

ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENT, METHODS AND PHILOSOPHICAL POSITIONS

My attempt in this paper is to show that the ontological commitment, method and the metaphysical construction of a philosopher are inseparable. By ontological commitments of a philosopher, I mean the primitives which a philosopher takes for granted. For instance, the primitives of Locke were the entities of Newtonian physics. The metaphysical system of a philosopher—the system which he claims to have arrived at by following a particular method—is an attempt to vindicate, by rational arguments, his ontological commitments. This is true of the Rationalists and the Empiricists as well as of the modern Analytic philosophers.

Philosophers, both present and past, have claimed that their philosophical positions are the outcome of following the right method. And on the basis of this, they claim that their positions must, therefore, be accepted. Names have been ascribed to these methods. Thus, Plato and Hegel called their method “dialectic” Bergson, “intuition”, Descartes, Mathematical (demonstrative), Russell and Moore “analytic”, Wittgenstein, (Investigations) *Description of ordinary language* and Husserl, phenomenological description.

Let me take, to validate my contention, the claims of some philosophers regarding the rightness of their position and their method.

Descartes blamed his predecessors for presenting conflicting philosophical theories because they accepted entities without sufficient proof. Descartes claimed to have followed the demonstrative method of mathematics. Thus, he claimed to have resolved the uncertainty in the field of philosophy and laid the foundations of certain and necessary knowledge. How far is Descartes' claim justified? Does he really follow the method of deduction? Has he deduced the rest of his philosophy from the *Cogito Ergo Sum*? The answer, to all these questions, is in the negative. From the fact of doubting, a spiritual substance, as the persisting subject of knowledge, cannot be deduced. At the most, Descartes could, by accepting the logic of subject and attribute of a proposition, deduce a momentary self.

The ontological position of Descartes lies in his commitment to dualism. The reasons underlying his position are that Descartes wanted the mechanical laws to have absolute validity in their own field; thus he made body independent of the mind. But due to his religious involvement, he seems to have assigned an independent status to spiritual substance. His method is nothing but an attempt to find rational arguments for this position.

Take next the illustration of Russell; Russell like Descartes, was seeking a general acceptance and prestige for his philosophical positions (the positions he upheld at different times). Descartes, being a Rationalist, took mathematics as his model and Russell, being an empiricist, took the method of empirical sciences as his method and called his method scientific and analytic. Russell's ontologically primitive terms are sense-data. There are no logical grounds for an empiricist to accept sense-data instead of material objects as his primitive terms. One of Russell's ontological positions we find in his lectures on "Logical Atomism". It is the position that our language can picture the structure of reality. Reality is the totality of simples. By analysis all factual complex propositions are resolved into their elementary forms and these in turn into their ultimate units of unanalysable simples.

The elementary forms or propositions mirror the facts of the world. The elementary propositions, to put it in another phraseology of Russell, represent the world. What are simples? Simples, for Russell, are the indefinable quality words. Thus, for example, 'yellow' as a quality word is simple and cannot be defined, whereas 'table' is complex and can be analysed into its qualities. This, in fact, is Russell's ontological position in "Logical Atomism". But as has been pointed out by Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigations*, what is simple from one point of view may be complex from another point of view. Russell's concept of simplicity, as is obvious, is based upon his ontological position in "Logical Atomism". Without this ontological position, material objects cannot be regarded as more complex than sense-data.

Thus we find that both Descartes and Russell, though claiming to follow different methods, are supporting their ontological commitments by rational arguments.

The claim of the modern analytic philosophers, beginning from Wittgenstein, is that they, by the application of their method, eliminate misleading and defective concepts. I again attempt to show that what is misleading and defective entirely depends upon the ontological scheme of the philosopher concerned. When a philosopher accepts one ontological scheme, all others inconsistent with it, become unwanted and defective. Thus, for Berkeley material substance is unwanted; for Hume both material and spiritual substances are unwanted and for the majority of analytic philosophers even mental states and mental processes are unwanted and defective. For those who only accept the categories of physical science, the whole world of common-sense with its solid objects becomes unwanted. (This is Russell's position in the *Analysis of Matter*).

Thus my basic contention, namely that all philosophers, analytic and non-analytic, start their philosophising with a pre-conceived ontological commitment, is reasserted. This ontological scheme can also be called as the metaphysical position of the philosopher. The linguistic philosophers' contention that they are free from metaphysical entanglement is, therefore, unwarranted.

We may ask : how can we explain the different ontological commitments of different philosophers ? This, in other words, is the question why philosophers have different ontological schemes and how do they arrive at the ontological scheme that they do have ? And it is connected with the question : how do philosophical problems arise ? The different fields of knowledge have different primitives. The primitives are the irreducibles in a system. For instance, for physics, the primitives are electrons and protons and these have no sensible qualities. But, on the other hand, the primitives of common-sense are solid material objects and these have all sensible qualities such as colours and smells. Some how or the other, these two ontological schemes are in conflict with one another, and give rise to philosophical problems. A philosopher with a commitment to Physical science will start his philosophy with the ontological scheme of physics as his premises, while a philosopher of common-sense in the same way, will start from common-sense. It is, because of different ontological commitments, for examples, that Locke and Moore have different metaphysical reconstructions. Likewise, take the case of philosophical

behaviourism. The science of Psychology, if it is to be an empirical science, must not deal with inner thoughts but with observable behaviour. Only on the basis of observable behaviour can psychology formulate general laws. Modern psychologists take behaviour as primitive terms and inner, private mental processes are of no interest to them. Ryle's ontological commitment is to bodies in space. He attempts to justify his position logically by taking recourse to the use ordinary language.

The ontological scheme with its arguments in support of it may be termed as metaphysical reconstruction. The philosophical arguments consist in arriving at such a reconstruction. The value of philosophy consists in the logic of such a reconstruction. For instance, Spinoza's system, as a system of philosophy, has unquestionable value by virtue of its metaphysical reconstruction; the value of analytic philosophy also consists in offering a metaphysical reconstruction although from a different perspective.

It is desirable for a philosopher to be conscious of his ontological commitments; otherwise he may become a prey to the misconception that his ontological scheme has some kind of necessity for its acceptance.

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