CHAPTER 2

PHILOSOPHICAL PROPOSITIONS: ARE THEY A PRIORI?

The term 'metaphilosophy' was coined by Morris Lazerowitz in 1940 to refer unambiguously to a special kind of investigation which Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* had described as one of the "heirs" of philosophy. To put it in his own words:

It is the investigation of the nature of philosophy with the central aim of arriving at a satisfactory explanation of the absence of uncontested philosophical claims and arguments.

At another place he says:

... (it) is the investigation of philosophical utterances, with the special aim of reaching a satisfactory understanding of what in their nature permits the intractable disagreements which invariably attach to them.

Its intended use is not to refer to a philosophical system or systems as "metaphysics" does; here one has to understand that metaphilosophy should not be treated as another branch of philosophy. It is about philosophy — about the statements which comprise it. To anticipate what will be discussed in detail, he characterizes a
philosophical theory as a

*** gerrymandered (i.e., re-edited) piece of language, which because it is presented in the ontological idiom, is capable of creating the intellectual illusion that a theory about things is being stated and also of giving expression to a cluster of unconscious ideas.\(^3\)

As this description suggests, the theories and arguments in philosophy are mis-conceived. It is obvious without elaboration of this bald account that the task of roetaphilosophy is not to adjudicate between rival views. Strangely enough, philosophers are not made curious about the nature of their activity, nor are they sufficiently disturbed to look into the baffling permanence of their disagreements. This situation has no parallel in mathematics or in natural sciences. The fact that there are unresolved problems in these disciplines in no way presents anything comparable to the disputes that everywhere pervade technical philosophy. Once a dispute occurs in philosophy it remains in philosophy. A further point of difference between philosophy and other disciplines is that they have a body
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of established results which can be counted as finished business. Philosophy has nothing comparable to show.

Philosophers may realise, at least dimly, that understanding these disputes might require a reassessment of the accepted ideas about the nature of their work. The impression that is gaining strength is that philosophers have a skeleton in their closet which they do not wish to be seen. Wittgenstein has expressed the wish that philosophy should disappear and it may well be that philosophers fear that philosophy will evaporate if it is given sufficient scrutiny. Gilbert Ryle seems to have sensed this when he coined the expression "meta-evaporate". As already mentioned in the preceding chapter, disputes in philosophy have existed for an astonishingly long time, and the irresolvability of these disputes is something which demands investigation. A further thing, these disputes have the curious feature of being carried on in the presence of all facts necessary to resolve them, if they indeed are about the facts. To illustrate, with regard to such elementary statements as $2 + 2 = 4$ and a cat is an animal the truth-values of which are not in dispute; rival views have clustered around the question as to what they are about. Some
philosophers have declared that the arithmetical proposition is about the terms "2" and "4"; others maintained that it is about abstract entities denoted by these terms, and still others stated that it is an inductive generalisation based on examination of instances. In the case of each theory, simple inspection of the proposition should yield the fact the philosophers seek; no further fact is required in order to settle the disagreements. Disputes of this kind pervade philosophy.

To turn to another surprising feature, philosophers who have maintained a particular view have changed their minds and adopted an opposing view. For example, Aristotle's view that a universal cannot exist without its particular, came to the fore again in our own time in the work of Rudolf Carnap. For many years Carnap denied (cf. his Logical Syntax of Language) that there are abstract entities denoted by general words. Later he accepted the Aristotelian view. Bertrand Russell is another example of a philosopher shifting from one view to an opposing view. In his early days he held that he was acquainted with abstract entities whenever he understood a general word, and later he was reduced to the tentative admission "I conclude ... though with hesitation, that there are universals..." This kind of
change of mind is understandable in religion and politics, but not in a reasoned discipline.

What explanation can be offered for such vacillation? The answer must lie in a correct account of the nature of a philosophical theory. Hence, the task ahead is to determine, if we can, what feature or features the theory has. Our preceding chapter elaborates distinctions between propositions which will serve as a starting point for the characterization of philosophical theories, (1) as being empirical (2) as being a priori.

