THE QUESTION OF PHILOSOPHY

What are we doing when we philosophize? Are we trying to increase our understanding of things, to gain knowledge, to say what is true? Well then, is such knowledge possible? Are the judgments that philosophers most characteristically make open to validation, to being shown to be valid or true? If they are not, what other purpose or value do such philosophical judgments serve?

Recent Western philosophy has raised this nest of fundamental questions with three critiques. It has questioned foundationalism, thereby undermining the possibility of the kind of ultimately justified, "foundational" knowledge that philosophy, it is alleged, traditionally sought as a bulwark against skepticism. It has questioned realism, the family of accounts of human knowledge that assert that knowledge captures things as they really are, independent of our knowledge of them. Antirealism and antifoundationalism have together paved the way for antiphilosophy. Antiphilosophy identifies foundationalism with philosophy so thoroughly as to reject the legitimacy of philosophy altogether or, at least, of anything resembling traditional or pre-twentieth century philosophy.

Other than those stalwarts who defend traditional foundationalism and realism in an unreconstructed form, the main philosophical alternative to antiphilosophy has sought to adapt to the antifoundationalist critique, to defend a nonfoundationalist yet otherwise traditional, realist philosophy. The attempt is to absorb the pounding from recent philosophical radicalism, to bend but not break in the critical wind. It is fueled by a new spirit of common-sensism that draws strength both from the recent renaissance of pragmatism and the reaction against the perceived extravagance of antiphilosophical radicalism.
What follows is based on three convictions that I will try to justify. The first is that the implications of antifoundationalism and antirealism are more radical than is usually supposed. They are too radical to be domesticated by the new common-sensism. When given the respect they deserve they cannot be harmonized with anything like the traditional notion of philosophy as achieving ultimate knowledge. The second is that philosophy is inescapably foundationalist. This is not to say that every philosophy is foundationalist or that every task and problem under the umbrella of philosophy is foundationalist. It is to say that if all vestiges of foundationalism were removed, then philosophy would be unrecognizable. The third conviction will be described shortly.

The critique of philosophy is not new; philosophy has been in question for a long time. The first recorded example of antiphilosophy in what we call the Western tradition occurred sometime in the early sixth century B.C. in the Greek-speaking region of what is now Turkey. Thales, a philosopher of nature who is claimed to have correctly predicted an eclipse in 585 B.C., became the target of ridicule recounted in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, when, “a witty and attractive Thracian servant-girl is said to have mocked Thales for falling into a well while he was observing the stars and gazing upwards; declaring that he was eager to know the things in the sky, but that what was behind him and just by his feet escaped his notice.”

There have, of course, been worse forms of insult, as the Athenians demonstrated in the case of Socrates. Since the *Apology* of Plato, which presents Socrates’s defense at his trial, philosophy has regarded the demonstration of its own legitimacy as part of its work. And, as that first defense of philosophy shows, the job has not gone well.

What is remarkable in our century is the abundance of criticism of philosophy by philosophers and hence, the creation of antiphilosophy as virtually a new philosophical genre. There are certainly varying degrees of comprehensiveness here. Philosophers have always criticized each other. But if a criticism of a philosophical school goes so deep as to deny the legitimacy of a whole area of philosophy, that begins to become an attack on philosophy per se. Such has been commonplace in the twentieth century. But antiphilosophy has gone still further, literally to call for, in the words of Richard Rorty, a “post-Philosophical culture.”

The question we will try to answer is straightforward enough: Can characteristically philosophical judgments be validated, and if so, in what sense of validity? The reason for the vague term *validity*,
as opposed to truth, is that, as we will see, it may be possible to claim that philosophical judgments can be valid in some sense other than being true; for example, they may be practically necessary, or beneficial, or beautiful. The practice of philosophy may be valid or cognitively valuable as a negative “edifying” process of undermining belief and promoting creative change. These are possible answers to the question of the validity of philosophy. But, first things first, we must determine whether philosophy can attain validity in the sense of making judgments we can know to be true. (So, unless context indicates otherwise, by valid I will mean true.)

Contemporary antiphilosophy denies that it can. This denial takes three forms which are not always distinguished. First, it is claimed that characteristically philosophical judgments cannot be known to be true. This is usually argued on the basis of an antirealist account of knowledge that makes truth or validity dependent on certain conditions which philosophical judgments do not meet. An example is contextualism, which makes the validity of judgments dependent on context. Because philosophical judgments, it is alleged, purport to hold for all possible contexts, to be in effect supercontextual, they cannot be valid. Second, it may be claimed, again on an antirealist basis, that philosophical judgments can be true, but only in an antirealist, say, contextualist, sense. Third, it is sometimes claimed that philosophical judgments can be valid only in some sense other than being true. They may be beneficial, unavoidable, pleasing, satisfying, and so forth.

