general critical to understanding the purport of the discussion that is supposed to provide an answer.

Perhaps the most radical position with respect to the institution of philosophy’s agenda is that of classical scepticism. Since the days of Sextus Empiricus in classical antiquity, sceptics have taken the line that philosophy simply has no proper agenda at all—that philosophical issues are totally and altogether improper, illegitimate, intractable. David Hume’s position was similar though not quite as radical. Settling questions of matter of empirical fact and formal issues relating to mathematics and logic apart, he regarded the remaining discussion of the philosophers as pointless twaddle that should be consigned to the flames. Philosophy’s only proper job is to explain why this is so—to delineate and account for the powers and limits of the human understanding.

One of the most problematic and controverted issues regarding the agenda of philosophy is that of its boundaries with science. Some theorists take the view that philosophy is out of the picture once factual considerations enter in. As they see it, philosophy operates only in the realm of the a priori: whenever questions require factual materials for their satisfactory
resolution, then addressing them is “no longer doing philosophy”. Bertrand Russell in one of his frequent puckish moods described the situation of philosophy as follows:

As soon as definite knowledge concerning any subject becomes possible, this subject ceases to be called philosophy, and becomes a separate science. The whole study of the heavens, which now belongs to astronomy, was once included in philosophy; Newton’s great work was called “the mathematical principles of natural philosophy.” Similarly, the study of the human mind, which was a part of philosophy, has now been separated from philosophy and has become the science of psychology. ... Those questions which are capable of definite answers are placed in the sciences, while whose to which, at present, no definite answer can be given, remain to form the residue which is called philosophy.¹

Russell’s perspective projects an interesting prospect. In the eighteenth century “natural philosophy” (= physics) emigrated; in the nineteenth century “political philosophy” (economics); in the twentieth century “mental philosophy” (= psychology) and “linguistic philosophy” (= semantics). Perhaps epistemology, ethics, and the other branches of present day philosophy will eventually join the ranks of “definite knowledge” until philosophy comes to be out of a job altogether because all the problems will have been handed over to the positive sciences. Such a view of the situation in terms of an ongoing separation has it that philosophy’s agenda is subject to a continual contraction that will ultimately reduce it to the vanishing point.

But this outcome seems unlikely because theory and fact—philosophy and science—intermingle and interpenetrate in their bearing upon the big philosophical issues that arise within natural science, political philosophy, psychology, and other fields. After all, questions about the range and limits of our knowledge regarding the nature of physical reality, about the basis of authority of the state, about the nature of and requisites for human happiness, and the like—were put on the agenda in classical antiquity and are still with us, calling now, as ever, for the philosophical elucidation of fact-laden issues. In general, philosophical problems relate to matters of interpretation which the scientific facts pose rather than resolve.

A characteristic feature of philosophical agendas deserves notice and indeed stress. For with respect to any item there are always two questions: Is it or is it not on the agenda? And if it is on the agenda, with what priority rendering does it occur there? For there is, of course, a difference—indeed
Nicholas Rescher

a noteworthy and portentous difference—between the priority items that figure high up on the agenda and the less significant items that occur further down. An agenda is not only a collection of items but an ordered list that prioritizes some over others. And where distinct rankings are concerned there is no way to compromise by “splitting the difference”. Either A is a give a place prior to and more prominent than B or it is not. It may be possible to effect a compromise where different priority positions are concerned, but it lies in the nature of things that one cannot find a coordinative combination of them. Like oil and water, different priority schedules just do not mix.

Two rather different factors are at work in the matter of setting priority: importance and interest. The importance of a philosophical issue is evaluated in terms of how much lost by not having a correct answer to it—the difference that this absence makes in the larger scheme of things. Clearly, a great deal more turns on issues regarding the nature of rationality that hinge on matters in the philosophy of humor or of sport.

A problem’s interest, in contrast to its importance, merely reflects the personal or collective inclinations of those who concern themselves with the issues involved. Interest hinges on the personal—and potentially idiosyncratic—concerns of people; importance is something more objective and impersonal, something that involves making a real difference in the larger scheme of things. Still, the fundamentally evaluative issue of the criteria property to be used in measuring this difference is—by its very nature—an indelibly philosophical question. And so in this regard too, determining the agenda of philosophy has to be seen as part and parcel of the subject itself.

