FROM DAILY LIFE TO PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: This article argues that the little everyday things of life often provide excellent entries into the intellectual problems of academic philosophy. This is illustrated with an analysis of four small stories taken from daily life in which people are in agony because they do not know what to do. It is argued that the crucial question in these stories is a philosophical question—not a closed request for empirical or formal information but an open question about how best to conceive of human experience. A discussion follows of the merits and short-comings of transcendentalism as an attempt by philosophers to make progress. It is argued that reformulating questions is what philosophers can do to contribute to people's comfort in life. This is illustrated with an argument showing that in the small stories discussed the question of what to do should be reformulated as the question of who to be.

Keywords: practical philosophy, philosophical questions, transcendental arguments, moral philosophy, flow of life.

One of the scandals of contemporary practical philosophy is that although from an academic point of view the subject is in very good shape, from a social point of view it has a very bad press. One explanation of this gap between popular image and professional reality might be the existence of a historically grown and artificially preserved prejudice that academic philosophy is a weighty enterprise of learned and unworldly scholars addressing momentous questions that grew out of an impressive history of ideas and have nothing whatsoever to do with the little everyday things of ordinary life.[1]

[1] I offer no more than a personal indication of practical philosophy's contemporary quality by noting that many major philosophers who started their work in other, more traditional fields of philosophy (metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind) changed their subject over the years to end up working in the broad area of practical philosophy. One thinks of Hilary Putnam, Jonathan Dancy, Simon Blackburn, Colin McGinn, John McDowell, and Thomas Nagel. Many others continue to publish in practical philosophy, such as Harry Frankfurt, Michael Bratman, Christine Korsgaard, Robert Audi, Joseph Raz, Derek Parfit, David Velleman, and Charles Taylor. Another indication of practical philosophy's contemporary quality is the number of articles and books published in the field, and the number that turn out to be influential. I also offer no more than a personal indication of practical philosophy's bad press by noting the success

In this article I shall attack this prejudice, not by directly addressing it but by showing that many of our daily concerns present us quite straightforwardly with excellent entries into the intellectual problems of academic philosophy. I shall first describe some cases taken from ordinary daily life, claiming that the small concerns presented in these cases invite us to engage in philosophy. I shall then argue in some detail why it is indeed the case that these small concerns present us with philosophical questions. The argument involves an account of the nature of philosophy, of the sense in which the small concerns of the protagonists in my examples are significantly similar to the monumental problems that have dominated the history of Western philosophy. The argument also leads me to suggest that the philosophical question ''What should I do?'' is substantially identical to the philosophical question ''Who am I?'' and that as practical philosophers we have reason to resist the popular invitation to understand ourselves as doing applied ethics. I shall conclude by drawing a picture of practical philosophy that is academically promising and socially worthwhile.

1. What Should We Do?

Nine-year-old Tim is vacationing with his parents and his older brother Mark at an Italian campsite. Mark has made a friend at the campsite, and the two of them are having a really great time. Tim makes a lot of effort to join Mark and his friend, to keep their company, to be one of them. Apparently he succeeds, at least to a considerable extent, accepting, of course, that he is the youngest and therefore the odd one out. A week passes. Then one evening, suddenly and without any immediate cause, Tim becomes very angry: he is furious with his parents, with Mark, with Mark's friend, and, in the end, sadly enough, with himself too. When he eventually calms down, he lets himself be taken off to bed. Later that night, Tim's parents are sitting in front of their tent, thinking about the situation and the day to come. They do not know what to do.

David's neighbor retired a few years ago. He had had a career as a municipal employee, and most of his acquaintances were colleagues or other people he knew from work. Now that he is retired he very much falls back on his wife, and they have become quite lonely. One day, while crossing the street, he was hit by a car. Luckily, he was only very slightly injured. Physically he was the same again in just a few days, but he seems to have lost his confidence. He is frightened of pain and complains all day

long. David comes around a lot to comfort him, but he feels inclined to be bold and give his neighbor a piece of his mind. He has never done so before, however, and fears he will be unable to strike the right note. What should he do?

Melanie is a middle-aged woman who is completely used to looking after her infirm mother, who requires a lot of help. But Melanie is getting older, and so too, of course, is her mother. At times Melanie feels quite unhappy with the way in which her life has unfolded. She dreams of breaking out of her daily routine, of abandoning her whining mother to her fate and living her own life to the full. But at the same time she knows that they both need each other. Discontent sets in, and it breeds unhappiness and brooding. What should Melanie do?