I will treat antiphilosophy as a form of inquiry that raises the most serious questions, questions to which philosophy may in the end have no answer. But I will also insist on a point that may already indicate some difference with those who critique philosophy, and this point is the third guiding conviction of this study. It is that philosophy is continuous with other forms of human judging, in particular, with inquiry. Philosophy represents the possibility of some kind of human knowledge. If we decide that philosophy is illegitimate or fundamentally misguided, then we are in effect deciding that a kind of knowledge to which the human community has traditionally aspired is unavailable. Philosophy is something some people have done. If it ought no longer to be done, then a limitation on legitimate, sensible, or valuable human doings is thereby announced. Perhaps it would be a small loss, perhaps a good loss, like the loss of the possibility of smallpox. The point is that antiphilosophy says something about human possibilities in gen-
eral, to the human community in general, not just to professional philosophers.

The effect of my three convictions, it may be apparent, is to make the status of philosophy as problematic as possible. For if philosophy is continuous with other forms of inquiry, with science and with the various modes of inquiry that occur in common life, then antiphilosophy threatens to spill over into a criticism of any and all inquiry, which raises the stakes substantially. It becomes unclear how we can continue, or reform, or abandon philosophy; each option has a cost that would be hard to bear. But before any of these options can be explored, we must gain some clarity about the thing in question, that is, philosophy.

The Question of Setting Out

In an essay that appeared in *The Monist* in 1905, Charles Sanders Peirce wrote,

Philosophers of very diverse stripes propose that philosophy shall take its start from one or another state of mind in which no man, least of all a beginner in philosophy, actually is. One proposes that you shall begin by doubting everything. . . . Another proposes that we should begin by observing "the first impressions of sense," forgetting that our very percepts are the results of cognitive elaboration. But in truth, there is but one state of mind from which you can "set out," namely, the very state of mind in which you actually find yourself at the time you do "set out" . . . (CP, 5.416)

So, the journey I now begin, to discover whether there is philosophical knowledge, must begin with an exposition of "the very state of mind" in which I am now. A state of mind is a complex thing. Many beliefs, wishes, hopes, feelings—all presumably related to a surrounding community and world—compose and determine this state. But one set of factors seems most relevant; namely, the kind of questions that I take philosophy to be. Perhaps more than anything, the point from which I set out is constituted by my convictions regarding what is needful of philosophic inquiry, by the questions that drive me to inquire in the first place. There are a set of such questions, which seem so related as to be almost different facets or costumes of a single question. They have always bothered me. Here are some of them.

What is the sense and significance of human life? What is the sense and significance of my life? What would give my life meaning,
redeem its deficits, satisfy the amorphous sense of absence? What would so redeem or satisfy human life in general? Given that everything is subject to decay and death, that all humans are destined eventually to lose everything they love most dearly, what can make up for that cruel destiny?

In light of this, what ought I do with my life, what should I make of it? What is the most important thing in human life? What should be most important to me? How should human beings live? How should I think about, look at, human life and the world? Is there a purpose to my life, to human life, or to existence in general? Most simply, what is best?

And to answer the foregoing I find myself asking, What in experience and thought is real or most real? What is the ultimate, most complete, most fundamental truth about the world and the place of human beings in it? What is the most basic true description of the world? What is the most basic true description of human experience? Which of the many competing views of reality and the place of humanity in it is right?

Now, these are different questions, but they are not unrelated. The answer to any one of them would have implications for the answer to at least some of the others, and perhaps all of them. But more than this, they seem to constitute a kind of family. What makes these questions a family is, at the very least, that their answers would serve a common function. Their answers would be likely candidates to play a certain role in my life, and in the lives of others; namely, the role of giving an ultimate orientation, a primary context to which I could always have imaginative recourse. This orientation could guide my actions, form my imaginative picture of the world, be the source of comfort or contemplative enjoyment, or all of these. It might, so to speak, lie dormant in my imagination, until moments of decision between aims, convictions, principles called it forth as the ultimate determinant of decision. Or it might shape my experience at every moment.

For the sake of convenience let us call these questions uniquely or characteristically philosophical questions. Among all the things that philosophers do and all the kinds of questions they ask, it is from asking this kind of question that philosophy gets its special character. We will see how these philosophical questions lead to a series of other questions. But, before that, we might pause to wonder about the nature and significance of these questions. What do philosophical questions signify? This question expands into a host of
further questions to which I have no answers; yet they ought to be raised.

Speaking psychologically, are uniquely philosophical questions a sign of ill health? Do they indicate an inability to tolerate uncertainty, a need to certify one's interests as valid, right? Are they the result of a deficiency in the self or ego, a kind of precariousness or feeling of unreality, such that mere living is felt to be insufficient and to require a mythic certification? Are they an attempt to make up for character flaws with intellectual constructs, trying to substitute thoughts for experiences or character traits? Are they symptomatic of a lack of courage, a lack of strong convictions or strong impulses, which seeks social consensus through inquiry to acquire direction in life?