2. THE RECENT SCENE

Simply having a view of a philosopher’s agenda—and inventory of the questions and sub-questions that preoccupy him—tells volumes about that individual’s substantive position. For the agenda provides a strong indication of what sorts of thing the individual thinks interesting, important, and worthwhile.

The concern of philosophers for the subject’s agenda is vividly illustrated by the early 20th century’s penchant for agenda-reducing positions. Indeed most of the century’s major movements proposed reducing the agenda to nil. Logical positivism set out to eliminate virtually all of traditional philosophy and substitute natural science in its place. Analytic phi-
losophers and deconstructionists alike agreed with eliminationism, but opted for different replacements—the study of language in the former case and that of literature in the latter. Other schools, by contrast, were prepared to leave the subject more or less intact but fought for control of the agenda in ways that prioritized them in particular range of concern. Pragmatists—social concerns; feminists—woman’s issues; etc.

However, apart from such doctrine-infused views as to how the agenda of philosophy ought to be constituted there stands the doctrine-external issue of how the business of the subject is in fact being pursued by the wider community of philosophical writers at large. What is at issue here is not the philosophically doctrinal perspective of “what constitutes proper philosophizing” but a descriptively bibliographic perspective regarding what philosophers are actually doing. It is, accordingly, not evaluatively normative but a factually descriptive issue that belongs in the hands of the students of philosophy rather than in those of the philosophers themselves.

When we look at the issue of agenda formation from this descriptive point of view, what most strikingly comes to view is the fact of agenda explosion—an enlargement that has engendered a revolutionizing of the structure of philosophy itself by way of taxonomic complexification. It is clear, for example, that the contemporary picture of taxonomic lay of the land in North America philosophy is thus vastly more complex and ramified than anything that has preceded it. The taxonomy of the subject has burst for good and all the bounds of the ancient tripartite scheme of logic, metaphysics and ethics. Specialization and division of labor runs rampant, and cottage industries are the order of the day. The situation has grown so complex and diversified that the most comprehensive recent English-language encyclopedia of philosophy cautiously abstains from providing any taxonomy of philosophy whatsoever. (This phenomenon also goes a long way towards explaining why no one has written a comprehensive history of philosophy that carries through to the present-day scene.) Philosophy—which ought by mission and tradition to afford an integration of knowledge—has itself become increasingly complex to the point of disintegration.

This situation illustrates the most characteristic feature of contemporary English-language philosophizing: the emphasis on detailed investigation of special issues and themes. In particular, the rapid growth of “applied philosophy”—that is, philosophical reflection about detailed issues in science, law, business, social affairs, computerized information processing, and the like—is a striking structural feature of contemporary North American phi-
Nicholas Rescher

In particular, the past three decades have seen a great proliferation of narrowly focused philosophical investigations of particular issues in areas such as economic justice, social welfare, ecology, abortion, population policy, military defense, and so on. For better or for worse, Anglophone philosophers have for much of the 20th century tended to stay away from large-scale abstract matters of wide and comprehensive scope, characteristic of the earlier era of Whitehead or Dewey, and nowadays incline to focus their investigations on issues of small-scale detail that relate to and grow out of those larger issues of traditional concern. The turning of philosophy from globally general, large-scale issues to more narrowly focused investigations of matters of microscopically fine-grained detail is a characteristic feature of American philosophy after World War II. Its flourishing use of the case-study method in philosophy is a striking phenomenon for which no one philosopher can claim credit—to a contemporary observer it seems like the pervasively spontaneous expression of “the spirit of the times”.

In line with the increasing specialization and division of labor, Philosophy has become increasingly technical in character. Philosophy historians are increasingly preoccupied with matters of small-scale philosophical and conceptual microdetail. And philosophical investigations make increasingly extensive use of the formal machinery of semantics, modal logic, compilation theory, learning theory, etc. Ever heavier theoretical armaments are brought to bear on ever smaller problem-targets in ways that journal readers will occasionally wonder whether the important principle that technicalities should never be multiplied beyond necessity have been lost sight of. There is certainly no doubt that the increasing technicalization of philosophy has been achieved at the expense of its wider accessibility—and indeed even to its accessibility to members of the profession. The growth of the discipline has forced it beyond the limits of feasible surveillance by a single mind. After World War II it becomes literally impossible for American philosophers to keep up with what their colleagues were writing. No single thinker commands the whole range of knowledge and interests that characterizes present-day American philosophy, and indeed no single university department is so large as to have on its faculty specialists in every branch of the subject. The field has outgrown the capacity not only of its practitioners but even of its institutions.

