Chapter 6

THE TYPOLOGY
Elements of Philosophical Taxonomy

1. THE KANTIAN BACKGROUND

One important resource of textual interpretation is afforded by classification in point of a descriptive taxonomy. Such pigeon-holing forms part of a larger project, one that roots in the post-Renaissance conception of systematicity in its orientation towards specifically cognitive or knowledge-organizing systems. The explicit theory of such cognitive systems was launched during the second half of the 18th century, and the principal theoreticians were two German contemporaries: Johann Heinrich Lambert (1728-1777) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). The practice of systematization that lay before their eyes was that of the great 17th-century philosopher-scientists: Descartes, Spinoza, Newton, Leibniz, and the subsequent workers of the Leibnizian school—especially Christian Wolff. The main use of the system-concept in all these later writers relates not to its application to material things, but to its specifically cognitive applications to the organization of human knowledge.

The use of a rationally coordinated taxonomy is of course a prime tool of such systematization. For this instrumentality makes it possible to coordinate various elements in a way that brings their cognitive interrelationships to light. Kant’s insistence on the a priori classification of the materials of any inquiry accordingly formed part and parcel of his generalized commitment to architectonic, to rational coordination. In this regard, as in so many others, Kant’s initial approach to issues reflects the position of the Wolffian school.

Among the cognitive disciplines that Kant insisted on viewing in this systemic and taxonomic light is philosophy itself. He was emphatically not content with a merely chronological and historical approach for the study of metaphysical doctrines, but prescribed that rational order should also be introduced into the historical proliferation of philosophical systems by means of a rationally explicated taxonomy of positions. The idea of a (philosophical) systematization of (philosophical) systems was a guiding factor in Kant’s thought and presently influenced the next generation.
Accordingly, in the section on “The Refutation of Idealism” of his first Critique, Kant elaborated a distinction between problematic, dogmatic, and transcendental idealism useful in distinguishing his own position from that of his predecessors. And in the section on the “History of Pure Reason”, he elaborated a tripartite cross-classification in line with three issues:

1. Do the objects of metaphysical concern become cognitively accessible to us through sensation (“sensualism”, e.g. Epicurus) or through reflection (“intellectualism”, e.g. Plato)?

2. Is our knowledge of these objects primarily based on experience (“empiricism”, e.g. Aristotle, Locke) or on reason (“rationalism”, e.g. Plato, Leibniz)?

3. Is the method of investigation by which the knowledge of these objects is established primarily one of observation (“naturalism” or “common sensism”, e.g. Reid) or is it a matter of scientific theorizing (“scientism”, e.g. Classical Atomism, Descartes, Leibniz)? This last, scientific approach, Kant further divided into his “dogmatism” (Wolff), “scepticism” (Hume) and the “criticalism” of his own position.

Note that these issues are all of a fundamentally epistemological nature, geared to the epistemology of metaphysical inquiry, an approach which typifies Kant’s recourse to cognitive mechanisms inherent in the resources of the human mind.

To be sure, Kant himself—being concerned in his own philosophy to abolish metaphysics rather than to categorize it—did not proceed very far with this venture. For Kant, the very process of classifying philosophical positions is, in a way, a discouraging exercise. It is a systematic survey all right, but a survey of the possibilities of error. From Kant’s own doctrinal standpoint, the history of metaphysical speculation provides no more than infinita philosophiae falsae exempla: the classificatory architectonic of metaphysics surveys alternative possible answers to questions that are based on false presuppositions. To Kant’s mind, the taxonomy of metaphysics ultimately represents the architecture of error—the construction of a building destined for collapse.

But where Kant’s own position towards metaphysical taxonomy was largely negative, his successors turned concern for systematization to a more positive direction.
2. THE COUNTER-REVOLUTION: TIEDEMANN

Kant’s younger contemporary Dietrich Tiedemann (1748-1803), who taught philosophy at Marburg, took a different line. A historian of philosophy endowed with a deep respect for the historical tradition, Tiedemann emphasized the importance of a comprehensive survey of alternative positions. Tiedemann saw himself as an improving continuator of the tradition of Jacob Brucker, an historian who had sought to present a comprehensive survey of alternative positions—based not on abstract principles of rational interconnection, but on a survey of the concrete historical kinships. Keenly opposed to any sort of aprioristic formalism, Tiedemann insisted on the need to use the actual course of historical development as our guide in devising a systematic survey of philosophical systems.

