

PHILOSOPHY AND THE FACTS

A long-established form of argument in philosophy—Plato uses it in the **Euthyphro**, and Ryle claims it to be the principal argument-form employed in **The Concept of Mind**—is the **reductio ad absurdum**, which demonstrates the inconsistency of a set of premises by deducing from them a contradiction. Such **a priori** methods of confutation seem to be essential for dealing with those philosophical views which belong to traditional metaphysics, since one of the identifying features of metaphysical views is that they protect themselves against refutation through appeal to what are commonly regarded as the facts. Their method of protection is simple: it consists either of denying that what are commonly regarded as facts are really facts or of denying that the facts are properly described by common parlance. This is what G. E. Moore often gives the impression of having overlooked.

This form of self-defence is available even to what are apparently the empirically most committed of philosophical theories. For example, two interdependent characteristics of Descartes's notion of **cogitatio** are that (a) the existence and nature of each **cogitatio** are known by its possessor without possibility of error, and (b) the occurrence of every **cogitatio** is logically independent of the occurrence of any bodily event. It is tempting—and despite what is said above I think Ryle falls into this trap—to identify the notion of **cogitatio** with some such vague notion as **mental event**, to include under the latter category sensations, emotions and thoughts, and to imagine that one has refuted Descartes by having produced all kinds of examples in which we are wrong about our own feelings and further examples in which it is clear that certain kinds of mental events are logically tied to certain kinds of bodily events. But without further argument such procedures can never **refute** Descartes. For all that they show is that our ordinary concept of mind does not match Descartes's concept of the possessor of **cogitationes**, the soul; that our distinction between psychology and the natural

sciences does not match Descartes's distinction between mind and matter. To which, obviously, Descartes can say: so much the worse for the ordinary concept of mind, which the deductions of pure reason show to be confused.

We can perhaps still demand of such a metaphysic that it impinge in some way upon what we commonly regard as the facts: for instance, that we should be able, at least in principle, to re-describe the events of which psychology treats in the terms which the metaphysic in question provides for us. But the necessary qualifying phrase 'at least in principle' immediately deprives this demand of any stringency. For all failures in such attempts at re-description can be attributed by the metaphysician under attack to our own intellectual inadequacy; and the confutation of **this** claim is clearly a far more difficult task than proving that one can be mistaken about one's own emotions. Even if it can be achieved, it is not a refutation that works by a simple appeal to the facts.

I have tried to show, briefly, that even the most empirical-seeming metaphysical view is not vulnerable to testing against the facts. The invulnerability can be seen far more clearly in the case of a metaphysical system which is quite remote from human experience, like Leibniz's. It appears to be Leibniz's view that the human bodies we encounter in experience are merely the phenomenal appearances of infinite collections of monads which differ in the clarity of their "perceptions", the one with the clearest perception being the dominant monad which forms the rational soul of the person. How on earth is such a view to be compared with the facts? For it straightway condemns them as mere phenomena, to be ignored in favour of the deductions of pure reason.

Given that **arguments** such as the **reductio ad absurdum** are essential for the rejection of misguided metaphysics since appeal to the facts is insufficient (and I intend this to be given only provisionally), we may begin to be puzzled as to the status of such philosophical utterances as 'Each single substance expresses the whole universe after its own manner, and in its notion all events are comprised with all their circumstances and all the sequence of eternal things' (Leibniz, **Discourse on Metaphysics**, translated by Lucas and Grint, synopsis to

section IX). This sentence is in the present indicative active, and looks in context as if it is being used to state a fact. Yet as we have seen, what we commonly regard as the facts cannot be made to bear upon its truth or falsity. So unless we are to say that there are two categories of facts—facts of pure reason on the one hand and ordinary facts on the other—we may as well say that Leibniz's utterance does not state a fact. But to some extent it does not matter whether we say that the utterance informs us of a fact of pure reason or not, for whatever we say we have still to get clear about the differences between such utterances and those which inform us of ordinary facts; and this is the task of getting clear about the different jobs that sentences are doing in philosophy on the one hand and in coping with ordinary day-to-day experiences on the other.

I said that to some extent it does not matter what we say which is pretty vague. But it is impossible to be precise since one way of marking the differences between philosophical utterances and others may be more confusing than another way. And I think that some ways of viewing philosophical utterances do make it almost impossible to understand their nature. So I prefer to say that utterances such as Leibniz's do not state facts.