Frankie and Johnny first met at high school. They fell in love, but they knew quite well that this was under the spell of Brook Benton's early love song "Frankie and Johnny" and two movies with the same title. Yet, being young and romantic, they embraced the happy coincidence of their names, applied to the same university, and decided to live together in a student flat. Unfortunately, Johnny's application was turned down, and this cast a black cloud over their summer: they feared the future, were afraid of living apart. Frankie became very much inclined not to go to university after all and to stay in their hometown. What should she do?

This list of cases could easily be extended, but the idea will be clear by now. The examples share a lot of features. For one obvious thing, they all end up with one of Kant's favorite basic philosophical questions: "What should I do?" Yet they do not seem to have a lot to do with major themes from the history of philosophy. The cases involve humans, but they are not about humanity at large. They are about small personal affairs, not substantial public affairs. They concern the future, but merely a very local and nearby future, not the future of humanity. There is no interest, at least not obviously, in big issues, such as truth, knowledge, thought, and reality. The examples are about making choices, about weighing alternatives, but they do not seem to present serious moral problems, or to introduce important moral principles, or to invite discussions of moral theory. The cases concern people who have to make up their mind, but who obviously have no interest in thinking about the nature of their mind or, in all likelihood, about the nature of rationality. Seen in contrast with philosophy's asserted aim—namely, "to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term" (Sellars 1962, 1)—my examples are mere small talk.

Although the examples present nothing but the little everyday things of life, this is precisely where I should like to locate my favorite entry into philosophy, even academic philosophy. Let me explain why this is in no way to demean philosophy.

2. Philosophical Questions

The main thesis I should like to defend here is that the question asked by
the protagonists of my examples—"What should I do?"—is a genuine
philosophical question, as interesting and as important from a philoso-
phical point of view as such monumental questions as "Does the world
have a beginning?" "What are the ends of life?" "Can we know the
external world?" My argument will focus on the claim that the protago-
nists of my examples basically ask a question about how to conceive of
experience.

A first step toward understanding this claim is to argue that my
protagonists' question is not a *closed* question asked in order to receive
information that could have been available to someone appropriately
equipped to have access to a reservoir of answers. Let me explain this by
discussing two types of question that are, in this way, closed questions,
namely, empirical and formal questions.

When questioners ask an empirical question, they assume that the
questionees (who might be the questioners themselves) could, at least in
principle, have access to a reservoir of empirical facts in which the right
answer to the question asked is available. Such access would be a matter
of observation and/or induction. Think for example of such questions as:
"Where is my coat?" "At what age does an average rabbit die?" "Did
Kant read Aristotle's *Categories*?" and "Did Napoleon's housemaid on
Elba have two kidneys?" The answers to these questions are available as
so much information. They reside in the empirical domain, which can be
accessed by those who know how to look.

It might not be easy to access this domain; it might even be impossible,
that is, practically impossible. But this impossibility is merely epistemo-
logical, not metaphysical; it is about the access, not about the availability
in principle of the information in the empirical domain. We can see this by
comparing two questions that are, at least grammatically speaking, very
much alike. Suppose we are faced not merely with the question whether
Napoleon's housemaid on Elba had two kidneys but also with the
question whether she had a free will. It might be impossible to answer
either question, but this would be so for completely different reasons in
each case. The matter of the kidneys is a matter of so much information,
of coming up with the answer available in the empirical domain.
Unfortunately, however, the answer resides in a part of the empirical
domain to which no one living today has access. This makes it *practically*
impossible to answer the question. Of course, this could motivate us to
ask deep and philosophical questions about the nature of observation.
But these would be general epistemological questions—questions that
would require us to change the subject—not questions about Napoleon's
housemaid and her kidneys. For she either did or did not have two
kidneys, and that is simply a matter of fact, of information.

But the matter of her free will is entirely different. As I shall argue, it is actually inappropriate to suggest that our incapacity to answer the question of whether Napoleon's housemaid had a free will is merely a matter of failing to have access to information that in principle is available. The main problem here, or so I shall argue in this section, is to determine the kind of information that we should be looking for. This would be a metaphysical enterprise, not an epistemological one. It would make a lot of sense, as I shall argue, to claim that as soon as we have determined what information we are looking for, most of the problem with which the question confronts us has dissolved. This is so, I claim, because philosophical notions, such as free will, are unable to function in frameworks of inquiry that disclose reservoirs of answers. Let me explain this more fully by discussing the other type of closed question.