It is, accordingly, one of the ironies of twentieth century philosophy that while the first half of the century saw a proliferation of movements that
sought to reduce the agenda, the second half of the century in fact wit-
nessed an explosive expansion in the range of philosophical concerns.

3. METAPHILOSOPHY—A PART OF PHILOSOPHY ITSELF

Interestingly enough, this agenda-oriented issue of how the problem-
field of philosophy is constituted is itself a decidedly philosophical ques-
tion. And philosophy is almost unique in this respect. For here—and here
virtually alone—the problem of how the discipline is constituted is one that
belongs to the discipline itself. What the problems and issues of physics
are is not a physical question (although, of course, only physicists can prof-
itably deal with it). Nor is the question of what constitutes the subject-
matter of grammar itself a grammatical question. But—unlike these
cases—the question of what philosophy’s problems in fact are is a philoso-
phical question. What the proper mission of philosophy is is in fact one of
the definitive and most significant issues of the field. And this means that
metaphilosophy is a part and parcel of philosophy itself. The fact is that
the make-up of its question agenda is one of the definitive aspects of any phi-
losophical position, seeing that its agenda of questions is every bit as char-
acteristic of such a position as is the body of its contentions.

It is not only the substantive theses, theories, and doctrines that afford
insight into the make-up of a philosophical position, but no less important
and determinative are its views about the questions and issues—its concep-
tion of the make-up and priority structure of the philosophical agenda. And
this question of what the agenda of philosophy properly is—should actu-
ally be—is itself one of the crucial items on philosophy’s agenda. Metaphi-
losophy, after all, is a component of philosophy, and what philosophy is all
about and how it works (its nature, composition, methods, etc.) is itself an
important part of philosophy. This helps to explain why philosophers
commonly proceed from certain view of philosophical methodology—as
consisting in logico-linguistic analysis, factual reduction, hermeneutic ap-
praisal, etc.—to insist that issues not amenable to treatment by this tech-
nique simply do not belong on the agenda. (This in part is why no philoso-
pher can feel altogether comfortable saying something like “Such and such
an issue is really not very important in the larger scheme of things; it just
happens to be something I am interested in.”)

In fact, however, two different agendas are at issue: the normatively de-
defined agenda of issues that philosophy ought to consider, and the descrip-
tively defined agenda of issues that philosophers do in fact consider. And
in general the two go off in rather different directions. Indeed only for someone of the Hegelian persuasion that “the real is rational”—that what does happen in contexts of this sort is ipso facto normatively appropriate so that actuality here serves to determine propriety—will the two have to coincide. And such a coincidence would, clearly, itself simply reflect a certain particular philosophical position.

*Descriptive* metaphilosophy is not a part of philosophy at all. At this level we are dealing with a ranch of *factual* inquiry—with the history of philosophy and perhaps its sociology. It is a matter of the observational scrutiny of a certain enterprise within the wide framework of human intellectual endeavor. And this is primarily a branch of *historical* studies, not fundamentally dissimilar in spirit from that of characterizing the historical development of the conduct of warfare or of techniques of communication.

However, issues of how philosophy *should* be done—of significant *questions*, adequate *solutions*, and good *arguments*—is something very different.⁴ And, obviously, this *normative* metaphilosophizing regarding the *correct* or *appropriate* problems, methods, and theses of philosophy is always a part of philosophy itself. That a certain way of doing philosophy is appropriate, successful, effective, superior, or the like—that philosophy is *properly* done in a certain way—is patently a philosophical thesis. And this sort of substantive philosophical contention itself turns on matters of cognitive evaluation and is thus bound to be every bit as controversial as any other issue of the field. What philosophy might “really” be is resolvable only within the framework of a philosophical position and cannot be settled extraphilosophically.⁵ As Franz Kröner cogently put it: “The dialectic of ‘intraphilosophical’ and ‘extraphilosophical’ and of ‘theoretical’ with ‘atheoretical’ shows that given a finger philosophy at once takes the whole hand. It is an autonomous whole that provides its own boundaries.”⁶ The character of *genuinely* philosophical questions and the character of *successful* philosophical problem-solutions are thus themselves always potentially controversial issues of substantive philosophy.

