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The Four Points of the Compass¹

JAMES ALEXANDER

Abstract

Philosophy has four forms: wonder, faith, doubt and scepticism. These are not separate categories, but separate ideal possibilities. Modern academic philosophy has fallen, for several centuries, into an error: which is the error of supposing that philosophy is only what I call doubt. Philosophy may be doubt: indeed, it is part of my argument that this is undeniably one element of, or one possibility in, philosophy; but doubt is only one of four points of the compass. In this essay I indicate the nature of each point of the compass as it has been found in the history of philosophy.

Philosophy is no longer, if it ever was, simply philosophy. It is, and has been since Hegel, a recapitulation of the entirety of the history of philosophy – even if a philosopher resist this truth, as Heidegger did, or ignore it, as Wittgenstein did. Deleuze and Guattari recently suggested that philosophy is ‘the coexistence of planes, not the succession of systems’.² If this is so, it seems valuable – at a time when philosophy is usually studied from within the middle of its own problems – to attempt to put forward a capacious account of what philosophy is – one which, I argue, can do justice to the varieties of philosophy seen in the entirety of history.

It is worth beginning with what philosophy is not.

Once upon a time all the world spoke a single language and used the same words. As men journeyed in the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks and bake them hard’; they used bricks for stone and bitumen for mortar. ‘Come’, they said, ‘let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and make a name for ourselves; or we shall be dispersed all over the earth.’ Then the LORD came down to see the city and tower which mortal men had built, and he said, ‘Here

¹ This essay, written in Downing College, Cambridge in April 2011, is indebted to the writings cited below, but perhaps especially to the writings of D.C. Stove and S.R.L. Clark. They have suggested to me that breadth is still possible in modern philosophy – something I had begun to doubt.

² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 59.

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accompanied faith down the ages: that the truth of faith is 'something which, for all its incomprehensibility, is still comprehensible'.³⁹

The problem of faith is how something not of this world can come into this world. The word divides the world into good and evil, true and false etc. But it raises the problem of how a single, eternal and unchanging God can have a relation to the world. McTaggart argued that if God causes change, and the law of causation is that anything which causes change is itself changed, then a changeless God could not come into the world. 'We must therefore suppose that God causes change without changing.'⁴⁰ For McTaggart this and other contradictions made faith untenable. 'Most people have no right to accept any religion as true'.⁴¹

But this could never be the end of the discussion. For within faith – as within scepticism – a contradiction is not a refutation. 'It is absurd,' said Tertullian, 'so I believe it.' Williams, when reflecting on Tertullian's claim, commented that there is 'a sort of inherent and necessary incomprehensibility, which seems to be a feature of Christian belief'. He added: 'If the Christian faith is true, it must be partly incomprehensible, but if it is partly incomprehensible, it is difficult to see what it is for it to be true.'⁴² McTaggart and Williams came to an impasse because they considered faith from the point of view of doubt. But within faith the contradiction may be embraced. According to Soloviev, 'The truly one is that which does not exclude plurality, but on the contrary produces that plurality within itself and yet is by no means changed by it, but remains what it is, remains one and thereby proves that it is unconditionally one.'⁴³ Of course, to state a contradiction is not to understand it. But Collingwood saw, as McTaggart did not, that the correct way of understanding faith is to see that it is not expressed in terms of claims such as 'God exists', but in terms of claims such as *Credo in unum deum*, or 'I believe God exists'. For Collingwood one could never treat 'God exists' as a proposition.⁴⁴

³⁹ Karl Barth, 'Bultmann – An Attempt to Understand Him', *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London: S.P.C.K., 1962), 83–132 at 99.

⁴⁰ J.M.E. McTaggart, *Some Dogmas of Religion* (London: Edward Arnold, 1906), 194.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁴² Bernard Williams, 'Tertullian's Paradox' (1955), in *op. cit.* note 21, 3–21, at 3, 20.

⁴³ Vladimir Solovyov, *Lectures on Godmanhood* ed. Peter Zouboff (London: Dennis Dobson, 1948), 133.

⁴⁴ R.G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford, 1940), 188.