In reasonable doubt

T. L. S. Sprigge

MAX BLACK
The Prevalence of Humbug and other essays
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0 8014 15144

There is a kind of no longer dominant analytical philosophy whose main message is: "Don't get too excited about it!" Its mission is to show that certain dramatic claims turn on conceptual confusions and that things are just as we ordinarily think them (when working in low mental gear, as an opponent might say). Max Black has long been a skilled and illuminating practitioner of an analytic philosophy which includes but goes beyond this approach. The present volume contains essays (based mainly on talks) intended for the general reader, in which a variety of issues about rationality that tend to generate excitement are dealt with in this sober way. There are four parts, each including two essays: "Rational and Reasonable", "Aspects of Science", "Beyond Rationality", "Some Puzzles".

The first essay asks "Why should I be rational?" For Black's taste, the very common view that it would beg the question to offer reasons for being reasonable (for basing one's beliefs and actions on reasons) plays too much into the hands of the relativists, for whom reason is optional. It is, he thinks, ill grounded, since the person who, theoretically, doubts the desirability of being reasonable may recognize individual good reasons, and it is worth offering him one for being reasonable. This will conform to canons of reasonableness but will not beg the question by using these as premisses. Black's own proffered reason is that reason in the full sense is a development of a minimal form of, or analogue to, rational inference found in animals, and is thus the specifically human form of a tool which any animal must use if it is to survive. For Black, any animal that uses perceptual signs for objects out of view which might threaten danger or promise benefit is employing this analogue of reason. Surprisingly, he does not contrast instinctive and learnt interpretation of signs. His answer to irrationalism would have been clearer if he had explained why.

In the second part, the two essays deal respectively with scientific objectivity and scientific neutrality. Sensible reasons are given for holding that science is a search, not hopeless, for truth and not, as some maintain today, the construction simply of one among many possible mythologies to live by. What seems a little unsatisfactory here is an apparent association in Black's mind of the view that science is concerned with genuine truth with the view that the scientific truth about nature is the only truth about it. One may agree with him in rejecting the view that, because it depicts a nature which is "dead, alien and purely functional" (Roszak) science is not properly true, while holding that such critics of science may be right if they are maintaining that a scientific account of nature, from which all value predicates are purged, is not the whole accessible truth about it, not "all that we have with which to get a grip on reality". In the second essay, "Is Scientific Neutrality a Myth?", the question of whether scientific propositions are value-free is distinguished from the question whether science as an activity should be conducted in a moral vacuum, and it is shown that an affirmative answer to the first question would be no ground for a similar answer to the second. But Black goes further, and contends that scientific research itself (though not the nature it reveals), especially as a team activity funded by interested parties, involves values to such an extent that the research workers' impact on human life cannot be hived off from their scientific work proper as something they do as mere citizens.

The third part opens with an essay on "humaneness" and is concerned with what it is to "act towards another human being as befits a human being". It lies, Black contends, in paying attention to him as something that matters in its own right, and having some power to sympathize with his "private world" and respecting his right to have it. Black shows himself a thorough humanist both in a good sense and in what some may think a less good sense, for he gives at least the impression that the human world is the sole locus of value. He protests (despite essay one) against all views of the kind "Man is just an animal that has such-and-such" but does not consider the attempts to place man more squarely in nature of the religious or humanist traditions, which are not thus belittling. The following, title essay seeks to define and put us on our guard against humbug. Black does not discuss the risk that analytic philosophers run of seeing more humbug around them than there is, but I would not defend any of the targets he aims at here.

Part Four contains essays dealing with the rationality of casting one's vote in an election when the result is normally pre-determined, and with a problem about the prediction of choice called Newcomb's puzzle. Black, doubtless rightly, characterizes the situation supposed to generate the latter as so far-fetched that the rational thing would always be to deem oneself not in it, but his self-interested voter weighing up his precise contribution to the election result seems to me too thin an abstraction to cast much light on what anyone is up to in the polling-booth.

These essays are pleasant reading, but almost too reasonable, sometimes bearing out Black's own suggestion that reasonableness is "a somewhat humdrum, pedestrian virtue". Perhaps their main weakness is that the opponents against whom Black here defends his own commitments are hardly the most serious alternatives to his kind of rationality, humanism, and confidently common-sense philosophy.

