



The Richmond Journal of **Philosophy**

Issue Nine Spring 2005

In this  
***issue***...

**Gerry J Hughes**  
on the existence of god

**Keith Crome**  
on socrates

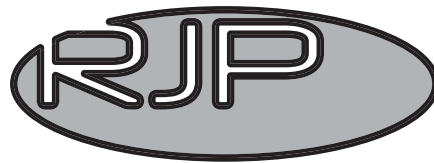
**Janne Mantykoski**  
on truth

**Steve Grant**  
on religious language

**Christopher Norris**  
on ethics



Richmond upon Thames College



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**Issue nine  
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## **Editorial Board**

Stephen Grant

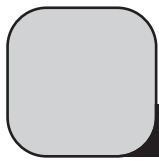
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# [Editorial]

Welcome to the ninth issue of the Richmond Journal of Philosophy.

Our first paper is an examination of the cosmological argument by Gerry Hughes. From God we move to a consideration of Plato's attitude to sophistry, which Keith Crome suggests is rather more complex than it is usually thought to be by many commentators. In our third paper Janne Mantykoski sets out to contrast two different approaches – the building block and holistic – to how truth and meaning can be constituted, addressing the question of whether truth should be seen as the goal of the inquiry or its starting point. The paper argues for holism by explaining that it better accommodates some crucial empirical features of natural languages, such as their fluid nature (change across time and dialectical regions) and learnability, and philosophical issues such as how the objectivity of meaning can be accounted for naturalistically. Next we return to the philosophy of religion as Stephen Grant examines our understanding of religious language.

The final paper in this issue is rather longer than our usual contributions and this reflects the scope and ambition of Chris Norris' discussion of a vexatious issue in epistemology and ethics and its relation to the tension between the anglophone or analytic and the continental traditions. The problematic issue is whether we are responsible for what we believe or

whether our beliefs are determined by factors beyond our control, and what an answer to this question means for an understanding of responsibility. The different traditions suggest their own ways in which the problem can be framed and how our response to it is to be articulated. Yet, this invites an oscillating approach that mirrors the difficulty in the issue under analysis. How can we reconcile our intuitions and arguments which incline us to see the opposing views and the problem of accepting one in outright favour of the other? There is no obvious middle ground or compromise, but there may be a middle way in the sense that a creative and critical engagement between the two traditions is possible.

## Purpose of the Journal

The motivation for and ambition of the journal is to provide serious philosophy for students who are at an early stage in their philosophical studies. The style and content of the papers will be accessible to students who have yet to become hardened to the more technical and specialised journals of professional philosophy

What do we mean by 'serious' philosophy? First, the content of the journal is not constrained by a remit to appeal to or reach the interested general public. Whilst the papers must speak to the needs of students who are relatively inexperienced in

philosophy, they presuppose that their audience is actively engaged in philosophy. Second, the content is serious in its focus on the central areas of philosophy. One must beware of the dangers of trying to impose more precision on a subject than its nature will allow. Therefore, some degree of caution is called for in talking of the central areas of philosophy. Nonetheless, the big or traditional questions of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics will provide the journal's centre of gravity. The third way in which the philosophy is serious is through the scope, variety and depth of analysis that can be achieved by the accumulation of papers over time. Moreover, each paper is not simply an introduction to one of the main topics on A-level, IB or degree courses. Such papers will indeed have a role in the journal, but they will not be the only kind. Our contributors will be offering original papers based on their own research. The journal will be a forum for the kind of critical engagement and debate that characterise the practice of philosophy. The fourth way in which the philosophy is serious is in the contributors themselves. The vast bulk of the papers will be written by professional philosophers engaged in both research and teaching.

# About the [Editorial] Board

Stephen Grant is a full-time lecturer in philosophy at Richmond upon Thames College. He has also taught at King's College London where he is completing his doctorate on the emotions. His main interests are in the emotions, ethics and political philosophy. He has published on the ontological argument.

Dr Paul Sheehy teaches philosophy at Richmond upon Thames College and King's College London. His main areas of interest are in metaphysics, political and moral philosophy and the philosophy of the social sciences. His doctoral thesis was on the ontological and moral status of social groups, and he has published papers on social groups, voting and explanation and realism.