Closed questions of the second type are formal questions. When questioners ask a formal question they assume that the questionees (who, once more, might be the questioners themselves) could, at least in principle, have access to a reservoir of facts about the formal relations between the terms used in asking the question—a reservoir that contains the right answer to the question. Access to this reservoir would be a matter of calculation and/or deduction. Think for example of such questions as "What is the cube root of 729?" "How many days are there in a century?" "Does the sum total of the angles of a triangle equal two right angles?" and "Did Napoleon's housemaid on Elba have a body?" Like answers to empirical questions, the answers to these formal questions are available as so much information. They reside in the formal domain that can be accessed by those who know the formal relations between the terms used in asking the question.

It might not be easy to access this domain, as it requires a mind capable of grasping all the formal relations between the terms used in asking the question. And the domain might be small: it comprises no more than the terms used in asking the question and their formal relations.[2] But understanding the question is, in the final analysis, sufficient to answer it as well. Understanding the question is tantamount to dissolving the problem presented by the question. Whenever a particular question is a formal question, it is a request for information that is in principle available to those who know the formal relations between the terms used in asking the question. It is for this reason that questions containing philosophical notions are never merely formal questions.

We can see this by comparing the question about Napoleon's housemaid's free will with that about her body. It is obvious that the latter question is a formal one: being a housemaid entails having a body.

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[2] These ways of stating the limits of formal knowledge are reminiscent of Salomon Maimon's views of the ways in which humans could gain knowledge through analyzing synthetic judgments a priori. Cf. Bransen 1991, 96–133.

Neither the term *housemaid* nor the term *body* functions in this question as a philosophical term. This is not to say that we couldn't ask philosophical questions about housemaids or bodies; it just means that the question we're discussing here is not a philosophical one. It is a formal question, one that can be satisfactorily answered by referring to the formal relations that exist between the terms *housemaid* and *body*. But it will be obvious that we would have misunderstood the question were this the way we went about answering the question of whether the housemaid had a free will. Stating that being a housemaid entails having a free will would obviously not count as having answered the question; on the contrary, it would obviously count as having misunderstood the question.

Against the background of the history of philosophy, Kant's transcendentalism, Carnap's logical positivism, and Wittgenstein's ordinary-language philosophy, this is an interesting conclusion (see Stroud 1984, chapters 4 and 5). It is used by Isaiah Berlin to characterize, albeit in a negative way, the nature of philosophical questions.

> Between the two original baskets, the empirical and the formal, there is at least one intermediate basket, in which all those questions live which cannot easily be fitted into the other two. These questions are of the most diverse nature; . . . those who ask them are faced with a perplexity from the very beginning—they do not know where to look for the answers. . . . Such questions tend to be called philosophical. [1980, 3–4]

We can elaborate on this characterization by pointing out that empirical and formal questions are closed questions, whereas philosophical questions are *open* ones (Hollis 1985, 5–10). Open questions are not merely questions about the content of human experience or merely questions about the fixed, formal, internal structure of a framework of inquiry; they are basically questions about the complex relationship between a framework of inquiry and the content of human experience at which it is directed. This is a more complicated, but also more specific, way of saying, as I said above, that philosophical questions are questions about how to conceive of experience. Let me explain this characterization more fully by discussing the nature of my protagonists' question. They all ask "What should I do?" and I claim that in asking this they ask a philosophical question.

If the discussion so far is plausible, my claim is that the protagonists are not asking for information available in principle to the questionee. To be sure, in asking their question they are not merely airing their mind; they ask a question and have an interest in an answer with which to solve their problem. I am just claiming that the appropriate answer to their question will not be a matter of providing information available to the questionee. Of course, one could object to this claim by arguing that the protagonists are really asking an empirical question, a closed request for

information. But, as will become clear below, it is very difficult to argue for this successfully.

Suppose, then, someone objects that the question "What should I do?" is in many contexts very much an uncomplicated empirical question. Of course, the question is a normative one, but that in itself does not rule out that it might be an empirical one as well. After all, there are facts about norms. For suppose I have stripped down my Harley Davidson and now want to reassemble it, in which case it is very likely that I will ask myself time and again "What should I do?" In the circumstances, that would clearly be an invitation to look very carefully in the manual to find out the right way to proceed. Something similar would seem to be the case if I am abroad and want to arrange something (say, rent a car) that requires me to go through a procedure with which I am unfamiliar. Closer to home, and more generally, I might ask the question if I find myself at a loss in the middle of a practice with which other people are familiar, or are experts in.