On the other hand, do they manifest special sensitivity or intelligence? Do they indicate an ability to recognize the questionability of things that generally goes unrecognized by others? Are they a response, not to a personal, but to a general human condition? Are they the manifestation of a natural and irreducible human trait, the desire for knowledge? If Aristotle was right that "All men by nature desire to know," are these questions the fulfillment of the human essence? Or are they expressions of the more or less universal need for security, which in the thinker is manifested as the need for secure knowledge? Are they fundamentally soteriological or religious in aim? Would answering these questions serve for the questioner approximately the same function that religious faith serves for others?

Viewed sociologically and historically, are they the secular remnant of an obsolete, ancient tradition that granted social position to the mysterious "wise men," the monks and priests, a tradition that associated book learning and speculation with the supernatural? Have I, for various personal reasons, identified myself with the contemporary vestiges of that tradition, whose real function has been usurped by science, but which has managed to preserve itself in a cozy niche in the modern university? Do I ask these questions because they grant me a special status in society, and the ambiguous respect due a "professor"?

Certainly, regarding their content, the philosophical questions presume certain ideas or beliefs. First is the idea of validity; for example, that there is a difference between having and deserving, between believing and knowing, between what can be done and what ought to be done. Second is the presupposition that my views on the relevant matters are under my control, that I am free to
change my views. For if not, what would be the point of asking? Third is the belief that inquiry, or directed and systematic questioning and answering, is viable, legitimate, valid, and that it matters. There is a belief that the kind of knowledge represented by answers to the philosophical questions would have a significant effect on the circumstances (both internal and external) that stimulated the questions in the first place.

One way to get at the nature of the philosophical questions is to try to imagine what would answer them. I might conclude that all that we experience was created by a good God who is concerned for each of us and will reward our moral excellence during a continued existence after death; that what is best in human life is autonomy and the pursuit of knowledge because they are inherent in the nature of our rationality; that human life is a purposeless accident created and defined by biophysical events, death is extinction, and life is ruled by pleasure and pain; that, there being no pre- or nonhuman source of significance or knowledge, the conventions of human communities are the only sources of norms and values; that there is an experience, induced by love, religious faith, mystical contact, or psychoactive drugs, whose impact and significance cannot be captured in assertions, that puts these questions to rest in a way that may be considered “answering” them; or that these questions, like all attempts to transcend ordinary language and practice, are unintelligible.

What would be the effect of ‘answering’ my philosophical questions in these or similar ways? Most likely, I would acquire an imaginative ‘picture’ that would satisfy something in me. I would know how to think about my life or human life or the cosmos or my society. Having this picture might be felt to be valuable in itself, or it might comfort me in times of difficulty, or it might guide my action in moments of decision. Depending on the kind of society I inhabit, my answer might enable or empower me to teach others what is true or to improve society or to gain a special status or any combination of these. Or the effect might simply be to stop the habit of asking such questions.

One can interpret the value or aim of philosophical questions and answers in a variety of ways. One may engage philosophy as the pursuit of truth valued in itself. One might instead see philosophy as a guide for conduct or practice or as the means to provide an image for the orientation of thought or imagination. It may be that human beings need such images, perhaps to survive or to enforce social conformity or to be creative or to be happy. Philosophy could
be seen as a means for the imaginative reconstruction of experience, for breaking the hold of the habitual and traditional, and fostering novel experiential possibilities. One could value the process of philosophical inquiry, independent of its potential results, for its beneficial effects. Philosophy may be an escape from the pain of life; or it may improve our ability to think about nonphilosophical matters; or it may be an essential component of a complete, cultured, mature personality. All of these views can be combined in various ways.

From what state of mind do I then set out? The present inquirer seems to be under some kind of compulsion to seek philosophical knowledge, to fix philosophical convictions, beliefs, or imaginative representations of the world through validating them as true. The source of the compulsion is unclear, but it is not unlike a religious quest for redemption, except that there is nothing particularly otherworldly about it. It is perhaps best described as an attempt by an individual to determine a most basic orientation through inquiry into what is true. There are many ways to determine an ultimate orientation, including faith in revelation, failure to question one's inherited orientation, and believing what is most pleasing. The philosophical way seeks to know the true orientation or, if there is no such thing, to know that truth (that there is none). Hence truth is the primary aim. Its method is inquiry, which involves making publicly accessible claims that are as clear and explicit as possible and subjecting those claims to the test of validation with evidence and inference. In this broad sense of method, the philosophic quest is continuous with science.

I take this to be consonant with the most pervasively expressed aims of Western philosophy. This tentative characterization of our starting point does not, of course, put to rest the many questions raised about philosophy's character. Nothing said here justifies this notion of philosophy, that is, supports the view that philosophy as inquiry makes sense. I am only making the fundamental issue, and the assumptions of this study, explicit. We must assume that philosophy has an aim—truth—and a method—inquiry—if we are to investigate it. At the close of this study we will turn to the question of whether this assumption is valid.