Paul Sperring is head of the philosophy department at Richmond upon Thames College and an A-level examiner in philosophy. He completed his undergraduate and masters studies at The University of Warwick, studying both analytic and continental philosophy. He is currently working towards his PhD at Birkbeck College. His research interests are metaphysics and the philosophy of mind.

# [Editorial]

**Gerry J Hughes**

# The Cosmological Argument for the [Existence] of God

**What is one trying to prove?**

Traditionally, the cosmological argument was intended to prove that there exists a being which is distinct from the universe, explains the existence of the universe, and is personal, all knowing, all powerful and good. This involves a view of God which is that of the main monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and it is in these terms that the debate about the existence of God is commonly conducted. Other religions, Hinduism and Buddhism for example, would require that the discussion be conducted very differently. In this paper, I shall argue that the Cosmological Argument probably does prove that there is a timeless non-bodily being whose existence explains that of the universe; but that in order to identify this being with anything like God as traditionally conceived, further arguments would be needed. Usually philosophers have argued that it is the first part of this which presents the greatest difficulty, and that if one proves that there is such a being, it would be relatively easy to identify it with God. I do not think so. I think the first half of the argument is relatively simple, and that the main problems arise with establishing that such a being has the rest of the attributes of God.

**Prove**

We need to be careful about 'prove.' It is too often assumed that we should think in terms of the kind of proof which is taken from algebra, geometry or formal logic. Proofs here are proofs in a very narrow sense – they demonstrate their conclusions with logical rigour. The word 'logical' is used because such proofs depend on the precise definitions of the words (*logoi* in Greek) involved. The angles of a plane triangle logically must total 180 degrees, and there logically cannot be a circle and a square with the same area. Now there's certainty for you! Yes, but why? Because in maths and logic we are in total control – we define the concepts, we make the rules, we have decided exactly what is to count as evidence for what. We are dealing, as Hume says, simply with the relationships between ideas.



But we also use a very different notion of proof which depends not upon the way we decide to use words but upon what we can reasonably conclude about the real world. If we try to prove that someone committed a crime, we are trying to establish what actually happened. What we require in the most serious cases is proof beyond reasonable doubt. Of course, it is *conceivable* that every single witness is lying, that the prisoner has an exact double whom nobody has ever seen, and that in any case the sniper's rifle that killed the victim from 250 yards just happened to be pointing at his heart by sheer accident. There is nothing *illogical* in any of those suppositions. It is logically possible that the accused is innocent; but it would be quite unreasonable to believe it. Arguments about the real world do not simply depend upon mere logic. Why is 'proof' so different in these two contexts? Because the real world, unlike the conceptual worlds of logic and mathematics, is messy, complex and to a greater or lesser extent escapes our control. We have only a partial grasp of what it is like and what is really going on in it. Logic is neat, but the kinds of proofs which we need in our everyday reasonings are not logical deductions, but reasonable interpretations of a variety of evidence. In less serious court cases we are content to establish guilt or innocence 'on the balance of probability' – a weaker test than 'beyond reasonable doubt.' This is the

standard of proof which we ordinarily use from day to day. Probably John is late because he just missed that train. Still, someone who thinks he might have had an accident otherwise he would surely have phoned might not be being completely unreasonable even if what they think is less likely to be true. For it is very often the case that more than one of a set of incompatible beliefs might be reasonably held.

I shall try to prove that God exists, understanding 'prove' in the sense of 'establish on the balance of probabilities.' I do not think that atheists are being unreasonable, though on balance I believe them to be mistaken. In any event, it is extremely important for both the atheist and the theist to accept that they could – *logically* could – be mistaken; and that the way each of them reads the evidence might be quite reasonable and yet wrong.