It makes sense, in such circumstances, to think of the question "What should I do?" as a sincere request for help or advice with the background assumption that the question is an empirical one, that it is a request for information available to the questionee who has gained access to the relevant empirical domain. This could be a domain of normative facts, collected in a manual or in a set of rules describing a practice. And even if I know that the questionee is not familiar with the practice, and is not an expert in it, I might nevertheless ask the question as though it were a request for available information. I might ask the question in this way, and think of it as a request to look very carefully in a manual, assuming there must be something like such a manual in whatever meaning of "be" would turn out to be appropriate in the context. I could think of the question in this way, and I could think of the problem it introduces as a mere practical problem, similar to that of not knowing how to answer the question about the kidneys of Napoleon's housemaid on Elba. I could have the conviction that the information contained in the manual will be available somewhere, and that the only problem is one of access.

This seems a possible, some might want to claim a plausible, way to make sense of the questions asked by the protagonists in my examples. Tim's parents could pose their question in this way to an educationist or child psychologist. David could think of his question as a request for more information about both the reaction patterns of his neighbor and his own communicative skills, and he might think that his neighbor's wife has access to the right answers. Melanie might wonder whether there is perhaps a volunteer aid protocol that specifies the conditions under which a volunteer would best decide to care for herself. And Frankie might think of her question as directed, for example, to the agony column of her favorite girl's magazine. They all might understand themselves in this way

as asking for advice about a practice with which they are not familiar but think their questionee is an expert in.

Understanding themselves in this way, however, gives a false impression of the question they ask. Or so I argue. And here is why.

A manual is an abstract specification of a general procedure that might be executed over and over again in dealing with every particular instance to which the manual applies. Likewise, saying that someone is an expert in a practice is to make a statement about the practice in general, about the expert's ability to engage in a pattern of behavior over and over again. If a questioner assumes that the questionee has access to the relevant information about what the questioner should do, there are two separate assumptions at work.

The first assumption is about the questionee's access to the information concerning the practice in general. The questioner assumes that the questionee has access to general facts about what someone with such and such characteristics should do in a situation with such and such characteristics. There are two ways to challenge this assumption, one by addressing the issue of access, the other by addressing the issue of the availability in principle of the information.[3] I shall ignore these challenges here, because I should like to emphasize the need to discuss the other assumption in the context of this article.

This second assumption is not about the questionee's access to information available in principle but about the appropriateness of the information, assumed to be available, for answering the particular question asked by the questioner in response to a problem he or she faces.

The second assumption allows for an open-question reply.[4] Such a reply says: "O.K., I accept that the manual requires that in situation S an agent A should do F, and I accept that an expert would do F in my case, but does this mean that *I* should do F?" This open-question reply echoes particularist concerns that I shall ignore here.[5] The reply makes sense because it underscores that we might need reasons to back up the assumption that I am in situation S, or that I am relevantly similar to A, or that the expert's example gives *me* compelling reasons to do what she would do. While reassembling my Harley Davidson, I might read in

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[3] There is a lot of literature on these two challenges. As regards the first, see recent work on moral epistemology, e.g., Morton 1997, 160–77, and Sinnott-Armstrong and Timmons 1996. As regards the second, see the debate on the role of theory in ethical argumentations, e.g., Caputo 2000 and Clarke and Simpson 1989.

[4] Cf. Moore's (1993) open-question argument.

[5] One way to discuss the issue of whether the question "What should I do?" is a request for in-principle available information is to engage in the debate between particularists and principalists. See, e.g., Hooker and Little 2000. This is not, however, the most fruitful way to emphasize the point *I* try to make here in distinguishing between open and closed questions, which is a point about the nature of philosophical questions.

the manual that if the motorcycle looks like figure n I should proceed by fixing p. But this only helps, of course, if I know that my motorcycle looks like figure n, and not like figure $n+i$.

The intelligibility of this open-question reply shows that my protagonists' question is not necessarily a closed request for information that might be available to the questionee. It is, at least, also a request for reasons to sustain the view that the information available to the questionee is relevant as an answer to my protagonists' question. What is more, the open-question reply shows, intriguingly, that understanding my protagonists' question as merely an empirical request for information turns possible answers into question-begging answers to an arbitrary, contingent formal question.

This can be shown as follows. Understanding a question as merely an empirical request for information means treating the question as a closed question. That in turn means accepting that one does not need reasons to back up the assumption that the information available to the questionee constitutes an answer to the question asked by the questioner. If the empirical domain contains the fact that Kant read Aristotle's *Categories*, or that Napoleon's housemaid on Elba had only one kidney, the questionee's access to these facts just constitutes providing an answer to the question of whether Kant read Aristotle's *Categories*, or to the question about the number of kidneys of Napoleon's housemaid on Elba. Having access to these facts just means being able to answer these questions. If they are empirical questions, this just means that we shall take for granted that questioner and questionee share the same knowledge of the meaning of the verb *to read*, and agree on having no worries about the quality of the particular copy of Aristotle's *Categories* Kant had in his library, and agree on knowing whether a certain organ counts as a kidney, and so forth. That is, understanding a particular question as an empirical question is precisely to understand it as a closed question, as a question that is *not* about the framework of inquiry itself but simply about the facts. To ask an empirical question means to take a particular framework of inquiry for granted, a framework that unequivocally identifies the relevant facts.

