

For Discussion

**THE PROBLEM WITH MUCH MODERN PHILOSOPHY IS
IT ASSUMES THAT PHILOSOPHY HAS ‘PROBLEMS’**

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My argument is that from Descartes and Locke onwards, distinctively modern philosophy has tried to deal with ‘problems’ such as those of an external world, knowledge, knowledge of others’ minds, free will and determinism, and the ‘queerness of value’. These ‘problems’ are never resolved because they are ‘pseudo-problems’, self-generated by philosophers who hold to inappropriate presuppositions which they never examine. Here are some examples:

1. The fundamental one: the ‘problem of an external world’. This stems from both Descartes and Locke. Descartes’ attempt to doubt everything cannot be carried through, because it requires the confident use of a language in order to articulate his thoughts, and so he never doubts the meaningfulness of the Latin and French which he uses. Nor does he really doubt that he lives, perceives, thinks and acts in a world that exists independently of himself, but pretends to himself and the reader that he does.

As for Locke, once he, and all the pseudo-empiricists, idealists and phenomenologists, assumed that we perceive only images, phenomena, *sensa*, sense-data and the like, then there was no way out of their predicament and solipsism, either the one finite self of the philosopher for whom other people could be only such images, phenomena, etc., i.e., ‘subjective idealism’, or the ‘objective idealism’ of the Absolute idealists in which we are only ‘appearances’ of the one Absolute. But of course, if we are locked with a system of perceptions, ideas, phenomena, etc., how could we know that and have perceptions, etc., of other minds? Kant is confident that ‘presentations’ are ones of ‘noumenal things-in-themselves’, but how does he know that, let alone that they are not all of one just the one existent Being?

2. From the above necessarily issues also the ‘problem of other minds’. Another route to it is the presupposition that the infant first interprets the world only in terms of physical reality, then apprehends some items as alive and finally some of those in personal terms like himself. But the truth is that we have no such ‘problem’. Babies respond to persons as persons and treat others as they treat them. Thus, they treat everything in the same way until they learn otherwise, as anyone who has had any contact with them will know. And so, in real life no one ever has a ‘problem of other minds.’ All this was proved in detail by the studies of children by Piaget and his associates. He was also aware of Lévy-Bruhl’s studies of ‘the savage mind’, tribes whose members are ‘animists’, the stage of treating everything as living. But for some philosophers and psychologists, other people are alien beings whose ‘behaviour’ we have to ‘explain’. But the reality is otherwise. It is the ‘I-Thou’ relationship that is primary, especially that of child and mother, and not the distant third person, ‘I-Him over there’, or, even worse, ‘I-It’. True we can have particular problems in understanding other people, and also ourselves. Indeed, that may be the harder. But there is no general problem of ‘other minds’. Even animals recognise each other as being able to act, in friendly or hostile ways, across species and very different forms of animate life.

3. ‘The problem of knowledge’, in addition to those inappropriate presuppositions mentioned in (1) and (2), also results from two other mistaken presuppositions: that genuine knowledge must have a stem of necessary axioms and necessary deductions from them, as in mathematics, and not merely probable; and that there must be a clear line between knowledge and mere true belief.¹

The general answer to any proposal that knowledge itself is a problem, all knowledge whatsoever, is like that to the foregoing pseudo-problems, that we could never know this because our knowing that

¹ e.g., B. Russell, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1912.

A. J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge*, London, Penguin, 1956.

N. Williams, *Problems of Knowledge*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001.

all knowledge is problematic would itself be problematic. There can be problems within our various forms of knowledge: partial, contradictory or corrupt texts in history, and the seeming contractions in natural science such as the differing accounts of quantum physics. Likewise, some proposed forms of knowledge such as astrology, Mesmerism and its explanation by 'animal spirits', Freudian or Behaviourist psychology, can be dismissed as deluded wholly or in part, rightly or wrongly, but that is rationally possible only on the basis of belief in certain principles and presuppositions.

As for rationalism, it is obviously a dead duck except that there is tendency to turn everything into propositions in formal logic. But the necessarily true universal propositions that it needs from which to make necessary deductions are scarce in any empirical science.

As for clearly distinguishing knowledge from 'mere' true belief, the unresolved and unresolvable 'Gettier problems' show it is a vain pursuit. In addition, the persisting 'standard' definition of knowledge, 'true belief supported by reasons or evidence', leads to an infinite number of infinite regresses because the reasons or evidence must be both true and supportive, i.e., are either mere true belief at best or themselves items of knowledge. And thus, the regresses multiply and have no terminus in a self-evident truth from which true and supportive inferences can be strictly deduced, i.e., a return to rationalism.