The Circle We Inhabit

The characteristically philosophical questions lead us to other questions. In what follows it will be convenient to refer to those
characteristically philosophical questions collectively as question one. Question one leads to a new question, question two: Can we make judgments of the kind that might answer question one, judgments we can know to be valid, and if so, how and in what sense? The intermediate phrase is crucial. We might already have the answer to any philosophical question we may want to ask. The answer to the question, What is the meaning of my life? may indeed be something like, “To fulfill the purposes assigned me by the Creator” or “To wallow like a pig in the trough of pleasure.” But can we know that one of these is the answer; that is, can one of these answers be validated? That is the question.

Question two is a second-order epistemological question. It is second-order because it asks a question about the characteristically philosophical questions. It is epistemological because it asks about the conditions of validity of judgments. Question two can be broken down into two component questions:

(a) Can we make any nontrivial judgments that we know are valid? What determines the validity of our nontrivial judgments in general?

(b) Can we make nontrivial judgments like those in question one that we know are valid? Can validity be determined for uniquely philosophical judgments? If so, what determines their validity, and what kind of validity is open to them?

We may notice something odd about what we have just asked. An answer to question two will probably be a uniquely philosophical judgment. That is, it will probably be the kind of judgment that answers some of the questions included in question one, about whose solvability it (question two) asks. Question two is in effect part of question one.

This brings up question three: Does inquiry of the kind we call epistemological (of which this study is an instance) make sense, is it legitimate, and if so, what kind of sense does it make? This is an important and natural question to ask. For we have just learned that the epistemological questions we are asking (question two) are of a piece with the uniquely philosophical questions we are asking about. Question three merely makes this explicit.

We are evidently caught up in a circle, although not necessarily a vicious one. The circle is constituted by the fact that any claim we make about the possibility of answering philosophical questions will presumably be a philosophical judgment. If there is something wrong, nonsensical, illegitimate, or just plain pointless
about philosophical questions and answers, then our question two is also wrong or nonsensical or illegitimate or pointless.

We will be caught in such a circle throughout this book. The reason lies in trying to inquire into the bounds of inquiry. All the philosophers we will read self-consciously operate, at least part of the time, at the bounds of philosophical assertion. They dance on the edge, if you will. The metaphilosophical strategies they have evolved are the repertoire of special steps required of someone who would do this dance.

The primary aim of this study is to answer question two-b, to determine whether philosophical judgments can be known to be valid. Questions two-a and three will also be addressed, albeit secondarily and incompletely. Question one will be deferred until another time, although we may find that to the extent we answer the other questions, we will thereby gain some advantage with respect to the philosophical questions with which we began.

None of our questions appears to have a claim on logical or conceptual priority. The priority of question one is personal; it is the first-order philosophical questions that bother me. They have biographical priority: priority within the order of my life's narrative. But then question two rises up quickly, with three on its heels. As we will see, any attempt to deny the cogency of question one on a principled basis will presuppose an answer to question two or three, even though any answer to two or three will in effect be an answer to question one. The point is that these questions have a circular, not a linear, relationship. Only in a particular order of interpretation, that is, from a particular perspective—whose validity would also be in question—can a priority be established among the three questions.

We must now turn to what will seem an unrelated matter. To engage recent attempts to respond to the problem of the validity of philosophical knowledge, it is necessary to introduce an unfamiliar language. The task of subjecting philosophy to deep criticism has driven some philosophers, cognizant of the self-contradiction entailed in any outright denial of the possibility of philosophical knowledge, to employ sophisticated metaphilosophical strategies. Even to discuss these authors without prejudicing the case requires the use of a special language that is neutral in ways I will describe. The only such language, to my knowledge, is provided by Justus Buchler's theory of judgment. To it we now turn.
Buchler's Theory of Judgment

At the outset of his 1955 book, *Nature and Judgment*, the American philosopher Justus Buchler announced his intention to develop a theory of judgment for which “every product is a judgment” (NJ, p. 8). By *product* he meant any act, contrivance or “verbal combination” rendered by a human being, or to use his synonym for judgment and product, any *utterance* (NJ, p. 10). Propositional assertions are only one type of judgment, product, or utterance. Running for a bus, rearranging furniture, and declaring one’s beliefs qualify equally as judgments.

In what follows the relevant portions of Buchler’s theory of judgment will be unfolded. But the most significant insight is already present in the preceding paragraph. By changing the reference of the term ‘judgment’ Buchler has shifted our perspective, such that it will seem natural to ascribe knowledge, comprehension, rationality, creativity, reasonableness, intelligence, and investigation *indifferently* and *equally* to the non-linguistic, non-assertive modes of judgment and the linguistic, assertive mode.

