Problematology: A New Paradigm for Thought

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Why declare problematology a new paradigm for thought? So many new paradigms have emerged in philosophy and the humanities that the concept itself has been diminished through over-use. Nevertheless, problematology does warrant this descriptor since it is fundamentally different from all other philosophies. Its originality and radicality arises from Michel Meyer’s inquiry into questioning itself, thus overturning centuries of thought which have relegated questioning to secondary status, despite its importance for scholarly practice. Meyer sees questioning not merely as a tool but as a central concept upon which to construct a new, systematic vision of philosophy. The problematological paradigm shift takes us from ‘propositionalism’—for example in the philosophy of the subject or ontology—to questioning. Indeed, propositionalism cannot easily account for paradigm shifts because it constructs them as incommensurable epistemological breaks. However, a paradigm shift is not a radical break between different foundational epistemes, but rather a shift in which one mode of questioning and resolution gives way to another—and underneath all such shifts we find the question-answer link. Problematology is unique in that it uncovers this underlying logic, explicating questioning and the answerhood of responses to historical problematization in contrast to propositionalism which constructs responses not as answers but as radically incommensurate propositions. Meyer effects a paradigm shift by responding to the generalized problematicity of contemporary thought experienced within philosophy in the prolonged twentieth-century crisis of metaphysics and outside of philosophy in art, music, literature, and science, and empirically in the weakening of social structures. He returns to the foundational question of philosophy and finds a new answer which reflects this questioning, giving a foundation to this generalized problematicity in a manner thought impossible by many. In problematology, problematizing the foundation of reason ceases to become the expression of the crisis of philosophy and is instead that which leads us to its true nature, its underlying principles, and positivity.

Problematology is a new conception of meaning and reason, grounded in a reflexively secured principle, and as such offers a renewed vision of philosophy itself. Philosophy, more than any other endeavor, asks fundamental questions
about reason and about the world, and it is in this questioning that Meyer finds a principle: if we question questioning, then we see that questioning is the first principle of reason and we reflexively confirm this principle in our questioning practice. The problematological foundation is an answer to the historical problematization of philosophy—just as all philosophies are—but it is different because it reflects the problematic, expressing problematization as the only reality from which to start. Meyer’s philosophy articulates this fundamental problematicity and works from it to provide a coherent, generalizable vision which consistently articulates the necessity of questioning and the freedom it enacts.

Meyer’s unique conception of the indeterminate foundation of questioning combines with his concern for unity to produce a new and yet traditional vision for philosophy. It is new because Meyer argues that philosophy has mistaken its own nature, looking to scientific answering for the model of its own answering, which can only be problematic. Philosophers have always questioned—even radically, like Descartes and Socrates—but not to the extent of questioning questioning itself. He argues for questioning as the first principle of thought and deduces from this answer the problematological difference between questions and answers. We have here a new conception of meaning and reason which articulates an original theoretical grammar very different from the traditional schemes. Problematology is paradigmatically different because it is neither subject-centered reason nor ontology. Rather, it operates at a more fundamental level by articulating the difference between question and answer, a difference found in all possible areas, including art, literature and politics. But like all new paradigms, the radical outlook of problematology makes it very difficult to apprehend.

At the same time, Meyer’s is a traditional vision of philosophy as metaphysics, albeit one which shifts its object from Being to questioning itself. In marked contrast with Wittgenstein, who declared that philosophy leaves everything as it was, and Heidegger, who reduced philosophy to the museum of Being, Meyer sees philosophy as a positive force which can contribute productively to other disciplines. His vision thus has more in common with the expansive approaches of Aristotle and Hegel than with many of his contemporaries. Perhaps this is another reason Meyer is not widely understood; this ambitious, integrated vision is out of step with much contemporary thought which acknowledges problematization but believes it renders such a coherent and systematic philosophy impossible.
The rhetoricization of twentieth-century thought looked dismal for philosophy as metaphysics, however the problematological view realizes this as an opportunity to bring rhetoric to the forefront. Problematology is a philosophical framework which expresses contingency but is nonetheless positive and, most importantly, integrative. As a philosopher Meyer is concerned with unity and systematization, but importantly this is the rhetorical unity of questioning and not the artificial unity of ontology nor the philosophy of the subject which have been criticized as paradoxical and entwined with attempts at social control. For philosophy to be renewed, it must be relevant to other modes of thought; useful, but without attempting to colonize them, to dictate terms as though philosophical reasoning could solve all problems by deduction from foundational propositions. By posing the question of the disciplines as a question, the relationship between them can be conceived of problematologically. Each discipline or modality of reason is a derived form of questioning which responds to the philosophical foundation, reflecting questioning but also—because each is a response and therefore an answer—detaching from its philosophical origin to form a unique mode of inquiry. Each mode of questioning separates itself from the philosophical by repressing its foundational interrogativity and directing its questions outward toward particular objects through specific modes of inquiry. The disciplines are autonomous but also embody the problematological difference because they are born of it. Hence, questioning is reflected in history, the natural and social sciences, politics, art, literature, theatre, and more. The operation of the problematological difference is common to all and yet each manifests this difference in its own way.

The principle of questioning and the problematological difference provide the grounds for consistency and comparability across disciplines, the basis for interdisciplinary work without diminishing the particularity of questioning within each field. Problematology indicates the positivity of philosophy for other forms of thought to which it had conceded intellectual territory and supports a constructive engagement with philosophy by those of us outside it. Meyer’s expansive vision for philosophy is a positive source of creativity rather than the expression of a paradox or that which undermines rationality itself. Problematology is integrative without being totalizing, providing a common theoretical grammar by which we might communicate across the many different disciplines in order to show what is in question and what can be answered, to elaborate which problems confront us historically and how we might search for answers which are problematological more often than not.
By articulating the logic of questioning, problematology brings to bear a singular philosophical vision upon the problematics of various fields. This issue commences a dialogue by bringing together for the first time an interdisciplinary collection of articles utilizing problematology. It goes only a small way toward constructing this interdisciplinary conversation but it does demonstrate the versatility and wide-ranging scope of Meyer’s ideas and how the mechanism of the problematological difference can be used to illuminate inquiry.