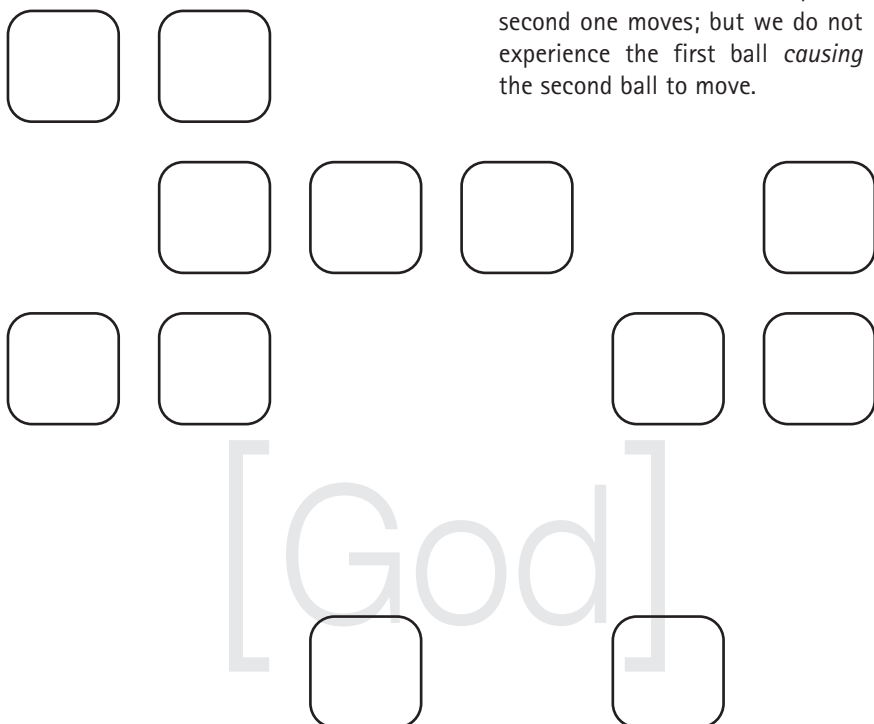
### Why Hume thinks any such proof is impossible

Hume believes that it is impossible to prove that God exists because he does not believe we can prove that *any* being exists. His argument goes like this:

- i) The only things one can prove are the relationships between ideas. But such proofs say nothing about whether there *exists* anything to which these ideas correspond.
- ii) The only way to know that something exists is not by argument but by experiencing that thing. But all experiences come via the senses, and one cannot sense God.
- iii) In addition to i) and ii) , Hume believes that *any* appeal to the notion of causation is bound to fail: We have a habit of projecting the idea of cause onto events. Of course we sense that when one billiard ball hits another, the second one moves; but we do not experience the first ball *causing* the second ball to move.

These arguments are less than conclusive, however. Hume appeals to the narrow, logical, notion of proof. Quite correctly, he claims that a proof of this kind does indeed explore the relationship between concepts (for instance, triangle, angle, sum, etc) but cannot prove that anything exists. But Hume underrates the other sense of 'prove', the one which considers the force of evidence in the real world. Think for instance of proving that sub-atomic particles exist, on the basis of evidence and experiments. The theories in atomic physics might all be wrong, in the sense that there is nothing illogical, nothing *contradictory* in supposing that there are no such particles. But given the evidence we now have it surely *quite unreasonable* to believe that they do not exist. Of course we cannot sense such particles. So Hume's second point also seems to be mistaken in maintaining that we cannot come to know that anything exists beyond the reach of our senses.

His third point is more complicated. He argues that the regularity with which things in our world behave does not justify us in believing that it is causal necessity which makes them do so. And he is up to a point right: there is no necessary logical connection between regular succession and causation. But once again, he is unwilling to recognise the validity of ordinary standards of reasonableness. Of course it is remotely conceivable that it is pure coincidence that things in the world behave according to regular patterns; it need not be logically impossible that tomorrow pigs might fly, essays might write themselves, and naturally tartan sheep appear overnight grazing quietly in Richmond Park. If such things happened, we could alter our definitions of 'sheep' and 'pig' and





'write' to accommodate such surprising events, just as we have already altered the Greek concept of 'atom', which meant 'unsplittable', to accommodate the fact that we believe an atom can be split. We can define and re-define our *words* as we see fit, so that there would then be no logical contradiction in saying that some pigs can fly, and some sheep are naturally tartan. But that's not the real issue. We want to know what is causally possible in the real world. And here, we surely know beyond reasonable doubt that such endearing things like tartan sheep and flying pigs are pure fantasy, and that it is simply ridiculous to believe that absolutely anything might happen at any time. If the world were so open-ended, it would be impossible to explain *why* the world is so regular, and why it is that science has made such progress by assuming that the relationships between things are causal and not just coincidental. Apparently unexpected events must have an explanation even if as yet we do not know what that explanation might be.