One theory which is represented as if it were empirical, i.e., as making a claim to which observation is relevant to determining its truth-value, is to be found in Hume. He urges observation as a means of deciding its truth or falsity. In his treatment of causation, he appears to have expected careful scrutiny to show whether there be "a tie" between cause and effect. To quote him:

What is the foundation of all our reasonings and conclusions concerning (the) relation of (cause and effect)? It may be replied in one word, experience.
Commenting on Hume, Russellsays:

Hume's real argument is that, while we sometimes perceive relations of time and place, we never perceive causal relations, which must therefore if admitted, be inferred from relations that can be perceived. The controversy is thus reduced to one of empirical fact. Do we or do we not sometimes perceive a relation which can be called causal.

To take another example from Hume, his account of the self seems to have rested on an empirical process of introspection. He reported that the notion of self as a 'simple and continued spiritual substance' was not to be found. When he supposed himself to be making an empirical examination of himself, he reported:

But self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are supposed to have a reference. If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, thro'
the whole course of our lives; since self is supposed to exist after that manner. But there is no impression constant and invariable. Pain and pleasure; grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never all exist at the same time. It cannot therefore, be from any of these impressions or from any other, that the idea of self is derived; and consequently there is no such idea ... After what manner, therefore, do they belong to self; and how are they connected with it? For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.

It is evident that Hume's procedure is permitted with an empirical air. He seems to be observing introspectively the contents of his experience in a search for a continuous self. The conclusion he comes to is that there is no such entity. Now these described procedures
look to be similar to those which the scientist engages in. Nevertheless, in science and in everyday life, when we look for something we have an idea of what it is that we are looking for. The astronomer who discovered the planet Pluto, in a general way knew that he was looking for prior to his discovery. He was looking for the cause of the perturbations in the orbit of Neptune. Any divergence of opinion about the causes of the deviations in the expected orbit of Neptune would have come to an end, as in fact it did.

In the case of Hume, the peculiar fact is that his claim that there was no impression of causation and hence no idea of it, implies that he could not have known what it was that he was looking for. His philosophical observation would seem only to imitate the genuine empirical searches in science and in ordinary life. A further point might be added. The claim that there is no impression of causation implies that the words "impression of causation" have no use to describe anything whatever, and that the word "cause" has no correct use in the English language. In general one cannot say what it is that one does not have. Wittgenstein observed that you cannot hang a thief who doesn't exist, to which we
might add that you cannot think of the meaning of a term which is meaningless.

Hume's attempt to discover causation, as well as to find a self to which his impressions "have reference", are entirely different from those in science. Hume is unable to say what it is he is trying to discover since he according to his own declaration has no idea of it. He says,

Unluckily all these positive assertions [by philosophers who claim that "we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call self"], are contrary to that very experience, which is pleaded for them, nor have we any idea of self, after the manner it is here explained.

He appears to tell us what it is that he can't find, by introspection or some other form of investigation, and at the same time tells us that we cannot even institute a search.

Now if Hume's denial of the existence of a causal "tie" or a continuous self were empirical, he and his opponents could in principle have settled their dispute. They would have an idea of what terminating the dispute
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would seem to be like. The question is, how is the continuing disputation to be explained? There seems to be no escaping the conclusion that Hume's investigation was not an empirical search regardless of how it may appear.

Wittgenstein stated clearly* though without elaboration, that philosophical problems *are, of course, not empirical. His remark makes it natural to suppose that he thought them to be a priori. And in lectures, 1934-5 he says* "philosophy is a priori". Having discussed at length in the preceding chapter the nature of a, priori propositions* we are now in a position to investigate whether philosophical propositions are a priori.

We take as an illustration an argument and a thesis which have all the earmarks of being a priori: St. Anselm's Ontological argument for the existence of God. The Leibniz-Cartesian form of it is as follows:

God is the greatest or (as Descartes says) the most perfect of beings* or rather a being of supreme grandeur and perfection* including all degrees thereof. That is the notion of God.
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See now how existence follows from this notion. TO exist is something more than not to exist, or rather existence adds a degree to grandeur and perfection, and as Descartes states it, existence is itself a perfection, or rather this perfection which consists in existence, is in this supreme all-great, all-perfect being, for otherwise some degree would be wanting to it contrary to this definition. Consequently this supreme being exists.