Against his Kantian critics, Tiedemann maintained that there is not (and perhaps never can be) any single set of appropriate standards for ordering or evaluating philosophical systems a priori, and held that the survey of such systems must consequently proceed on historical rather than rational principles: whatever classificatory order there is should emerge from the historical data rather than being imposed upon them ab extra from some aprioristic point of view. As Tiedemann saw it, the idea of a rational taxonomy of philosophical systems is an unattainable illusion, because—short of imposing our own philosophy on the historical facts—we have no prospect of having them back to some fundamental source inherent in the time spent as such. No extra-historical, purely natural point of view is available to us: no philosophical taxonomy is given absolutely by pure reason alone. Tiedemann accordingly rejected the Kantian approach root and branch.

3. A KANTIAN RENOVATOR: CARUS

Friedrich August Carus (1770-1807) taught philosophy in Leipzig. Though his death at a relatively early age deprived him of the opportunity to develop his ideas fully, his posthumous *Ideen zur Geschichte der Philosophie* (Leipzig, 1809) was an important and influential work. Following in Kant’s footsteps, he was not content with chronological treatment or historical periodization, but insisted on the quest for a strictly rational, substantively determined categorization.

For guidance here, Carus turned to Fichte, under whose influence he adopted as basis for classification the familiar tripartite scheme:
Applying this approach, Carus proceeded to classify philosophical positions in terms of the sort of answers that a metaphysical position gives to the fundamental questions of the field. The following sketch gives an idea of his approach:

(A) **What are the sources of knowledge?** Its ultimate source is

1. experience: Empiricism
2. reason: Rationalism
3. mixed: Electicism

(B) **How is knowledge related to its object?** The connection is such that

1. our knowledge is of things as they exist independently of our thought: Realism
2. our knowledge is of mere thought-things: Idealism
3. our knowledge is of real things but not as they really exist: Criticism

(C) **How diverse are the world’s building blocks?** They are

1. of one sort only (be it material or mental): Monism
2. of several sorts (e.g. the material and the mental): Dualism and Pluralism
3. unfathomable: Scepticism
(D) How pervasive is the causal relationship among things? It

1. is all-pervasive: Determinism

2. leaves room for the occasional intervention of chance and lapses from causality: Indeterminism

3. seems all-pervasive according to our historical thinking but is in fact a mere fiction (Hume): Causal Scepticism

The list can be prolonged (e.g. as regards such topics as the role of God, fate, free will, etc.) But the general idea is clear enough. The approach Carus endorsed begins with an inventory of the major issues and then proceeds to survey the possible alternative answers to these questions in the light of a tripartite division: yes/no/yes-and-no.

4. HEGEL

Carus sought to develop taxonomic principles in an endeavor to reveal rational order in the historic process. Hegel, in effect, carried this approach to an extreme. He saw the history of philosophy not as illustrating an underlying rational order, but as constituting such an order. To his mind, the temporal order of historical developments actually establishes a rational order, in that each stage or moment in a succession of historical values should be regarded as an element in a classification. Historical order provides rational order. Classification is to emerge from periodization. As Hegel saw it, the history of philosophy is the unfolding of a logical dynamic inherent in productive reason exfoliating in successive stages or phases the organic development of philosophical thought in a manner analogous to the development of a human being through infancy, childhood, and adolescence to maturity. Here, the taxonomic project is absorbed into the historical one: the successive stages or moments of historical development are simply reconceptualized as elements in a classification.

From the standpoint of taxonomy, this Hegelian approach represents a highly ambiguous development. For one can view it either (1) as a perfecting of the taxonomic project by implementing it in concrete application to historical materials, or (2) as an abandonment of the taxonomic project and its replacement by an historical periodization. From the second point of
view taxonomy simply disappears, being sunk without trace in the ocean of historiography.