Understanding the question "What should I do?" as an empirical question boils down to taking for granted that the situation which elicited the question is correctly understood as a particular situation described in a manual, or as a particular sequence in a well-determined practice. The result of taking this for granted is, ironically, *not* that the questionee will be able to answer the question by providing the relevant *empirical* facts but that she will merely be able to answer the question by providing *formal* facts, made up of unsupported assumptions about certain formal relations between the various parts of a manual or between the various sequences that constitute, by definition, a particular well-determined practice.

The point made can be clarified by analogy. Suppose I am troubled by the question of whether Napoleon's housemaid on Elba had a free will.[6] Suppose I ask around, and someone informs me that it is an empirical question to which he happens to have the answer because he has access to the relevant facts. Suppose he is a follower of Sartre (or, for that matter, of Harry Frankfurt, Ted Honderich, Robert Kane, and so on) and claims that the fact that the housemaid is a conscious person (not merely an *en-soi* but also a *pour-soi*) provides sufficient empirical evidence to answer the question positively. Such a response to my question would clearly be methodologically naive. And it would, intriguingly, be similar to stating that being a housemaid conceptually entails having a free will, which would mean that the question was mistakenly, and unselfconsciously, answered as though it were a formal question. Such an answer would obviously invite a rhetorical open-question reply: "O.K., I accept that according to Sartre's theory of man the housemaid had a free will, but should we accept this theory in the first place?"

The upshot of the discussion so far is that if we assume that the question "What should we do?" is a request for available information, this leads to an interpretation of the question as a closed question directed at clarifying, articulating, or making explicit the formal relations that exist between the terms used in the question as though they were terms with a meaning completely determined by their relations to one another in a contingent, independent, and complete theoretical framework. The information assumed to be available on this interpretation is in one respect empirical. It is information about a theoretical framework that is itself understood as a historical product, as a framework of formal relations between terms that do not exist in some timeless realm of propositions, existing merely in a contingent, historical setting of a local language game.[7] The information assumed to be available on this interpretation is also, in another respect, formal. The information is formal on the assumption that the terms used in asking the question can *only* mean what they mean by definition. This is assumed to be so, insofar as it is assumed that in asking and answering the question we only move within the confines of one particular, local language game.

In the light of the original question asked by my protagonists, this is a remarkably implausible result. For in asking their question, they merely used general, unspecific, highly context-sensitive terms: "What should I do?" These do not at all seem to be terms that can have a meaning only within the confines of one particular, local language game. For the sake of

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[6] Because, for example, I have read perplexing passages in her biography and am familiar with some of the philosophical views on free will.

[7] The example of the Harley Davidson manual is in this respect plausible. One could also think of the rules of chess or the rules constituting the procedure of renting a car in Perugia, Italy, in 2001, and so forth.

argument, however, we could try to make this result more plausible by making a detour into transcendentalism. I shall do that in the next section in order to clarify what philosophers do when they address open questions.

3. Transcendental Arguments and Moral Philosophy

Let me recapitulate. I argued first that philosophical questions differ from empirical and formal questions because they are *open* questions, not requests for available information. But I then argued that it might be plausible to defend the view that my protagonists' question—"What should I do?"—is not an open but a closed question. Defending this view reveals an interesting feature of philosophical questions. Reinterpreting an open question like "What should I do?" as a closed question shows that, with respect to such questions, the distinction between an empirical and a formal question is a difference without a distinction. Turning a philosophical question into a closed question is a matter of showing that a particular well-determined theoretical framework is necessarily presupposed in the act of sensibly asking the question, and this leads to a situation in which one is offered the opportunity to discover empirical facts about the formal internal relations of this framework of inquiry. I concluded, however, that it seems too far-fetched to believe that my protagonists in asking their question "What should I do?" of necessity have to presuppose one particular well-determined framework. Now in this section I shall try to clarify why and how philosophers since Kant have thought they had reason to believe that this is not far-fetched after all, but convincingly true. In clarifying the transcendental approach, I have no scholarly ambitions but aim primarily to show what philosophers do when they make headway in dealing with open questions.