Well, what kind of utterance is it? Suppose that we wish to reject it as somehow incorrect, and that our method of rejection is to deduce a contradiction from it, either alone or combined with some set of similar utterances. Such a procedure reveals that the premiss or premisses of the deduction are not consistent. We can then state the premisses which give rise to the contradiction, and say what is apparently the right thing by prefacing these premisses, with the words 'It is logically impossible that...'.¹

Now Moore (**Philosophical Papers** p. 275:) claims that Wittgenstein implied in lectures that the sentence 'It is logically impossible that p should be the case' means the same as 'The sentence "p" has no sense.' Wittgenstein also talked at the time of 'tautologies' as being 'without sense'; and it was characteristic of him throughout his career to think of philosophical remarks as in some way or another nonsensical.

(I realise that even in the **Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus** he distinguished at least two importantly different ways of lacking sense) but that is not to the point here.) E.g. in the **Tractatus** (6. 53) he says that the correct method in philosophy would involve demonstrating to someone who wanted to say something metaphysical that 'he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his sentences'; while in the **Investigations** (p. 221e) he speaks of the utterance 'I know what I want (or wish or believe or feel)' as 'either philosophers' nonsense or at any rate **not judgement a priori**'.

If Wittgenstein is correct, we are apparently freed from our initial puzzle concerning the status of Leibniz's remark. It now seems to be clear why we needn't bother to consult the facts when considering it: how could we expect the facts to be relevant to nonsense? But this advantage seems far outweighed by the disadvantages of Wittgenstein's idea. First of all, we appear to **understand** many remarks which on his view should be condemned as nonsense. Of course this apparent understanding could be illusory, but that point would require separate argument for each individual case. Secondly, we can perform logical operations on these utterances; and if some are to be condemned as nonsense on the ground that they give rise to contradictions it seems that we **must** be able to perform such operations in order to demonstrate their nonsensical character. How on earth, then, can they lack sense? One cannot perform deductions on the utterance 'Fairy the how watch too' which very clearly lacks sense. It looks as though Wittgenstein's idea is one of the most implausible one could have about the nature of philosophical utterances.

However, the idea does have sufficient useful properties to make it a view worth investigation. (1) If it is correct we can, as I have said, see why the facts don't always bear on traditional philosophy, and see also the advantages attendant upon doing another kind of philosophy which depends heavily on the use of examples to give it empirical content and persuasive force. (And here one may consider the enormous change in **style** amongst some distinguished contemporary philosophers which is largely owing to Wittgenstein.) (2) It can

seem (and did to the logical positivists) to provide a weapon with which all metaphysicians can effectively be bludgeoned into silence. (3) It explains why metaphysical disputes seem rarely to be satisfactorily resolved. (Old arguments never die; they simply fade away, only to be revived later to fight again.) (4) It explains the peculiar feeling of unreality that overcomes me when I try to follow the supposedly rigorous deductions of, say, Spinoza's **Ethics**. (5) Perhaps most importantly, it can give us a middle road amongst seemingly exhaustive and mutually exclusive philosophical theories. Thus: is the universe one or many? Neither, for the question cannot sensibly be asked. Is Time real or unreal? Such talk is nonsense. And so on—though admittedly that is far too short a way of dealing with such questions; the hard work and real insight would come in **exposing** the nonsensical character of the questions. Even philosophical views which seem to lie closer to the facts than those at stake in the questions I have just mentioned may be avoided through using Wittgenstein's idea. For instance, we can reject both dualistic and idealistic theories of mind, on the one hand, **and** their materialist counterparts on the other, for we can say of all these traditional theories of mind that they are constructed in terms of a dualist model and that hence any contradiction in dualism will infect them all with nonsense, since they will all contain such contradictions or the equally nonsensical denials of them. (If it is nonsense to suppose that the world consists of two substances, it is equally nonsense to suppose that it consists of one, or any other number.) This at least is an important result. So what can be said in a defence which is other than merely pragmatic, of the idea that philosophical utterances which are open to rejection only through methods of argument like the **reductio** are nonsense?

I must admit that the outlook is not initially promising. Wittgenstein said in the lectures reported by Moore (*ibid.* p. 274) that the expression "'makes sense' is vague, and will have different senses in different cases", and one can distinguish straightway two different kinds of nonsense **at the very least** (of course there are other kinds), one being

of the category-mistake kind like 'Cardboard boxes eat geometry' and the other of the kind exemplified by the remark I quoted from Leibniz. Let us call examples of the former kind 'obvious nonsense' and examples of the latter kind 'disguised nonsense'. This categorisation, while it contains the seed of a remarkably powerful philosophical idea, is hardly explanatory, and indeed it seems to throw up a further difficulty. For surely the **point** of classifying utterances like Leibniz's as **nonsense** is that they are to be regarded as essentially similar to category-mistakes. And if we distinguish them, as we must, we seem to throw away the advantages of terming them nonsense. One indicator of a sentence's being nonsense is its not stating an ordinary fact, but being nonsense must surely have more to it than this. For if it does not, we are guilty of nothing better than mere persuasive definition, of using the phrase 'lacking sense' simply to mean 'not stating an ordinary fact' and then going on to trade on the pejorative character of the former phrase to produce a sense of discredit when in reality something quite neutral has been pointed out. (Wittgenstein may have done something like this accidentally when in the **Tractatus** he described certain otherwise quite respectable non-fact-stating sentences, e.g. tautologies, as 'senseless'—as opposed to 'nonsense'). Thus commands, mathematical equations, questions and exclamations do not state ordinary facts—the second and fourth do not even have a propositional content—but are we to describe them as nonsense? If so, it doesn't appear to matter a bit whether an utterance is nonsensical or not.