The normative agenda represents a particular position’s view of the matter. But philosophy-at-large is of course something greater than any particular position: it has to include the whole gamut of such positions. And so its view of the agenda is bound to be larger. But “its view” of course here means “its view as constituted from the *descriptive* standpoint”. Philosophy-at-large does not—cannot—have any normative position. The taking of a doctrinal stance is—or thus as on any substantive philosophical issue—the exclusive prerogative of particular doctrinal posi-
tions. Philosophy-at-large takes no positions—only particular philosophical doctrines are able to do so. In philosophy as in politics there are only individual positions not collective ones—the community as a whole is too diversified, too balkanized for doctrinal coherence. We can say what philosophers teach, but not what philosophy teaches.

It is important to note that there is no possibility of reducing philosophy’s substantive agenda to zero. For the question of what philosophy’s agenda should be is always there. Even maintaining that it should be annihilated will—as long as not done dogmatically but rationally, i.e., philosophically—paradoxically yield an issue (viz. that of how philosophy is properly constituted) that figures upon philosophy’s agenda. The fact that metaphilosophy is part of philosophy itself—and, specifically, that the question of the sort of questions that philosophy should be asking is itself a philosophical question—means that the philosophical agenda will never be entirely empty.

Even the most agenda-restrictive of philosophers must—just exactly because they have taken the issue of agenda reduction in hand—preoccupy themselves with philosophical issues. A radical philosophical scepticism—of the sort that appealed to the Pyrrhonist theory sceptics of classical antiquity—is a self-defeating position because it allows itself no locus standi for the rational defense of its pivotal own stance. In endeavoring to support its own position by reasons and arguments it vitiates its own thesis that reasoning and argumentations are always futile and unproductive in such theoretical matters. However reluctant agenda-reductive thinkers may be to acknowledge the meaningfulness of philosophical problems, they have no rationally defensible alternative but to acknowledge and confront at least some of them.

4. THE POLITICAL DIMENSION: A STRUGGLE FOR OWNERSHIP

Every philosophical system or school of thought has its own characteristic practice regarding the subject’s agenda. The business of agenda setting in philosophy is by nature an ownership dispute—a battle for precedence or “right of way” of sorts when it comes to philosophical issues themselves. Controlling the agenda is a way of asserting a territorial claim in philosophy—of addressing the question: “Which doctrine’s devotees can assert dominance—to whom does the discipline property belong?” The natural bias to philosophers to shape—to gerrymander, if your prefer—the agenda so as to fit their own pet theories and give priority and precedence
to those issues that it views as doctrinally central. The long and short of it is that struggle for control of the agenda is itself one of the prime modes of philosophical conflict.

What constitutes successful philosophizing is accordingly a matter of (perfectly legitimate) philosophical dispute. Theses about the *appropriate* nature, issues, methods, standards, and goals of philosophy are always philosophical themselves. This, in fact, is one of the characteristic features of the field as perhaps the only intellectual discipline the question of whose own nature itself constitutes one of its key problems. Philosophy thus finds itself in a state of virtually *permanent* “foundation crisis” (*Grundlagenkrise*). There is always dispute and controversy about fundamentals. Neither method nor any other alternative resource provides a “neutral” Archimedean fulcrum for the weighing of philosophical issues. In particular there is no way of conjoining or combining philosophical agendas. For what is at issue is a matter of different principles and different value assessments. And there is no way to combine the view that A outranks B with one which has it that B outranks A.

The fact is that this sort of communal agenda is flatly incoherent. For given the plausibility and diversity of opinions within the community at large, the questions that will constitute its “agenda” will be based on incompatible presuppositions. After all, no initially coherent register of question can compare incompatibilities, as per:

- Since man’s mind is a machine, how is to that the illusion of free will can arise?

- How does the fact that moral judgments are objectively valid demonstrate the necessity of free will?

The question register of philosophy at large is not a coherent agenda but a mere catalogue.