Stephan Körner (1969) has argued convincingly that a transcendental argument should be understood as an argument designed to show that a particular framework of inquiry is the only—the *unique*—categorical framework that makes it possible at all to ask particular questions about a certain region of experience. That is, a transcendental argument is designed to show the emptiness of an open-question reply. If there were indeed a transcendental argument that would show us, for example, that accepting Sartre's theory of man is necessary to make it possible at all to wonder about the free will of Napoleon's housemaid, then, in actually being able to ask a question about this woman's free will, we would have shown our in-principle access to all the resources needed to answer that question. Possessing a valid transcendental argument with respect to a particular region of experience would, therefore, constitute the end of philosophy so far as that region of experience is concerned. This is so because once we have a valid transcendental argument, we have eliminated the logical space for any philosophical questions about that region of experience. This would count as success, not failure. It is what many

think happened in the process of emancipating physical science from philosophy.

Given the validity of a particular transcendental argument, all questions we could possibly ask would imply, because of our very ability to ask them, our access to the relevant information with which to answer them. In the empirical mode the questions would be empirical, but under the assumption of the availability of the reality of a world of appearances, and in the transcendental mode the questions would be formal, but under the assumption of the availability of the categories of understanding and the forms of intuition. In the empirical mode we could trust science, and in the transcendental mode we could trust logical analysis. Philosophy would be completed, or dissolved.

Such could have been the dream of at least one philosopher.[8] We could understand this dream as expressing one of the ends of philosophy—namely, to build a transcendental argument. This is indeed one of the things we could take philosophers to be doing. Clearly, we're still very far from, for example, anything near a convincing argument designed to show that we need to accept Sartre's theory of man to be able to wonder at all whether Napoleon's housemaid on Elba had a free will (and, obviously, most of us do not think that such an argument will be forthcoming). But a significant part of the job philosophers seem to be capable of doing consists precisely in specifying the meaning of open questions, in order to eliminate meaningless interpretations of these questions and to arrive at questions closed enough to entail answers and to dissolve problems.[9] One of the results of a philosophical enterprise is indeed the narrowing down of the meaning of the original question asked. This can be seen in a popular, although implausible, picture of Kantian ethics with respect to the question asked by my protagonists.[10] I shall discuss this in some detail in order to clarify my claim that the question asked by my protagonists *is* a philosophical question in the sense of being a question about how to conceive of experience.

Take a look at my protagonists' question: ''What should I do?'' The words used are very general and context sensitive. But now look at the following attempt to narrow the question down to something that could perhaps be answered by providing information.

Step 1

To *do* something presupposes intentional and rational agency. That is, one can only *do* something under the assumption that one's bodily

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[8] It could have been Carnap's dream of what could be achieved by understanding the verificationist principle. Cf. Stroud 1984, 170–208.

[9] It is in this respect telling to analyze the structure of Dennett's arguments in Dennett 1984.

[10] The picture is the target in Herman 1993.

behavior is not mechanically triggered by events. This means that one's attitude to preceding events should be decisive in doing what one does. Not every attitude counts as the right kind of attitude, because it makes sense to argue that, for example, one's emotional attitudes are themselves triggered by internal events. This reasoning leads to the conclusion that one can be said to *do* something only if it is an action one decides to do in virtue of a rational deliberation. This reasoning, if plausible, allows that my protagonists' question is already narrowed down from something vague and indeterminate to something quite specific: my protagonists ask which rationally defensible intention to have.

Step 2

"I" is an indexical that refers to an elusive self. The self that is asking the question will appear as a particular empirical self, but will also be known as a universal noumenal self. And only the latter can be the one able to *act*, able to exist under the postulate of freedom we need for a being able to *do* something. This considerably narrows down my protagonists' question. It turns the multitude of questions, each specific one asked in particular circumstances by particular people, into one single question. "What should *I* do?" is not a question merely about what Tim, David, Melanie, and Frankie should do, but about what each of them should do in his or her mode of being a noumenal self that is capable of rational self-legislation.

Step 3

There are quite a number of modal auxiliaries, and "should" is one of them. In asking what one *should* do—rather than "might," "could," "will," and so forth—one is asking something quite particular. It is defensible to argue that the only things we *should* do are things that it is our *duty* to do. This line of arguing, like those used in steps 1 and 2, is often associated with a Kantian conception of morality. It leads to another, serious limit to the question asked by my protagonists. It leads to a narrow conception of morality. If my protagonists ask "What *should* I do?" they are really asking what their *duty* is in the circumstances they are in. And given all three steps, we might understand this project as an attempt to provide a transcendental argument to the effect that we have to understand my protagonists' question as one about the content of what Williams calls "the morality system" (1985, 174). Understanding the question in this way, and accepting the three steps as constituting a transcendental argument aimed at specifying the necessary presuppositions for the possibility of the question being meaningful, turns the

question into one that is indeed very much like a question about the contents of the Harley Davidson manual.