However, utterances of the kinds just mentioned do not just not state ordinary facts; they do not even **appear** to do so. Whereas Leibniz's remarks, and many others to be found in the writings of metaphysicians, do look as if they are stating facts. What may make them pernicious, then, is not their non-factual status, but their non-factual status **combined with** their factual appearance. At this point it may even be possible and advisable to drop the vocabulary of nonsense and instead to talk of philosophical remarks which masquerade as statements of fact. The word 'masquerade' retains something of

the pejorative character of the word 'nonsense', but its use frees us of the urge to misunderstand my point, which stems from a justified desire to preserve the dignity of philosophy.

Well, how many different kinds of masquerades are there, and how do they deceive us? To the first of these questions I have no answer; to the second I have no simple answer but I can illustrate to some extent the ways in which we may be deceived, by invoking Wittgenstein's notion of the misleading grammatical analogy.

Let us remind ourselves first that we cannot judge the nature of what a form of words conveys solely by attention to its surface grammar. The sentence 'I have many vices' is grammatically similar to, but logically different from, the sentence 'I have charming vices.' Even where logical form is apparently most manifest in surface grammar, as in such sentences as 'War is War', 'Business is business', 'He jumped up and down', whether such sentences express tautologies and contradictions or not will depend upon the context in which they are used. (Generally, they seem to express tautologies and contradictions only in philosophical discussions.) Further, if sentences such as these may have acceptable uses in which they do not express tautologies or contradictions, so equally may any typically philosophical sentence find a non-philosophical application. A vague awareness of such possibilities of application can produce in us the impression that we are stating a fact when we use such sentences divorced from a context. And this is one kind of masquerade, where we use a sentence that takes on meaning only in a context of application, in no context at all, and expect it to retain some kind of essential nucleus of meaning which is independent of all applications. The illusion is fostered here by the contribution of etymology to our notion of meaning, for a sentence retains its etymology even when unapplied. In such a way sentences like 'Colours are simple' can appear to tell us something fundamental and important.

A similar way in which we may be misled in philosophy is through using a sentence which has application in one context, in another and inappropriate context; supposing

that a sentence will automatically carry its sense into every application. Thus one can imagine a philosopher searching for certainty and saying to himself solemnly 'I am here' as an expression of complete certainty of a fact; and here the illusion of fact-stating is fostered by the fact that in another context the remark has a perfectly good application, **e.g.** as a signal when spoken in the dark.

Another kind of masquerade arises where we combine symbols analogously to other symbols which have a use, but where the former have no use. A commonly-seen example is 'I cannot have your pain' (used as a premiss in sceptical arguments about other minds), where the analogy with 'I cannot have your wife' suggests pains are even more difficult to prise away from their owners than wives are from their husbands. The muddle here becomes evident when it is realised that particular pains are identity-dependent upon their "owners" and that this sceptical premiss is at best vacuous.

Now in any real case of metaphysics one probably gets all of these kinds of masquerade and more. Sorting out what gives us the appearance of grasping a fact when we read 'Each single substance expresses the whole universe after its own manner...' would be a sizable task. But the principles are comparatively clear: think, **e.g.**, how such remarks trade on metaphor, imagery and suggestion. Metaphysics would be nowhere without metaphor and imagery.

If we can defend the idea that much of the **a priori** is a masquerade, in some such way as this, we can get all the benefits which accrue from the initial attempt to regard metaphysical utterances as nonsense, without having to put up with the difficulties. For our apparent understanding of such utterances, and our ability to perform logical operations on them, can be explained in terms of our reading them while under the influence of a grammatical analogy. And at the same time we are not forced to classify them along with gross category-mistakes, for we can allow that many of them are doing a job; only it is not the kind of job that they look as if they are doing. If we wish, we can then get those jobs done (**e.g.** recommending the substitution of new conceptual

schemes which are free of the inadequacies metaphysicians claim to detect in our present ones) without risk of being misled by the masquerade; by framing our philosophical utterances in such a way as to reveal as clearly as possible their non-factual status. It is a further step to give them a primarily linguistic or grammatical status as Wittgenstein tends to do, and I don't wish to argue for this; but at least we can change from making the right points in the wrong way to making the right points in the right way.

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