The Roots of Philosophy

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What are the roots of philosophy?

The roots of philosophy are most of all its natural beginnings. There seems to be four natural beginnings of philosophy. Two are in our desire and two are in our knowledge.

Philosophy is rooted in two natural desires. First is the natural desire to understand, the inborn wanting to know the cause, to know what and why, and to know truth. As the words indicate, this is especially the root of theoretical or looking philosophy whose end is to see or understand. But practical or doing philosophy is also rooted in the natural desire to live well and do well.

There are also two roots of philosophy in our knowledge.

One is the natural road in our knowledge. This is the road from the senses into reason. Since man is by nature an animal having reason, the natural road for man must be from the senses into reason.

Another is the axioms (and their parts), the statements known through themselves by all, and especially the axioms about being and non-being, which are the natural beginning of all the axioms. "To be or not to be: that is the question." It is a question because *it is impossible both to be and not be* and because *it is necessary to be or not be*.

Philosophy can grow from these roots and be nourished by them, but to do this well, more is required.

The philosopher must measure and order by reason the natural desire to know. Often thinkers want to know more things than is necessary and neglect to learn well the things necessary to know for understanding the most important things, or they want to know things more than they can be known by us, or they want to know things out of the order in which they need to be learned.

The philosopher also needs a distinct knowledge of the natural road and a distinct knowledge of the axioms.

The history of human thought shows that thinkers often wander off the natural road into various errors.

And the sophist sometimes gives objections to the axioms that most men can never answer.

Hence, the philosopher needs a distinct knowledge of the natural road to follow it well and a distinct knowledge of the axioms to build upon them and refute the sophistical objections to them.

Every philosophy rooted in wonder will necessarily be a knowledge of causes, a knowledge of what things are and why they are as they are. Beginning with a knowledge of the kinds of causes (and their ways), it will include a consideration of the kinds of cause to be sought in each subject and demonstrating that there are first causes in each of these kinds of cause, it will tend toward and end with a knowledge of the first cause. Failure to do any of these is a sure sign that a philosophy is not rooted in wonder or fully nourished by this root.

The tool of such philosophy must also be most of all a knowledge of the questions what and why. Hence, it must also be a knowledge of definition and demonstration by which these questions are answered. Further it must include a knowledge of how one can define and demonstrate. And since the questions what and why seek a knowledge of causes and are answered by a knowledge of causes, such a tool must have a consideration of how definition and demonstration include a knowledge of causes. And since both are grounded in a knowledge of causes, it should also have at its heart a knowledge of the connection between definition and demonstration. A logic, which is not such a tool, is not rooted in wonder.

A practical philosophy rooted in the natural desire to live well must include an investigation of what it is for a man to live well, and a family to live well and a city to live well. And when this investigation has been completed, there must be also a consideration of how these ends can be achieved.

A philosopher rooted in the natural road will place names upon things following the road from the senses into reason. And he will follow the order of learning in acquiring the parts of philosophy; so he will learn geometry and natural philosophy before wisdom. He will reason more from the effect to the cause, especially in natural philosophy and practical philosophy and in wisdom. (Only in mathematics does the cause seem more known to us than the effect because of the abstract consideration of quantity and figure there.)

A philosophy rooted in the axioms is most of all rooted in the axioms about being and non-being since these are the natural beginnings of all the axioms. A philosophy in which the axioms, and especially the axioms about being and non-being, are considered and defended from sophistical objections is obviously a philosophy more rooted in the axioms than a philosophy in which this task is neglected. And since the words in the axioms are equivocal by reason, a philosophy strongly rooted in the axioms will include the distinction and order of the central senses of these words.

A logic rooted in the axioms about being and non-being must include a knowledge of what contradictory statements are and a consideration of whether it is possible to reason well from contradictory statements and to contradictory conclusions. (Is it possible to doubt well, that is, to reason well to contradictory conclusions?) Such a logic will also involve a consideration of how the axioms are to reasoned out knowledge. The logician must also know which axioms are most important for logic. The axioms about being and non-being are first in importance for the logician. But the axioms of before and after are also very important. The logician must see that nothing is before or after itself.

Greek philosophy at its best had roots, those distinguished above.

Modern philosophy and modern logic are not rooted in wonder.

Modern ethics does not seem to be based on an understanding of what it is to live well. It does not seem to be nourished by the desire to live well.

Modern philosophy and modern logic are uprooted from the axioms.

The philosophy of Spinoza seems especially uprooted from the natural road since he tries to go from cause to effect everywhere.

False philosophy could be said to be rooted in false imagination, in pride and in custom.