The most striking feature of the community’s situation is disagreement on the issues’ lack of substantial conclusive means, that it does not offer an answer to the questions but a plurality of different and discordant answers. For the community need not (and will not) “make up its mind” among conflicting alternatives. This, however, is something the individual must do. The weight of rationality—of consistency and coordination—bears down upon the individual in a way that the community in its aggregate totality cannot and will not reflect.
The situation here is distinctly reminiscent of that of politics, and the fact is that philosophy at large exhibits a certain “political” aspect because the struggle to set philosophy’s question agenda is in effect a dispute for territorial dominance, a “turf war” of sorts. Philosophizing thus has an inescapable “political” (as it were) dimension. Philosophers would fain be in a position to dictate the agenda, taking the line (however discretely or even tacitly) that “my issues are the ones that have top priority”. To articulate a philosophical position is to engage in an imperialism of sorts. For half the battle, so to speak, lies in managing to set the agenda, to be in a position to determine the rules of conflict by delimiting the shape of the battlefield. Its declaration regarding some discussion that “this just isn’t really doing philosophy (as it should be done)” is in general deeply revelatory about the substance of any philosophical discussion.

5. THE SYSTEMIC DIMENSION

To be sure, philosophers do not like being reminded that the question of the agenda is itself out there as an object of concern. They like the comforting feeling that their own substantial position has already managed to settle all that. To have to defend not only its overt substance but also its implicit metaphilosophy is a task they do not welcome. But of course they cannot on good conscience avoid it, seeing that the inherent coordination between substance and agenda obviously renders such a tactic is of very doubtful legitimacy.

Philosophizing is an inherently reflective discipline. Here, if anywhere, we have to be concerned about what we are doing in the conscientious endeavor to provide a cogent rationale for doing it our way. And seeing that metaphilosophy is inescapably a part of philosophy itself—posing such concludes such synoptic issues as the mission of the enterprise and its overall question agenda—the conscientious philosopher has no alternative but to proceed systematically to assure the consonance of practice and theory, of doctrinal substance and methodological procedure.

This facet of the situation constitutes yet another valid reason why philosophy has to be developed systematically. The fully adequate development of any philosophical position has to take into view the holistic issue of how its own deliberations fit into the larger scheme of things. They should make manifest how its practice exemplifies rather than contradicts its proceedings and how its presuppositions manage to do justice to those issues which, of its own telling, are the most crucial. This business of
showing how its own deliberations fit into a proper understanding of the nature of things is a crucial part of philosophical systematization. Any philosophy that neglects it—that fails to provide a suitable rationale not only for its own doctrines but for its own modus operandi—does so at the price of its own adequacy.8

* * *

The salient lesson of such considerations regarding the agenda of philosophy is that philosophically significant questions have substantive philosophical presuppositions. The constitution of a philosophical agenda accordingly cannot be separated from position-taking in substantive philosophical matters. And so, how philosophers configure the manifold of issues that figure on their agenda provides a synoptic view of the doctrinal structure that they propose to take on the substantive issues of the field.

NOTES

1 Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), p. 240. Émile Boutroux similarly remarked earlier (in 1911) that once we have found a definitive resolution to a problem we thereby show, retrospectively as it were, that it was not a *philosophical* problem at all—it is the persistence of philosophical problems that marks them as such. Quoted in Franz Kröner, *Die Anarchie der philosophischen Systeme* (Leipzig: Ausg. Photomechan. Nachdr, 1929; rpt. Graz: Akadem. Druck- u. Verlagsanst, 1970), p. 185.


3 John Passmore’s *Recent Philosophers* (La Salle, 1985) is as close as anything we have, but—as the very title indicates—this excellent survey makes no pretensions to comprehensiveness. In this direction an earlier multi-person survey went somewhat further, exemplifying what is the best and most that one can hope to obtain: Roderick M. Chisholm et. al., *Philosophy: Princeton Studies of Humanistic Scholarship in America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964). Yet not only does this book attest to the fragmentation of the field—but it conveys (from its Foreword onwards) the defeatist suggestion that whatever larger lessons can be extracted from an historically minded scrutiny of the substantive diversity of the contemporary situation are destined to lie substantially in the eyes of the beholder.

4 This point is forcibly argued by Robert Nozick: “A metaphilosophy will be part of a total philosophical view rather than a separate neutral theory above the battle”
NOTES


5 This is the burden of Franz Kröner’s dictum that “there is no such thing as philosophy überhaupt” (*Die Anarchie*, op. cit., p. 59).

6 Ibid., p. 273.


8 This chapter draws upon an essay of the same title in the author’s *Philosophical Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 33-44.