5. THE RECOVERY OF TAXIS: DILTHEY AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TURN

With Dilthey too the history of metaphysics affords the key to its taxonomy—but in a manner very different from and explicitly antithetical to Hegel’s. For Dilthey rejects the idea of an orderly sequential progress through successive phases that is the mainstay of the Hegelian view. He regards the conflict between different systems not as a unified ebb and flow moving in the direction of a higher synthesis, but as a real, persistent, and ineliminable conflict. Where Hegel envisioned an eventual supercession of conflict in a coherent unity imposed by reason in its inexorable movement towards a single coherent, all-embracing system, Dilthey held that there are three incomparable styles or approaches to philosophical thought:

naturalism: reality is seen in thing-oriented terms, as a matter of inert constituents functioning in complex but essentially “mechanical” interaction. [Physical agency provides the key to metaphysical understanding.]

subjective idealism: the idealism of individual free agency [The will of human beings provides the key to metaphysical understanding.]

objective idealism: the idealism of a universal, impersonal reason at work in nature [Reason provides the key to metaphysical understanding.]

Dilthey regarded these three approaches as metaphysical perspectives or positions that have pervaded the history of philosophy from its beginning and will persist ineliminably throughout the future. As he saw the matter, no one of these approaches will ever prevail to the exclusion and destruction of the rest. For the reality is too complex and many-sided to constitute a coherent systemic whole. There is always room for discordant tendencies of thought. Systems are diverse because they are expressions of human nature and human nature is diverse. Even as the world of human action contains and combines people of very different personalities without any ulti-
mate unification, so the world of human thought contains and combines systems of different commitments without any prospect of ultimate unification.

At this stage of the deliberations, it became sensible to see the diversity of philosophical thought as rooted in the diversity of philosophizing thinkers. And this invites the transition to a psychological approach. This invitation was soon accepted.

With the emergence of scientific psychology in the latter part of the 19th century, several theorists sought to classify metaphysical positions on the basis of the psychological attitudes or orientations that incline people in their favor. Various theorists came to envision a taxonomy of philosophical positions in terms of the temperament and psychological disposition of the people who are “naturally drawn” to such a position.

Perhaps, the most familiar instance of this approach is William James’ distinction between the “tough minded” and the “tender minded” approaches to philosophical positions.8

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<tr>
<th>The Tender-Minded</th>
<th>The Tough-Minded</th>
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<td>Rationalistic (going by “principles”), Intellectualistic, Idealistic, Optimistic, Theistic, Voluntaristic (free-willist), Monistic, Dogmatical.</td>
<td>Empiricist (going by “facts”), Sensationalistic, Materialistic, Pessimistic, Atheistic, Fatalistic, Pluralistic, Sceptical.</td>
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James’ idea is that pragmatism (and “pragmatic mindedness”) provides us with a third option—a mediating alternative. His philosophical outlook operates in a world without extremism: its principle is the idea that wherever one can draw a clear contrast between radically opposed philosophical options, the truth lies somewhere in between.

6. THE ENCYCLOPEDIC TURN

A variant major impetus to taxonomy in metaphysics proceeds not from the internal requirements of philosophizing itself, or the historical survey of philosophical teachings, but from encyclopedism—the endeavor to provide an impartially externalized description of the discipline. A good ex-
ample of this approach is afforded by the article on “Metaphysics” in Rudolf Eisler’s *Handwörterbuch der Philosophie*. Eisler’s classification of positions is based on an inventory of the basic questions (Grundprobleme) that define the tasks of the discipline, followed by a blocking out of the possible answers to their questions:

1. What is the character of the basic building-blocks of nature?
   - uni-modal: Monism
     - matter as basic: Materialism
     - mind as basic: (Spiritualism)
     - as compositional basis (psychologistic reductionism, panpsychism) [Berkeley]
     - as explanatory basis (explanatory idealism) [Kant]
     - as provider of the basic building blocks, namely ideas (thoughts as basic): Idealism, a neutral, mixed basis (Neutral Monism)
   - bi-modal: Dualism
     - mind/matter dualism
   - multi-modal: Pluralism

2. Is there a God— and if so what is His nature?
   - Atheism
   - Theism
   - Monotheism
   - Polytheism
   - Pantheism
3. How are natural occurrences interrelated?