What is involved in judgment in general? According to Buchler, every judgment serves to “embody a policy relating [the judge] to his environment and to his own past history, and characterize the existences among which he is located” (NJ, p. 12). “Each judgment,” he suggests, “is the individual’s situational recognition of his universe” (NJ, p. 29). To judge is “to bring a natural complex within the orbit of an attitude” (NJ, p. 13). Judging “primarily determine[s] a subject matter . . . and only secondarily disclose[s] an agent” (NJ, p. 16). “To produce,” Buchler writes, “is to manifest the natural commitments of a self, and to apply in a fresh instance the cumulative resultant of these commitments” (NJ, p. 11). “A judgment,” he insists, “is a pronouncement . . . a commentary . . . a version, a rendition of nature . . .” (TGT, p. 47). Lastly, “Whatever . . . in some possible perspective, can be deemed to be made or be said or be done is legitimately regarded as a judgment” (NJ, p. 18).

Buchler believes that there are three functions of judgment: active, exhibitie, and assertive, or doing, making, and saying (NJ, p. 20). When a judgment functions assertively it is valuable in terms of truth, falsity, probability, and evidence. When a judgment functions exhibitively its relevant achievement is a rearrangement (a “shaping”) of materials into a “constellation that is regarded or assimilated as such” (NJ, p. 22) and that manifests a satisfying
quality. When a judgment functions actively, it is subject to moral predicates (NJ, p. 28).⁴

The relation of these categories of judgment to the often met cultural trilogy of morality, art, and science is one of whole to part. When judgments are ramified in a way that is directed, systematic or methodical, interrogative and inventive, then the process of judging is an instance of query. There can be query in all three modes of judgment. Assertive query is inquiry (of which science and philosophy are instances). Active query is organized moral action.⁵ Exhibitive query is art.

An important consequence of the process of query is that its product “grows” in the sense of acquiring increasing autonomy from the producer, and this autonomy compels the producer forward in the process of query. In inquiry this compulsion is achieved by evidence, in moral action by the tenable situation, and in art by the quality of the constellation of materials. It is interesting to note that for Buchler, if this autonomy is exhausted, which is to say, if the producer gains complete mastery over the product, query ends, because the source of continued interrogation dries up (NJ, p. 82).

It is in query that the novelty of Buchler’s notion of judgment becomes most apparent. For query is the force that establishes human culture, that generates all but the most rudimentary, spontaneous and isolated manifestations of human being. Buchler chides other philosophers for restricting their concept of human achievement to one type of query: “traditionally the tendency has been to identify the processes of reason with the processes of assertive query... the problem of reason has been taken too often as the problem of the limits and forms of discourse... The attribute of reason must be applicable to the whole of human production and not merely to the forms of talk and thought; to inventive communication in all its forms and not merely to that exemplified by assertive query” (NJ, pp. 96–98).

This has interesting results. Fallibilism, for example, is wrong to claim that all legitimate judgments admit of further verification, because “only to assertive judgment does the notion of truth and falsity, and therefore of verification, apply” (NJ, p. 98). Verificationism, we could add, makes the same mistake.

Pragmatism, which was invented by the thinker closest to Buchler, Peirce, suffers from related errors. Buchler writes that, the pragmatists, by “emphasizing the active character of belief, neglect the judicative character of action, and even more, the judicative character of contrivance” (NJ, p. 32).⁶ Pragmatism’s contribution
was to locate assertive judgment in the context of active judgment, to manifest the active character of belief, and to evaluate belief in such contexts. But although its proponents rightly regarded this as a step beyond the “intellectualism” of those who rigidly separated assertive and active judgment, Buchler’s view takes a further step. His way of transcending the rigid separation of modes of judgment is not to describe one in terms of the other, but to make the differences between them functional, to expand the concept of judgment to house them all on an equal basis and render them indifferently capable of enjoying the privileged predicates of “validity” and “rationality.” Thus “action itself is a mode of judgment rather than a means of bringing us beyond judgment to make it intelligible, valid, or effective” (ML, pp. 148–149).

Buchler claims that all judgments need to be validated. Every judgment, whether act, assertion, or contrivance, is incomplete. As such it implicitly makes a demand on future judgment, a claim that needs to be ratified. A judgment embodies a commitment that needs to be secured and maintained.

Validation, like judgment, comes in three types: assertive, active, and exhibitive. Truth, falsity, and probability hold only for assertive judgments. Assertive validation is also distinguished by three other traits. First, the character of assertive judgments permits an adequate reenactment of their validation conditions by others; the difference between what they are for the producer and for the receiver(s) can be negligible. Second, assertive validation takes the characteristic form of evidential compulsion. Third, assertive judgments can oppose or contradict each other, unlike exhibitive judgments (ML, p. 171).

Both active and exhibitive validation can be described in terms of the satisfactoriness, or the degree of assent that results from recognition of the potential for further judgment based on the judgment in question. What is most unique in exhibition is the “gap” between creator and audience; that is, there is likely to be something in the product, by virtue of the process of production, that is “essential” or important in the creator’s perception of it, yet cannot be shared by those who assimilate the product (TGT, p. 155). Active validation occupies a kind of middle position in that it shares the possibility of evidential compulsion with assertive validation (TGT, p. 151) and the possibility of a nonshareable component with exhibitive validation (TGT, p. 151). Buchler emphasizes that to validate an act is “to determine its justifiability (in terms of specified ends)
under certain conditions” (TGT, p. 152), which he glosses as “moral
justification” (TGT, p. 151).