Reconstructing my protagonists' question along these popular lines leads to a number of interesting results. One is that it could explain the popularity of ethical constructivism (namely, by explaining that moral facts are empirical facts about "the morality system," which means, by the same token, that they are formal facts about the conceptual relations that make up this morality system). Another is that it could explain the popularity of the narrow conception of morality (see Kagan 1991). Although my protagonists ask themselves what they should do, there is not much comfort forthcoming from morality, because, despite their use of "should," there is not much to be said about their *duties*. This could also explain the image of Kant's categorical imperative as a sieve. It is as though morality is unable to provide my protagonists with a motive, and as though they are invited to come up with a motive of their own that could and should be subjected to the hypothetical universalization test in order to see whether it falls through the categorical imperative sieve as producing permissible actions.

A further result is that it shows us an interesting distinction between the work of a moral philosopher and that of an applied ethicist. The moral philosopher is engaged in discussing, criticizing, developing, and reconstructing arguments that pretend to be steps in a transcendental argument that aims to determine the inner conceptual structure of the framework of moral inquiry. The applied ethicist, on the other hand, deals with what he or she assumes is a closed question and tries to determine the particular moral facts that could, as it were, be read from the manual of morally permissible actions.

I should like to link up with this distinction between applied ethics and moral philosophy by emphasizing that I take my protagonists to be asking the *philosophical* question of how to conceive of experience, and not the closed question about what would be their duty in the circumstances. I take my protagonists to be wondering about how to proceed, about how to respond to their situation. I take them to be inclined to make the open-question reply to anyone who straightforwardly reinterprets their question as being about their *duties*. My point can be clarified, linguistically speaking, by stressing that the steps sketched above erroneously focused on the last three words of the question and ignored the first one. But this first word—"what"—could arguably be taken to carry the full meaning of the question. That is, it would not really have changed my examples had I presented my protagonists as asking merely "What?" or "What next?" or "Now what?" rather than "What should I do?"

A better way to understand this is to take my examples to be stories, or narrative biographies, that get stuck—that is, stories that have an inner dynamics, that unfold themselves with a particular "flow" but reach a deadlock because the protagonist of the story does not know how to

proceed. The question with which the stories come up, and which invites us to engage in philosophy, is a, perhaps ill-phrased, response of the protagonist to the unfolding of a series of experiences, of events and actions, that evoked each other up to the point where he or she is expected to proceed in one or another way but finds himself or herself deeply unable to determine the right direction in which to proceed.

If this is a correct description of what is going on in my examples, it can be shown why the applied ethicist's understanding of my protagonists' question is a possible understanding, but also an understanding that silences all philosophical problems that my protagonists' question could be taken to refer to. That is, if it is crucial to my examples that the protagonists experience the unfolding of a story—their autobiography—and experience it as reaching a deadlock in their inability to determine the right direction to proceed, then at least one answer to their question could be appropriate: an answer that would provide them with a determination of the right direction in which to proceed. But jumping to the conclusion that "a quote from the moral manual" is all my protagonists are asking for is not merely taking for granted that my protagonists will implicitly have accepted some kind of transcendental argument like the three steps discussed above; it is also taking for granted that they have no interest in discussing, exploring, and investigating the framework of inquiry that is assumed, because of the implicitly accepted transcendental argument, to be the only—the *unique*—categorical framework of inquiry they have to rely on in order to experience the breakdown of their stories as pointing to both their necessity to act and their inability to act. Resisting this jumping to the conclusion that my protagonists merely have an interest in information—an easy way out of their predicament—is one of the goals of those philosophers who think of themselves as advocates of critical thinking, as engaged in questioning presuppositions. I hope, however, that my argument has made it clear that philosophy is not merely a matter of questioning presuppositions. That is just one of the guises the project of addressing open questions takes.

4. On Asking How to Regain the "Flow" of One's Life

I should like to draw three conclusions in the light of the foregoing. One is about the nature of philosophical questions, the second is about doing philosophy, and the third is about a suggestive, alternative interpretation of the question asked by the protagonists in my examples.

Conclusion 1

I argued in the previous section that philosophical questions are not closed requests for information available in principle but are open

questions about the complex relationship between a framework of inquiry and the content of human experience to which it is directed. In the previous section we came across some of the issues involved in this complex relationship—namely, the issue of the framework's uniqueness and that of the framework's appropriateness to uncover, elucidate, and grasp the region of human experience in question. Obviously, however, in asking ''What should I do?'' the protagonists in my examples do not merely, or exclusively, display an interest in second-order questions about the framework of inquiry. Their interest is not merely conceptual. They are not unworldly intellectuals interested merely in the working of their own minds. In the terms introduced in the previous section, they have a serious interest in being informed about the correct way to proceed. They have an interest in restoring the ''flow'' of the stories of their lives. They want to get on with their lives.