So Hume does not offer any good grounds for saying that we cannot argue on the basis of causation to the existence of beings which we cannot sense. Scientists do it all the time, and with every justification. Still, such causal arguments, which work well enough in showing that protons or quarks exist, do pose additional problems which have to be overcome if they are to show that it is reasonable to believe that there exists a first cause of the universe, totally beyond the reach of our senses; and further difficulties still in showing that such a first cause bears any resemblance to God. Some of these problems we are just about to see.

## The Structure of a Cosmological Argument

Cosmological arguments vary in detail. But all of them have the same basic structure consisting of four crucial steps.

- i) Nothing happens without some causal explanation
- ii) A satisfactory explanation cannot appeal to something which 'just happened' and was not caused
- iii) The existence of the universe requires explanation outside itself
- iv) It is reasonable to think of this 'transcendent' explanation as God.

I have already tried to defend i) in my comments on Hume. There is indeed a qualification to be made, however, in that it may be the case that in subatomic physics some events do 'just happen'. Different radio-active elements decay into other elements at fixed rates, different for each element -- and that predictable regularity might suggest a causal connection. But at least many physicists would argue that even though there is a statistical pattern, the decay of any individual atom might be undetermined, uncaused. This is still a matter of dispute. Einstein thought that events simply could not occur without a cause. So he preferred to say that even in the mini-world of quantum physics individual events must be caused, it's only that we can't investigate them; and some contemporary scientists would agree with him. But whatever is the state of affairs in the tiny world of quantum physics, at least middle-sized and large events do not just happen. Nor do we think they do. Suppose all the students in the College suddenly fell ill -- yet not with flu, nor food poisoning,

nor measles nor anything like that. What would we say? 'Oh, these things happen, and that's all there is to it'? Or 'College hit by mysterious illness'? Surely the second. We say 'mysterious' because we know that something must have caused the outbreak, even when we cannot as yet find out what it was. Indeed, that is how medicine progresses -- precisely by not giving up at this point and saying that some things just happen without any cause at all. Could it have been contact with the tartan sheep, maybe?

The second step is somewhat more difficult. You all know the ancient story about what holds the world up. Some sages said that the world rests on the back of a tortoise. And the tortoise? Oh, that is standing on the back of an elephant. So what holds the elephant up? Answers like these, even were they true, would be unsatisfactory precisely because at each stage there is just as much reason to ask the question again as there was at the beginning. In that sense, the explanation has got nowhere. If there was a problem at the beginning with how the earth is supported, there remains just as much of a problem with the elephant. So a satisfactory explanation must end with something about which the same question cannot reasonably be asked. Of course, the list of questions might be as long as you like -- but the answer is no better unless there is good reason for stopping the chain of questions. Otherwise the explanation is not complete, and the stopping point merely arbitrary. So the second step of the argument requires that everything should have a *complete* explanation -- on the grounds that an incomplete explanation would leave unanswered exactly the same kind of question that forced us to look for an explanation in the first place.



Would it be any better if the chain of explanations was infinitely long, so that one need never get to the start of it? It is often said that Aquinas and other medieval philosophers did not believe that one could have an infinitely long series. This is not accurate. They knew very well that, for instance, the series of whole numbers could be prolonged indefinitely. But it is also clear that they did not believe that there could actually exist an infinite number of things; just as, no matter how long one keeps counting, one has never actually named an infinite number of integers. One has always counted to a particular finite number at any given point. So Aquinas denies that there could ever be an actually infinite number of causal links in a chain. He also held that just carrying on – indefinitely, if you like – repeating the same kind of explanation is in an important sense to get nowhere.