Buchler’s account of the distinctive characters of the three
functions of judgments remains rudimentary. He was more inter-
ested in sketching a general theory of judgment, of which the tripar-
tite categorization is just a part, and in locating judgment in an
account of “the human process,” than in a rigorous analysis of their
differences. Buchler makes this clear in a response to the suggestion
that there might actually be more than three modes of judgment.

Are the three modes of judgment which I distinguish all the modes
there are? . . . once judgment is seen not to be limited to assertion,
there is no end to the classifications, divisions, and sub-divisions
that may be devised. But the essential question is, how useful, how
comprehensive, how widely applicable will a classification be? The
one I have made . . . is accepted in practice and . . . is as old as man,
is universally recognized . . . Making, saying, and doing . . . are
remarkably pervasive. . . . Actually, for me the number of modes of
judgment is not nearly so important as the principle that each of
them is a mode of judgment.

Because his work is poorly known, Buchler’s account of the
three functions has not yet been developed much further.
Consequently, very basic questions about this division have not yet
been answered (as we will see in Chapter Seven). The aim of the pre-
sent study is less to develop Buchler’s tripartite view than to use it
and so will not help much in addressing this lack. My use of this
division does not imply that I endorse all that it may imply. We do
not yet know enough about the implications of this powerful theory.

The Metaphilosophical Strategies

It is now time to delineate the various metaphilosophical
strategies employed by philosophers concerned with the possibility
of philosophical knowledge. The problem to which these strategies
respond is this: how to criticize philosophy in a radical and global
way without doing philosophy? In particular there is the difficulty of
asserting antirealism consistently; that is, claiming that the valid-
ity of human judgments is not determined by what they judge. If
this claim is applied to itself, then this implies that the validity of
antirealism is not determined by what it judges either, that is, the
character of knowledge. Any theorist who tries to make assertions
about the bounds of reason or inquiry or philosophy potentially faces this problem.

There are four different ways of trying to avoid the self-referential problem. At the proper moments of inquiry, the inquirer makes only negative assertions, makes assertions that implicitly show or do what cannot be explicitly said, claims that the view in question is invalid according to some norm other than truth; or makes judgments that are supposed to be valid according to some norm other than truth. These strategies are not mutually exclusive; they can be combined. They deserve some explanation.

There are positive and negative philosophical modes of assertion. The former makes claims that purport to characterize whatever is under discussion, whereas the latter makes purely critical claims that deny the validity of other philosophers’ characterizations of whatever is under discussion. Given a philosophical position, call it Q, a negative criticism of Q explicitly claims that Q is false or dubious—dubious meaning that we cannot know that Q is true, that Q is unsupported—without making positive claims about the phenomena Q concerns. A purely negative approach avoids the burden of justifying knowledge about the phenomena, as well as avoiding the status of a competitor theory to Q. Nevertheless, its point is embodied in explicit truth-claims (e.g., “Q is false or unsupported”).

By implicit I mean a judgment whose primary function is other than assertion, hence either active or exhibitive. That is, its primary function is to do or show, rather than to say its point or meaning.

A philosopher, while avoiding explicit assertions not only about the phenomena but also about whether a received view of the phenomena is true or false, may still make statements whose effect is a rejection of that view or that exhibit the inadequacy of the view. If a philosopher writes about a view Q, such that the inevitable effect of that writing is to make us abandon Q or treat Q in a way indistinguishable from the way we would treat Q if we thought Q false or unsupported, then the commentator is implicitly denying Q’s adequacy. It is possible to undermine Q without making any positive or negative assertions logically equivalent to the assertion that “Q is false or unsupported.” One way to do this is raise doubts about every application of Q to an individual phenomenon, without making any general statements about Q at all. This implicit approach makes assertions, but it uses these assertions to imply something not explicitly stated in them.
It is a different matter to make, in regard to theory Q, the explicit claim that Q is invalid according to some norm or criterion other than truth. This approach avoids the burden of showing Q to be false or unsupported, by asserting that Q is inelegant, useless, unappealing, immoral, impossible to believe, impossible to put into practice, and so on. This is what Rorty has claimed about the entire genre of epistemology. For example, he writes of his “pragmatist” view of truth, “Pragmatists think that the history of attempts to isolate the True or the Good, or to define the word ‘true’ or ‘good,’ supports their suspicion that there is no interesting work to be done in this area. . . . This does not mean that they have a new, non-Platonic set of answers to Platonic questions to offer, but rather that they do not think we should ask those questions anymore. . . . They would simply like to change the subject” (COP, pp. xiii–xiv). Notice that the claim being forwarded is a truth-claim; Rorty claims that it is true that epistemology has no use. It would be yet another move to offer this very statement as valid in some way other than being true.