— Causal determinism
— Mechanism
— Purposive determinism (Teleologism)
— Indeterminism
— in nature (“chance”)
— in man (“free will”)

4. Is there a place for value in nature?

— yes (Axiological Realism)
— no (Positivism; Axiological Nihilism)
— only insofar as it is man-made (Naturalism)

On this basis, a taxonomy of positions is developed by making an inventory of the main questions of the field, and then surveying the range of possible answers.

What differentiates this encyclopedist approach and renders it more bearable than the aprioristic approach of the Wolff-Kant tradition is its grounding in the interest problem-structure of metaphysics, which is relatively secure, rather than in the epistemology of metaphysical inquiry, which is inherently contestable.

7. ORDER BY ONTOLOGICAL PARADIGM: S. C. PEPPER’S ROOT METAPHORS

An interesting departure from the traditional lines of approach to the taxonomy of metaphysics is afforded by S. C. Pepper’s theory of “root metaphors”. Pepper regards traditional metaphysics as based on a family of fundamental modals or analogies. He envisions basic alternatives according to the analogy-model for the metaphysical description of nature as
Nicholas Rescher

an (inert) thing, a machine, a process, or an organism. Accordingly, there are four root metaphors and four major modes of metaphysical doctrine:

1. “Formism” based on the metaphor-model of thing and thing-kind—of types, sorts, classes considered by likeness relations. Resemblance (similarly) as the organizing principle.

2. “Mechanism” based on the metaphor-model of a machine and its laws of operation. Behavioral pre-programming of operation as the organizing principle.

3. “Contextualism.” Events and processes as the metaphor model. Temporal occurrence as the organizing principle.

4. “Organicism.” Organisms and their functioning as the metaphor model. Integrative interrelation as the organizing principle.

Pepper’s approach is interesting and suggestive, but not altogether satisfying. Its development is simply too fortuitous. The question of why these four and not others is not addressed by him—let alone cogently resolved. Pepper’s theory represents an attempt at systematization that is not systematic enough. In theory, every discovery of a new type of thing (for example, a subatomic particle with quantum behavior) provides a new possible basis for a “root metaphor”.

A somewhat more systematic implementation of Pepper’s “root metaphor” approach might begin with an ontological classification of objects characterized by different modes of comportment—different types of action and reaction that things may exhibit:

Inert things and thing-kinds (mechanical action)
Organisms (biological action)
People (thought, intelligent agency)
Societies/Groups of people (social interaction)
Processes (activities performed by things, agencies, or people):
Process Philosophy

Artifacts/Products of the agency of organisms or people

— Physical: Machines

— Intellectual: Thoughts

And at this stage one can now project—in line with the “root metaphor” idea—a spectrum of metaphysical theories according to which item on the preceding list provides the explanatory analogue for comprehending the furnishings/process of nature. This would elaborate Pepper’s four-fold root-metaphor basis into the more elaborate seven-sided array:

Inert things: MATERIALISM (e.g. Democritus)

Organisms: ORGANICISM (e.g. Aristotle)

People: PANPSYCHISM (e.g. Berkeley)

Societies: MONADISM (e.g. Leibniz)

Processes: PROCESS PHILOSOPHY (e.g. Whitehead)

Artifacts:

— Machines:

Teleological theism (The physical world as God’s clockwork): DEISM (Descartes, Newton) or

A theological mechanism (The physical world as a “grown”, self-developed machine): MECHANISM (e.g. Laplace)

— Thoughts: IDEALISM (e.g. Plato)

But the difficulty with the whole approach is now clear: namely the need for a classificatory basis for its “root metaphor” scheme. A metaphysical
commitment is thus presupposed. And this means that the entire root metap- 
phor approach is ultimately a blind alley for rational taxonomy.

8. A REPRISE OF THE EROTETIC APPROACH

There is good reason to think that the most satisfactory approach to the 
issue of a rational taxonomy of metaphysical positions is to be found along 
the direction of the encyclopedic approach envisioned by Carus. Here we 
begin by inventorying “the fundamental questions of the discipline”—the 
issues whose consideration defines the constituting mandate of the field as 
the particular intellectual discipline it is (in contrast, say, to geology or 
economics)—questions such as:

(1) What is the definitional character of being or existence? What, in 
general, is it to be or exist?