Lured to complexity

Penelope Mackie

GEORGE N. SCHLESINGER
Metaphysics: Methods and Problems
269pp. Oxford: Blackwell. £18.50 (paperback, £6.95).
0 631 131248

Although one of the declared aims of *Metaphysics* is to illustrate some of the "unique techniques" employed in metaphysics, what is distinctive about George Schlesinger's approach is his conviction that various metaphysical beliefs – in the existence of God, of an external world, of minds other than one's own – have the status of explanatory hypotheses which, like those in science, are susceptible of assessment in terms of confirmation by empirical evidence.

What relevance does this model have to other traditional metaphysical problems? Professor Schlesinger has not worked out his answer, as, for example, his perplexity over the problem of universals shows. There are unresolved tensions in his conception of the relation between metaphysics and evidence, which place on the reader of the first two chapters an intolerable burden of interpretation.

Unlike scientists, metaphysicians cannot expect significant additions to their stock of relevant empirical evidence, and hence, we are told, are "forced to compensate by relying more on arguments"; we are given a list of items from their "methodology", such as "the method of counterexamples" and "the infinite regress argument", with the warning that there may be no general agreement about their applicability. But this is needless obscurantism: some clarification would have been introduced had the author entered into debate with philosophers who would argue that metaphysical problems should not be treated as problems about explanatory hypotheses at all.

On its jacket the book is described as an introduction to metaphysics, but its discussions of various metaphysical topics – theism, time, possible worlds, universals, other minds, induction, the external world – do not take the form of introductory surveys, nor are bibliographies provided. The author does not pretend to give a history: Descartes and Hume make brief appearances, but of other philosophers working before 1800 only Plato and Zeno are mentioned. Nor is Schlesinger a reliable guide to the recent literature. For example, we are encouraged (on page 214) to dismiss Strawson's views on induction because "he fails to consider" a type of example that, in fact, he discusses in some detail; and (on page 62), to reject J. L. Mackie's conclusions about the theological problem of evil on the basis of the attribution to him of an "unquestioning assumption" that he neither makes nor needs to make. On page 24 we are told (although this is later contradicted) that "all epistemologists agree" that it is a condition of having knowledge that one possesses sufficient evidence for one's belief.

The writing is often polemical, and one of the author's purposes is to give cautionary tales illustrating "the strong forces tending to lead philosophers astray"; in particular, the temptations that lure them away from the simple and obvious solution. But the case-study to which he devotes most attention is, to say the least, ill chosen. Schlesinger claims that needless complexity has been introduced into attempts to cope with various counter-examples to a formulation of the logical conditions for explanation that was given by Hempel in 1948. He produces a "simple principle" which, he says, expresses "plain common sense", yet is capable of accounting for all the counter-examples. But his principles are vitiated not only by a failure to distinguish changes in evidence from changes in the facts, but also by an ambiguous use of the logical term "contrary" which for his purposes must sometimes mean "contradictory" and sometimes merely "inconsistent". When the confusions are stripped away, Schlesinger's principle would appear to add nothing to an intuitive criterion stated in Hempel's 1948 paper: that an adequate explanation must be capable, in principle, of being used for prediction. Moreover, on page 130 Schlesinger appears to confuse this criterion with the quite different principle that, in an adequate explanation of a phenomenon, the explanatory statements must entail the statement that the phenomenon occurred.

The chapter in which this discussion appears is one of the least satisfactory in the book. But even when Schlesinger seems to be on firmer ground, the reader is frequently perplexed by the failure to consider obvious objections, and no chapter is free from inaccuracy and confusion.

Bridging the gap

David Papineau

SOLLACE MITCHELL and MICHAEL ROSEN (Editors)
The Need for Interpretation: Contemporary Conceptions of the Philosopher's Task
182pp. Athlone Press. £14.
0 485 11224 8

The Need for Interpretation is a collection of essays united by the conviction that there is more in philosophy than is dreamed of in Oxford University. The contributors, all alumni of a maverick discussion group in Oxford, share a background in English-speaking philosophy, but find their tradition narrow by comparison with other philosophical approaches. Or, as the editors put it, the contributors "embrace the methods but not the aims of analytic philosophy, and the aims but not the methods of continental philosophy".