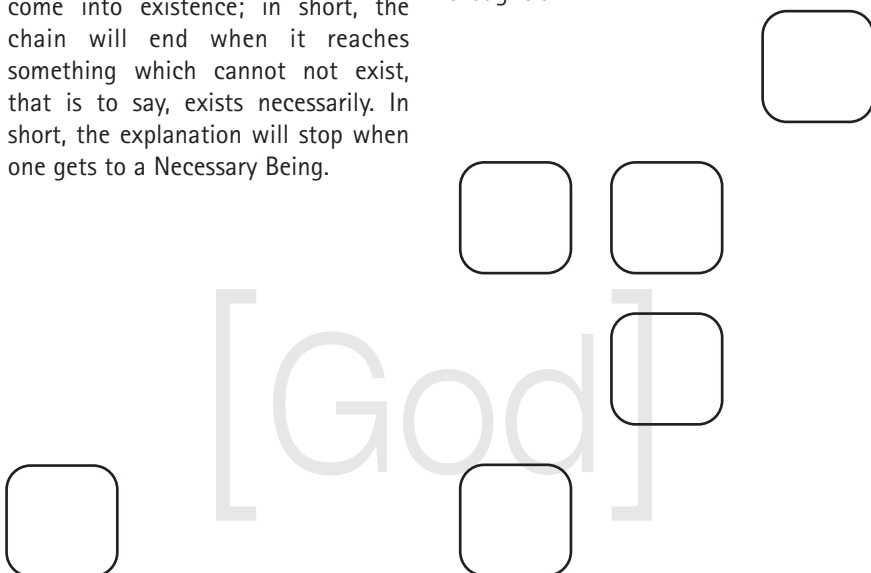
All right, you might think, but how *does* one know when to stop the chain of questions once one has started? The reply is that the chain of explanations will be complete and satisfying only if in the end one reaches something which has not 'just happened', simply come into existence; in short, the chain will end when it reaches something which cannot not exist, that is to say, exists necessarily. In short, the explanation will stop when one gets to a Necessary Being.

Might it not be, though, that the universe as a whole just happens to be there, even if particular bits of it are caused by other bits? Maybe the Whole Universe is the necessary being we are looking for? There is a promising argument in favour of this conclusion. One of the basic laws of physics is the Law of the Conservation of Energy. As you know, energy can take many forms, of which matter is just one. It is possible to re-arrange the energy in the world in various ways. A tree can be cut down and burned, for instance. The tree has ceased to exist; but the matter/energy of which it was composed have not ceased to exist – it has simply been re-arranged. There is exactly the same total amount of energy at the end of the process as there was at the beginning; quite simply some of it became heat, some became light, some turned to ashes, and so on. The overall total remains exactly the same. So, the argument goes, if energy is indestructible, then it exists of necessity. At last we have found the end of the chain of causes: energy just is an indestructible given. Call it god if you like, but it has little or nothing in common with God as traditionally thought of.



The difficulty – and to my mind the fatal flaw – in this argument is that it does not take into account the fact that so far as we can now tell, the universe itself came into being a finite time ago. But surely universes cannot just happen, just appear without any explanation, any more than pink elephants or tartan sheep can. Something must have produced it, something external to the universe itself. And that is step iii) of the cosmological argument. As someone well expressed it, at this point we have left the realm of science altogether – for our sciences are descriptions (more or less accurate) of the way in which existing things relate to one another. If there exists nothing at all, there is nothing for the sciences to describe, there are not even any laws of physics.

But perhaps that is just a bit too quick. Perhaps because they see that to accept the argument so far has very deep implications for the limitations of the sciences, some physicists have tried to avoid admitting that there is a point at which the universe simply began. Perhaps it rhythmically expands to vast distances, then contracts to something infinitely small, and then expands again, in an everlastingly repeated cycle; or



perhaps, before there was matter or energy as we know it there was some powerful vacuum out of which matter/energy as we know them simply came. But as far as I know, no satisfactory theoretical account has ever been provided which can be made to work convincingly. So the problem still remains: if at any point there was simply nothing, then a universe cannot simply appear without a causal explanation; and if the universe as we know it was somehow preceded by something else, then we need to know what that something else could be.

Here, however, as the philosopher Kant takes care to remind us, we are at the very limits of our human powers of reasoning. Does the word 'cause' have any application outside the world of our experience? It would be a brave, indeed a foolhardy person who tried to claim that any conclusion at this level has been established beyond reasonable doubt. Nevertheless I believe that it is much better to conclude that the universe had a cause quite outside itself, because to deny this is simply to deny a principle which works so well in helping us to understand everything else. As if we were to say that the world has to stand on a tortoise, and the tortoise has to stand on an elephant, but there is no need to ask whether the elephant has to stand upon anything at all. Still, at the limits of our reasoning, I cannot possibly say that someone who disagreed with me was being unreasonable, even though on balance I believe them to be mistaken.