(2) What is the descriptive nature of being in the abstract, of “being qua 
being”? How is existence-in-general to be described and under- 
stood?

(3) What is the classificatory taxonomy of being or existence? What 
kinds of existents are there?

(4) What is the descriptive mechanism for characterizing existence? 
What is concept-machinery approaches to the description and/or 
classification of existence, the “category scheme” for its discus- 
sion?

(5) What is the basic form of being? Is there one sort existent that gives 
rise to the rest?11

(6) How does that which is come to be known?

An inventory of the central problems of metaphysics would thus involve 
the description, classification, explanation, and evaluation of existence—
together with the classification of the terms of reference and standards of 
procedure by whose means these several tasks are accomplished. In conse- 
quence, apart from the meta-metaphysical characterization of the discipline 
itself, four distinct major metaphysical projects are envisioned: descriptive
metaphysics, taxonomic metaphysics, evaluative metaphysics, categorical metaphysics. Unlike the root metaphor approach, this sort of taxonomy does pivot the issue on something that can itself only be the end product of metaphysical inquiry, but on something that has to be there from the very first— the domain-defining questions that from the very outset delineate the project of metaphysics as the particular project that it is.

With a question-inventory in hand, the classification of doctrinal position of the field hinges on surveying the general sort of answers that can be given to its various questions. For example, as regards question (1) above, one would enumerate theories that see existence to lie in:

— having a position in space/time (being an ostensively indicatable “this”)
— having a position in time
— acting upon and causing effects among things having a position in space/time
— being a product of the activities of things having a position in space/time
— etc.

To be sure, once one adopts a particular position with respect to these questions— say atomism on the question of basic existents— then the problem of the nature of the atoms arises on one’s metaphysical agenda, in a way that it would not do if one were an idealist and rejected physical atoms. But that doesn’t matter from the angle of the taxonomy of positions. For clearly, the classificatory venture proceeds on a hypothetical basis: “If one is an atomist, then the question of the nature of the atoms must be confronted.” (In classifying positions we need not adopt them.) Of course, on this approach there is no tidy, limited overall register of positions of the sort one would secure on a root metaphor approach. The taxonomy of positions becomes as diversified and complex as the range of questions that can arise in the field. Taxonomy becomes as untidy in philosophy as it has become in science.

In conclusion, it is of interest to note that one can also devise a metataxonomy to survey the range of taxonomic approaches to the classification of metaphysical positions. The result could stand somewhat as follows:
I. A priori classifications

A. Geared to the epistemology of metaphysical investigation. (Kant)

B. Geared to the range of models, metaphors or paradigms available for use in the projection of metaphysical world-views. (Pepper)

C. Geared to the problematic of the discipline—the range of questions that constitute its problem-mandate as an area of inquiry. (Carus, Encyclopedism)

II. A posteriori classifications

A. Geared to the successive developmental influences among the various historically developed positions. (Hegel)

B. Geared to the substantive correspondences and similarities among the various historically developed positions. (Tiedemann)

C. Geared to the psychological orientation of those who proposed (or espouse) the various historically developed positions. (Dilthey, James)

As this inventory suggests, the taxonomy of philosophical taxonomies cannot be completed. For the prospect of further development on the a posteriori side cannot be precluded on general principles of any kind. Philosophy demands conceptual innovations and there is no way to canalize this sort of novelty in advance of the fact.

NOTES

1 His theory of systems is set out by Lambert in various essays (including the brief Fragment einer Systematologie [with parts dated 1767 and 1771], Theorie des Systems [1782] and Von den Lücken unserer Erkenntnis [c. 1785]. Lambert’s philosophical writings were issued by J. Bernoulli (ed.), Johann Henrich Lambert: Logische und Philosophische Abhandlungen, two vols. (Berlin, 1782 and 1787; reprinted Hildesheim, 1967, ed. by H. W. Arndt).
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5 Especially in his six volume history of the *Spirit of Speculative Philosophy* (*Geist der speculativen Philosophie* [Marburg, 1791-1797]). On Tiedemann see Lucien Braun, op. cit., pp. 189 ff.


7 Lucien Braun, op.cit., pp. 252 ff.


11 This particular list is taken from the *Disputationes Metaphysicae* (1597) of Francisco Suarez.