The Anselmic argument is intended to show that existence is a necessary property of a perfect being. According to philosophical theologians existence is a perfection of a thing, such that to have it is to be more perfect than to lack it. To say an absolutely perfect being does not exist is to imply that a perfect being lacks a possible perfection and is therefore less than perfect. That existence is classed with such properties as all-powerful, is exhibited clearly in the following version of the Anselmic proof. An absolutely perfect being than which a more perfect is inconceivable is such that all its possible properties are actual properties of it. Now such a being could exist, i.e. could have the property of existing. It's existence
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is not incompatible with any other of its properties. Hence it exists.

Against this, Kant posed the objection that existence is not a characterizing property of a being. He says:

By whatever and by however many predicates we may think a thing — even if we completely determine it — we do not make the least addition to the thing when we further declare that this thing is. Otherwise, it would not be exactly the same thing that exists, but something more than we had thought in the concept; and we could not, therefore, say, that the exact object of our concept exists.¹⁶

Hume maintains a similar view when he talks about the existence of God. He says that the idea of existence is nothing different from the idea of any object. To quote him:

Thus when we affirm, that God is existent, we simply form the idea of such a being, as he is represented to us; nor is the existence, which
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we attribute to him, conceived by a particular idea, which we join to the idea of his other qualities, and can again separate and distinguish from them. But I go farther, and not content with asserting, that the conception of the existence of an/ object is no addition to the simple conception of it...

If the existence of God is deduced from the nature of God, then God exists is an a priori proposition. But if God exists were a priori, then it would tell us nothing about the existence of an/ thing or being. As we saw in the preceding chapter, an a priori proposition is not about things, and the only information it provides, in an oblique way, is about the use of terminology in the language. In the present case what it conveys is information about the use of the word "exist".

Counted as a predicate which characterizes the nature of a thing, it is possible without loss of literal sense to deny that a given thing has it. Thus the term "octagonal", which has a characterizing use, is such that to deny that a given thing is octagonal has no unwelcome consequences.
Similarly, if existence is a characterizing attribute, then to deny that the thing in question exists should likewise have no unacceptable consequences. The difference between the uses of "octagonal" and "existence" can be seen by comparing "This exists", and "This is octagonal". The denial of "This exists", i.e., "This does not exist", makes no literal sense, unlike the denial of "This is octagonal". To bring out the point somewhat differently, consider the statement "I have 13 pence in my hand, one of which does not exist". This makes no literal sense, although it should, if "exists" has a characterizing use.

There are countless additional ways of bringing out the difference we all sense between existence and a descriptive property such as all-wise. Some of these are enlightening. I cite two further considerations that called my attention by Lazerowitz:

1. There exists an all-perfect being =
   There exists an all-wise, all-good, all-powerful being. If existence is listed among the perfections, this equivalence becomes:
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There exists an all-perfect being =
There exists an all-wise, all-good, all-powerful, existent being. Thus one of the implications of There exists an all-perfect being is
There exists an existent being.
And this tautology adds nothing to the implication of There exists an all-perfect being.

2. Given that existence is a feature of a perfect being, it becomes absorbed in the subject term. Thereupon the statement that a perfect being exists involves us in an infinite regress. For attributing the property of existence to a thing yields a statement about its nature (about what it is, rather than that it is). Once absorbed into the subject term, the existence of that subject has yet to be demonstrated and if, again,
existence becomes part of the
nature of the subject, then the
statement that the subject exists
requires a demonstration ad infinitum.

These various considerations all show that arguments for God's existence which involve taking existence to be a characterizing attribute, go against the fact that to say something exists is to say that it is, not what it is. This fact shows that a perfect being exists is not an a priori proposition. Existence is not part of God's nature.