### **Unfinished Business**

Is the theist home and dry then? By no means. I have already indicated that in many ways the crucial step for the theist is step iv) in the original argument. Is the Necessary Being

anything like God is supposed to be? What (if anything) has been proved so far? At most, we have established that outside the universe there exists something incredibly powerful capable of producing all that there is in our universe. But then what? Well, we might suggest that, since space, time and gravity are all features of a material world, so far as we can tell, the explanation for such a world will be timeless and not in space – perhaps, then, what has traditionally been called a spirit. But even if this too is accepted, is there any reason to suppose that this Eternal Force is personal and good and intelligent? Nothing we have so far said justifies leaping to that conclusion.

To justify the claim that we are here speaking about God, we would need further evidence. Perhaps it would help to examine in detail the intricate design in the way this universe has been put together. It might help to ask whether the Force that brought into being some packet of mass/energy in precisely such a way as cause it to evolve into the universe we know, could be anything other than intelligent and personal. We might also examine the implications of the variety of religious experiences in many human cultures. Do some people really experience God? And finally, whether such an eternal, spiritual, powerful, and personal Force is good and worth worshipping, depends upon whether one can deal with the problem of evil. So the cosmological argument leads to some important truths – truths which may well be truths about God. But this last step still needs to be argued, and that would take at least another article!

To sum up. I have argued that the cosmological argument most probably does work although, because of the distance it tries to cover, one cannot

say for certain that it does. What one can say is that it seems possible to defeat most of the standard difficulties brought against it, and that it links with our current scientific beliefs rather better than any alternative view does. The assumptions upon which it depends are the very ones which have made the progress of the sciences possible. But even so, it takes only the first steps towards establishing that the ultimate reality is the good God of Jewish, Christian and Muslim tradition. Much more arguing remains to be done.

**Keith Crome**

On Socrates and  
 [Sophistry]

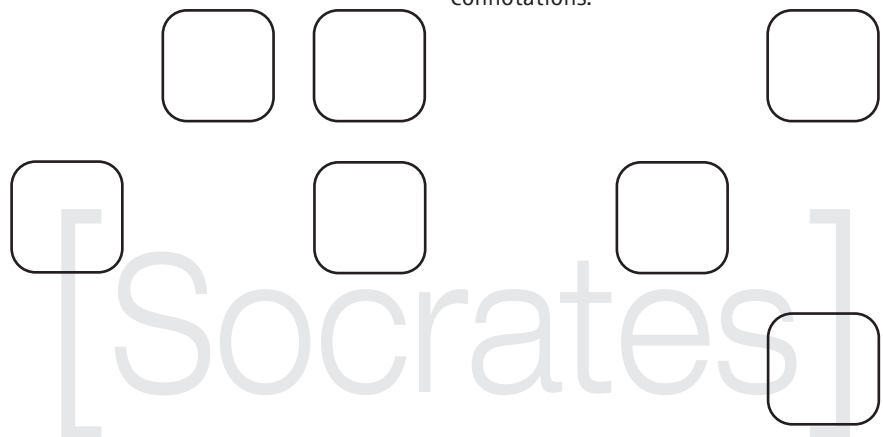
The sophistic movement flourished in and around Athens in the latter half of the fifth century BC. It almost immediately acquired a bad reputation, and this reputation has stuck: a sophist, we say, is a quibbler; someone who indulges in mere argument for argument's sake; someone who, by playing on words, makes issues problematic that are not. It is frequently observed that Plato played no small part in this: he produced the definitive picture of the sophists, and fixed for posterity their poor reputation. This observation is true, but I shall argue it is only partially so, the glaring evidence of Plato's hostility having obscured the complexity of his treatment of sophistry. Further to this, I will suggest that recognising this complexity can make apparent to us an essential aspect of Plato's philosophising.

First let us consider sophistry's bad reputation. It has been pointed out that this reputation is more puzzling than is often assumed: the period in which sophistry flourished, 450 – 400 BC, was 'in many ways the greatest age of Athens,' and although the majority of the sophists were not native Athenians, writings from the time show that they played a major role in this thriving city. It is testimony to the political influence of the sophists that one of their number, Protagoras of Abdera (ca. 490 – 421 BC), was invited by the great Athenian statesman Pericles to draw up the laws for his planned Pan-Hellenic colony in

Thurii, Southern Italy. Just as marked was the influence of the sophists upon the artistic and intellectual culture of the era. The tragic dramatist Euripides was reputed to have been one of Protagoras' pupils, and it is said that the historian Thucydides was a 'disciple' of Gorgias of Leontini (ca. 483 – 376 BC). If Socrates was never taught by the sophists, he was certainly familiar with their works, arguments and methods.