4. 'The problem of value', that values are 'queer' and do not fit into any category, results from the presupposition that the category or form of existence is physical in some way or other. Thus, to be real and not illusion they must have some physical existence, such brain states and processes for thoughts. But consider meaning. Physical objects such as inscriptions, documents, enamel signs, sounds, gestures and bodily symptoms have, or can be given, meanings, but their meaning, if any, is itself not physical, although it is carried by physical means, such as sound waves when we speak. Now meaning is a value or disvalue, either by itself or in relation to something else. Hence values are not 'queer' for we recognise them every moment in our life: toothache as meaning in signifying that something is wrong with our teeth. It has disvalue in being painful but value in alerting us to do something to cure it or to have it extracted. When buying we add up the monetary value of goods and services and compare them with those of others, including, if we are wise, the 'opportunity cost' of not be able to spend our money also on something else, like a new car but not on improvements to the house, a recurrent neglect of impulse buyers. Monetary value is carried by bits of paper, metal or plastic or '0's and '1's on banks' servers, but its real worth is what it can be exchanged for. We also recognise objects as beautiful or ugly; actions as helpful or harmful, just or unjust, obligatory or permissible or not to be performed, or people as reliable or unreliable, honest or dishonest, responsible or irresponsible; and we could not live or act without so doing.

5. Finally, 'the problem of free will' results from presupposing that all systems, especially the purely physical one of atoms and subatomic particles, are 'closed' and cannot be affected by others, i.e., that 'downward causation' is impossible. But again, at every moment of life we act, react or do nothing as we choose, with deliberation or acquired skill that needs no stopping to think about what to do, or from mere habit or impulse. We know the difference between pushing and being pushed, choosing and being overcome by desires and fears that we do not or cannot resist. Even domestic cats recognise the difference between their tails being accidentally and deliberately trodden on, and thus they respond, respectively, with a sharp *mrrrow!* or either by running away or by turning to attack with open claws. Any degree of intelligence gives some degree of choice.

But if philosophical 'problems' really are ones resulting from inappropriate presuppositions, is philosophy then redundant once we have exposed them, as with Wittgenstein and the exposure of mistakes of language? I suggest otherwise, and what it's task should be is the practice of a genuine empiricism of reflection upon all our experiences starting, as the Delphi Oracle said, with ourselves, because it is obvious that all those who think that the above pseudo-problems are genuine ones, do not actually believe what they profess to believe, as shown by their actions and responses in life. Moreover, my experience includes my experience of others' experiences so that both can enlarge, modify and correct the other.

From the above follows one particular task for philosophy, the articulation of not only the presuppositions of the particular sciences, human and natural, but also those upon which we all tacitly and acritically rely because any attempt to justify or criticise them necessarily involves reliance upon them: our basic and fundamental powers of perception, induction, memory and judgement. Thus, to try to distinguish true memory images from false ones requires the ability correctly to remember some of each and what distinguished them. These presuppositions upon which we can only acritically depend when testing particular cases, are what I call, extending Collingwood's account, 'Global Absolute Presuppositions'.¹ In turn that entails a fallibilist and fiduciary philosophy in which faith and belief are the basis of knowledge. It also suggests that philosophy, although it depends on the special sciences, human and natural, is concerned with what is universal and necessary: e.g., we all have some ideas about the past, our own and that of others, and thus a basic form of history in individual and collective memory; and some notions of what is the product of human action and what is not, and thus an embryonic natural science.² Not being an empirical special science, it follows that philosophy does not add to the body of empirical knowledge but aims to bring to consciousness and to articulate what we already know but usually do not know that we know it or do so only partially and confusedly.³

In turn it is a task of philosophy to consider how the objects of these forms of knowledge can fit together in a coherent world around us. Older philosophers did do that, as have more recent ones such as Michael Polanyi with his 'dual control' of a higher level's operations controlled by its own autonomous operational principles, but subject to the limits, the boundary conditions, set by the next lower level and to dislocations and breakdowns caused by the lower.⁴ Errol E. Harris, in several books and especially *The Restitution of Metaphysics*,⁵ used Collingwood's 'scale of forms' of levels of existence and an evolutionary and an Hegelian framework to show how the findings of special sciences from physics to theology can form a coherent universe. Far from being made redundant by the exposure of its self-induced 'problems', philosophy can return to these and other productive pursuits.

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¹ 'Philosophy as the Articulation of Absolute Presuppositions', *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2016. pp. 41-61.

Collingwood, R.G., *An Essay on Metaphysics*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1940, Revised ed. with additional material, 1998. Chaps. IV and V.

² See Collingwood, 'Nature and Aims of a Philosophy of History', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, XXV, 1924-5; and his pamphlet, *The Philosophy of History*, Historical Association, and London, G. Bell, 1930.

³ See Collingwood, *Essay on Philosophical Method*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1933, p. 107.

⁴ Polanyi. M., *The Tacit Dimension*. London, Routledge, New York, Doubleday, 1966, pp. 40-3.

⁵ Harris, E. E., Amherst NY, Humanity Books, 2000.