The division between analytic and Continental philosophy is a difficult thing to get hold of. At one level it is not clear why there should be a division at all. English-speaking and Continental (especially French) philosophers ask similar general questions about mind, language and reality, and indeed at a general level they tend to give similar answers – thus, for instance, a dominating concern in both camps over the past few decades has been to remove the conscious subject from the centre of the philosophical stage. But as soon as we come down to any level of detail we seem to be faced with two entirely different enterprises. Even if they start with similar concerns, both sides end up feeling that the other is by-passing all the important issues and succumbing to stylistic self-indulgence. But why they should always find themselves talking past each other remains a puzzle. Why should similar starting-points have led to phenomenology on one side of the Channel and to phenomenalism over here, to their having Jacques Derrida and our having Donald Davidson? There seems no good response except to recognize that the demands of common rationality (if there are any) stand for nothing against the brute power of divergent tradition.

This volume illustrates some of the difficulties involved in trying to bridge the gap. For a start, only two of the pieces engage directly with recent developments in Continental thinking. Sollace Mitchell discusses post-structuralism, in the person of Derrida. He focuses on the elimination of the concept of intention from the understanding of texts, and argues that Derrida, in assimilating all meaning to metaphor, simply overlooks the kind of literal or "first-order" meaning where some notion of intention is ultimately inescapable. This is a considered and not unsympathetic piece. But reassuring as the conclusions may be to analytic readers, more committed enthusiasts will no doubt feel that the real thrust of Derrida's thinking is obscured if we view him through the grid of analytic philosophy of language. The other piece dealing directly with Continental developments is Michael Rosen's article on Critical Theory. Rosen concentrates on Theodor Adorno and Jurgen Habermas, criticizing the former for being a materialist who still wants to eat his Hegelian cake, and the latter for not taking Wittgenstein's insights about rule-following sufficiently to heart. Again, while this is an admirably cogent piece of work, and while it is unlikely that anybody nowadays would want to defend Adorno against this kind of criticism, it is by no means clear that the most illuminating way to object to Habermas is to appeal to Wittgensteinian considerations about rules.

These Wittgensteinian considerations, as it happens, figure rather large in this collection. Two of the other articles are explicitly about aspects of Wittgenstein's thinking on rules and conceptual judgment. Christopher Leich writes on Wittgenstein and mathematics, and Theodore Schatzki on Wittgenstein and social science. These are interesting topics, and certainly worth discussing, but it is somewhat surprising to find them featuring so prominently in this volume. For, if there is such a thing as the analytic tradition, there can be little question that Wittgenstein is a fully fledged member of it. It is of course a measure of his greatness that he can be seen as subverting and changing this tradition. But this gives no cause for dissatisfaction with the analytic tradition – on the contrary, it is surely to the credit of the tradition that it can absorb such innovative influences. This issue of Wittgenstein's place within it is not without significance, for while Leich's and Schatzki's essays are stimulating, they present distinctly idiosyncratic views of their subject matter, and they could only have been improved by some discussion of the increasingly sophisticated literature in this area.

Perhaps the most interesting piece in the collection is by Charles Taylor. Taylor is a rather more senior figure than the other contributors, and indeed, among currently active philosophers, probably the most successful at bridging the gap between the two traditions. It is noteworthy that he does not take as his topic some meta-issue relating to the distance between Continental and analytic thinking. Instead, he discusses one of the most lively areas in contemporary analytic philosophy, namely computer-influenced materialism about the mind, and explains why somebody of his phenomenological inclinations will feel that this approach is quite unable to account for the point, or significance, of mental events. The materialists will no doubt find answers to the difficulties Taylor raises, but they are real difficulties, and Taylor at least succeeds in posing a serious challenge to the materialists' position. And perhaps he also succeeds in illustrating a more general moral: that to build bridges you need to construct them out of substantial philosophical argument. It's no good just shouting plaintively to the people on the other side.

Papineau, David. "Bridging the gap." The Times Literary Supplement, no. 4205, 4 Nov. 1983, p. 1222. The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200443005/TLSH?u=tlsacc&sid=bookmark-TLSH. Accessed 23 Sept. 2023.