The fourth and last strategy makes the latter move. It does not regard its own judgments as governed by truth. Alternatively, these judgments will be governed by practical utility, moral goodness, or aesthetic quality; or the judgments may be offered as non-normative, as facts that satisfy no norm at all. We will see that this fourth strategy is particularly important in the recent discussion of the possibility of philosophical knowledge. It constitutes what I will call a method of abstention, whereby some authors have believed it possible to write in a way that undermines philosophical positions while abstaining from making philosophical truth-claims.

The analysis of this method is difficult. Presumably, to most of our claims, the addition of “It is true that . . .” is redundant, and so claims imply their truth. Yet some may believe that there is a philosophical point to withholding the imputation of truth, to show or exhibit something that cannot be consistently asserted, but that is valid nonetheless. We will see in Chapter Nine that this voice was invoked by Sextus Empiricus, the expositor of Pyrrhonian skepticism. Sextus has been interpreted as avoiding truth-claims, as encouraging his readers to adopt his skeptical “formulae” in order to do something, to affect an abstention from philosophical truth-claims, thereby, in his famous figure, purging our philosophical intestines. He writes of his apparent claim that, regarding any philosophical assertion, the assertion is “no more” true than its contrary, “The formula ‘No more,’ for instance, even though it exhibits the character of assent or denial, we do not use in this capacity.
Rather, we employ it indifferently and by a misuse of language either in lieu of a question or in lieu of saying, ‘I do not know to which alternative I ought to assent, and to which I ought not’” (PH, I.191).

Richard Rorty, whose similarity with Sextus has been pointed out, occasionally makes the same gesture. He sometimes treats his own statements as if they were not claims aimed at truth, but rather actions aimed at producing an effect on the reader. For example: “Conforming to my own precepts, I am not going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace. Instead, I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favor look attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics” (CIS, p. 9). There is nothing illegitimate about this voice. To reject it as insincere or impossible or immoral is, as I suggested in the Introduction, unphilosophical. But, I will argue, neither is it an avenue of escape to some critically invulnerable, indefinable locale.

It is to deal with such strategies that Buchler’s terminology was introduced. The Pyrrhonist or Rortyan abstentions may not be truth-claims or assertions, but they certainly are judgments. And Buchler’s account of judgmental validity dispels the illusion that the escape from assertiveness is an escape from the demand for validation. If the activity in which a writer is engaged is not inquiry whose norm is truth, but an action aimed at a certain effect, then the legitimate demand for validation does not disappear, it merely shifts to the active. It requires the kind of validation or justification we normally demand of a technique for achieving shared aims, a proposed social policy, a suggested change in our way of life. We may ask, Is this effect good for us, does the author offer any reasons why we ought to accept this action? To take the extreme case, although silence is not an assertion, it is nevertheless a judgment, and so, if offered as valid, compelling, or meaningful, is in need of validation.

On this level Sextus and Rorty will, as we will see, offer some reasons why we ought to accept their views; for example, the Pyrrhonian state of ataraxia or tranquility and the enhancement of our “redescriptive” creativity that Rorty envisions. The spirit in which these views are offered dictates that they must be evaluated entirely independent of their possible truth or falsity. For, to the extent that Sextus and Rorty offer their own judgments as non-assertive (not truth functional), considerations of truth are irrelevant. Nevertheless, we are obligated to consider the truth of their reasons for making these judgments; for example, whether it is true that abstention from truth-claims is beneficial. So truth has not
been circumvented, only relocated to a different level of the discussion.

My point is not that all language is truth governed, still less that it is philosophical. It is that whatever form of query we engage is inevitably evaluative and subject to evaluation. Whatever we do, we must pay the piper; there is no escape from the demand for validation. If utterances are offered as contributions to inquiry, even negative contributions meant to derail inquiry, then they are ipso facto being offered as relevant to truth. If they are not, very well; then they must be validated as good or qualitatively satisfying. Whatever the answer, whatever we are doing at any moment in our discourse, that doing has its own vicissitudes, its own rules, its own evaluative burden. No mode of judgment has any intrinsic superiority, none is intrinsically unsupportable. Truth-governed inquiry is not unconditionally superior to any other mode of judgment, but neither is it unconditionally inferior.

Before leaving the subject of metaphilosophical strategies, something must be said about irony. Actually, 'irony' refers to forms of assertion in which what is meant is antithetical to what is "literally" asserted. I have no wish here to engage the very interesting debate over the nature of literal versus tropic (e.g., metaphorical) language. My point is a modest one: if we remain faithful to its dictionary and everyday meaning, then irony is a rather special and limited phenomenon. Not all the cases in which our assertions serve to mean or do more than their literal content indicates are cases of irony. At any rate, that is how I shall conceive of irony. So, the philosophical refusal to answer a question, the answering of a question with another question, the use of metaphorical language or silence as a philosophical option—none of these count as irony in my sense. If, on the other hand, one were to interpret irony more broadly, then much of what will be discussed here would count as ironic.