All the same, in asking their question, and even in rightly taking it to be a philosophical question, we might think of them as essentially having merely an *instrumental* interest in their framework of inquiry. It would be misleading to suggest that they are exclusively interested in the conceptual inner structure of their framework of inquiry. They are not. In claiming that their interest is philosophical, I do not mean to claim that they have such an exclusive interest in a conceptual framework of inquiry: what I claim is that they will have an interest—*also* an interest—in the inner structure of the framework they use in responding to their situation by means of asking a philosophical question. It will be an interest in this inner structure *as* an instrument—or as *the* instrument—to uncover, elucidate, and grasp the region of their experience that appears to be important as well as problematic.

The point to be emphasized is that a philosophical question is to be distinguished from a closed question in *two* ways: it is not merely a request for *empirical* information, nor is it merely a request for *formal* information. Philosophical questions are not merely about the content of human experience or merely about the inner structure of the framework of inquiry; they are questions *about both at once*, questions, in short, about how to conceive of human experience.[11]

Conclusion 2

Doing philosophy is, in one way, always a matter of asking questions and, in another way, always a matter of solving and dissolving problems. The

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[11] One final way to state the point is to emphasize that in asking a philosophical question about the complex relationship between a framework of inquiry and the content of human experience at which it is directed, one might precisely be asking a question about the intelligibility and/or correctness of there being anything like a clear-cut distinction between the content of experience and the framework of inquiry. See Davidson 1984.

apparent paradox immediately disappears once we emphasize that asking a question is itself just a first step toward solving a problem. But the philosopher's way of solving and dissolving problems is not primarily a matter of providing the information asked for: instead, it is a matter of improving the question to be asked, of improving our understanding of the particular problem beneath the surface that elicits from us an open question about how to conceive of a particular region of experience.

What philosophers do is determine the right question to ask.[12] My detour into transcendentalism has shown us one way in which philosophers could indeed be doing that, and could think of themselves as making progress, because for example they regard themselves to be developing, defending, and criticizing transcendental arguments. These are arguments designed to show that the experience of a particular problem presupposes the availability of the only—the *unique* and necessary—framework of inquiry that makes it possible to experience that one particular problem at all. The success of such arguments also makes it possible to solve that problem through the analysis of the conceptual inner structure of the implied framework of inquiry. That is, philosophers should think of themselves as doing a number of closely interrelated things, namely: (1) determining a conceptual framework, (2) showing this framework to be the only one capable of articulating the problem encountered in a particular region of experience, (3) asking the right question, in terms of this framework, that articulates the problem we really have, and (4) solving this problem by analyzing the conceptual inner structure of this framework of inquiry.

Conclusion 3

In section 1, I presented the protagonists in my examples as asking themselves what they should do. That question is one of Kant's famous basic philosophical questions, and as such my examples could at least give the initial impression that they were invitations to engage in philosophy. In sections 2 and 3, I argued for a much stronger sense in which my protagonists' question should be understood as philosophical, but I also emphasized that the problems they respond to in asking what to do need not necessarily be understood as the specific problem Kant thought to be essential to ethics. I argued that emphasizing the role of "should," "I," and "do" in the formulation of the question entailed a biased understanding of the question that allowed for an open-question reply intended to undermine the plausibility of the transcendental argument that could be said to underpin this biased understanding. I suggested a better way to

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[12] See, for fun, the discussion by Scott and Scott (1999) on the right question to be put to an angel; they note the failure to engage the real problem of how to conceive of the experience of being able to ask an angel a question.

understand my protagonists' problem—as being about the story of their life getting stuck, about their autobiography having an inner dynamics, one that unfolds with a particular "flow" but reaches a deadlock because the protagonist of the story does not know how to proceed.

This way of understanding my protagonists' question rightfully plays a major role in contemporary practical philosophy. Understanding the question "What should I do?" along these lines shows us on the one hand why we are so easily lured into applied theorizing that fails to address the philosophical issues (showing normative ethics and rational choice theory to be quite similar projects), but it shows us on the other hand how to engage in the philosophy of practical reasoning. It allows us to understand the pivotal importance of autonomy and evaluative self-knowledge for the capacity of practical reason. Much work has still to be done along these lines in order to show that we can make headway in practical philosophy by reinterpreting the question "What should I do" in the light of the question "Who am I?"

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