**Philosophy as Ultimate Judgment**

The way is now clear to suggest a characterization of the uniquely philosophical questions that were recited earlier and, by extension, the uniquely philosophical judgments that might answer them. It is, as John Herman Randall pointed out, foolish to try to define philosophy. But fools should be honest in their foolery, and if I am to inquire into the validity of philosophical judgments, it is incumbent on me to characterize the distinction between philosophical and nonphilosophical judgment.
It seems inadequate to try to define philosophical judgments in terms of their objects, because many philosophical judgments lack objects that are the sole province of philosophy. Truth is the aim for all inquiry. Philosophy is not alone in its interest in meanings or words or concepts or universals or humanity or God or nature.

Philosophical judgments certainly appear to be general or comprehensive in a way that judgments in other fields of inquiry are not. Philosophy seems to be especially “nonlocal.” To ask what is the cause of cancer is not philosophical, but to ask what is a cause, or what is disease, is. There are, however, different ways to be general or nonlocal. Newton’s laws of motion were nonlocal, but today we would not call them philosophical. This very example touches on the problem that the bounds of philosophy have fluctuated historically, because Newton did consider himself a philosopher, that is, a natural philosopher. Certainly philosophical judgments arise in all walks of life, in indefinitely many contexts. The domain of philosophical questions and judgments is more widespread than the domain of systematic philosophical inquiry.

Our best chance of characterizing uniquely philosophical judgments is in terms of their function, their role, in inquiry or life. That function or role, I suggest, is one of ultimacy. Characteristically philosophical judgments are ultimate judgments; characteristically philosophical questions are ultimate questions seeking ultimate judgments.

Ultimate judgments seek priority over other judgments or perspectives, and establish order among perspectives. They establish an orientation for the person or community that utters them. They provide a framework for other judgments. They aspire to be the most comprehensive or most fundamental judgments. I am taking some liberty with Latin etymology of ‘ultimacy,’ because ultima means last or final, and I do not want to restrict myself to final judgments. In my use, ‘ultimate’ can mean any of the following non-equivalent terms: original, first, last, final, comprehensive, absolute, complete. The implied notion is of judgments in inquiry arranged in a series; not that all judgments are or could be located in one series, but that every judgment has a place in some series. Philosophy characteristically seeks to establish the ultimate judgments in any series of judgments.

Philosophy is, then, ultimate inquiry. But this in effect means that it is unlimited inquiry, inquiry responsible to question any limit placed on any inquiry or on inquiry as a whole. Philosophy is the extension of inquiry beyond any given limit of scope, discipline,
or presupposition. This does not mean that any philosopher’s work is actually unlimited, but that in principle it must remain open to an unlimited demand for validation.

My intention is to understand what I have called characteristically philosophical judgments. Obviously, philosophers make many kinds of judgments in the course of philosophical inquiry. Philosophers discuss when Plato wrote The Republic and Kant’s relation to Rousseau—but so do intellectual historians. I am concerned with a subset of the totality of judgments made by philosophers whose presence in their inquiry makes the inquiry philosophical. When these judgments appear in other kinds of inquiry they are still philosophical, but their relation to the aim of the inquiry or discourse is different than it is in philosophical discourse. My interest is solely in those judgments whose defining characteristic, I am suggesting, is this open demand for ultimacy.

My notion of ultimacy is relational. What makes one judgment ultimate is its function or role with respect to other judgments, rather than any nonrelative content of the judgment, say, the occurrence of universal quantifiers or necessity operators or reference to certainty or to the nonempirical world or to what is true “by nature” or what is nonevident, and so forth. We are always open to the possibility of the demand for ultimacy. Given the inferential relation among judgments, any series of judgments implies some judgment or set of judgments that are, relative to the series, ultimate. Philosophy’s task is to make these judgments explicit, to articulate, clarify, and validate them. This task will then generate more judgments that are ultimate with respect to the original series of judgments and ultimate with respect to the selected ultimate judgments. What formerly was ultimate may no longer be ultimate.

So, philosophy is that form of inquiry seeking to make valid assertive judgments that are ultimate with respect to the rest of judgment (this is not to say, judgments about the rest of judgment, which would mean epistemology solely). Philosophy is that form of inquiry which constantly pushes the boundaries of any inquiry and of inquiry as a whole. Another way to characterize philosophical inquiry is to say that it is indefinite, indeterminate inquiry. It is inquiry that cannot state the limits of its task with any precision, because those limits are in question for it.

The pursuit of ultimate principles need not be metaphysical. There seems to have been an expansion of the meaning of ‘metaphysical’ in some current philosophical circles to cover any and all “foundational” or “superempirical” or “first” principles, regardless of