The sophists' influence was rooted in their mastery of language: they were expert in the practice and theory of rhetoric, and in what we now call linguistics, i.e. the study of the form and grammar of language. They lived on their wisdom: they exercised political power by using their rhetorical expertise in law courts and assemblies, and acquired a fortune from the very high fees they charged for teaching their oratorical skills.

It is sometimes suggested that it was *because* of their successes, rather than despite them, that the attitudes of the ancient Greeks towards the sophists were not wholly positive. In the early 5<sup>th</sup> century BC the Greek word *sophistēs* (sophist), which is closely related to the words *sophos* (wise) and *sophia* (wisdom), was used of someone who was skilled in a particular craft or who was an expert in particular discipline. A little later it came to be associated with wisdom in general matters – a sort of practical and even political wisdom. Finally, it was applied to the sophists proper – the group of individuals who taught (or boasted of teaching) the art of persuasive discourse. Initially, then, the term *sophistēs* was used in a positive way of esteemed individuals: the poets Homer and Hesiod, the sage Solon, and the great mathematician Pythagoras were all described as sophists. However, by the time sophistry proper was thriving, the term had already acquired derogatory connotations.



John Dillon and Tania Gergel have suggested that this was in part due to the 'natural suspicion of the man in the street for experts in any particular arcane discipline, or for intellectuals in general'.<sup>2</sup> Allied to this 'natural suspicion' of experts and intellectuals, was a distrust of the power that words can exercise. The rhetorical displays in which the sophists excelled were seen as akin to sorcery. That the sophists could persuade a jury, sway an assembly, even in the most unpromising circumstances, led to their words being likened to charms or spells, which enchanted those who happened to hear them.<sup>3</sup> Such powers excited admiration and fear in equal measure.

If there was almost immediately a suspicion of the sophists, then by the time of Socrates' trial in 399BC this suspicion had hardened to hostility. The charges of corrupting the youth of Athens and making new gods (amounting to a charge of impiety), brought against Socrates by Meletus, Anytus and Lycon, were accusations frequently made against the sophists. Protagoras was forced to flee Athens for teaching disbelief in the gods, and his books were reputedly burned by the Athenians. Socrates was condemned to death. In the dialogue entitled *Protagoras*, Plato has the eponymous sophist suggest that these accusations derive from envy at the sophists' success in getting the youth of Athens to associate with them in order to acquire the rhetorical skills they taught. Protagoras explains to Socrates:

A man has to be careful when he visits powerful cities as a foreigner, and induces their most promising young men to forsake the company of others, relatives or acquaintances, older or younger, and consort with him on the



grounds that his conversation will improve them. Such conduct arouses no small resentment and various forms of hostility and intrigue.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst such behaviour provoked the anger of a great many Athenians, threatening the dissolution of traditional social ties, it also aroused the opposition of Socrates. Socrates was concerned that the tuition of the sophists encouraged a dereliction of virtue in favour of vanity, political power and wealth.

Because we possess only a very few original fragments of the sophists' writings, the Platonic dialogues are the principal source of information about the sophistic movement and its leading figures. Consequently, Socrates' hostility, presented so forcefully in Plato's work, has served, for the most part, to fix the way in which the sophists have been viewed. According to convention, Plato opposes Socrates, the prototypical philosopher, to the sophists, and henceforth the difference is taken as absolute. The sophist may well appear to be like the philosopher, but is not: the philosopher is concerned with

truth, and virtue; the sophist with appearance, power and money. The philosopher is serious, arguing about substantive issues, making us aware of genuine problems concerning our claims about the nature of things; the sophist is frivolous, arguing over things unworthy of genuine concern.

Some scholars of the sophistic movement have cautioned against taking Plato's account of sophistry at face value: as a declared enemy of the sophists, he is always likely to distort the truth.<sup>5</sup> Attempts have been made to correct these distortions by suggesting that behind Plato's polemic we can discern the serious contribution made by the sophists to the disciplines of ethics, epistemology and ontology, and to the study of language.<sup>6</sup> Certainly such claims help us to put to one side sophistry's bad reputation. But, more often than not, such rehabilitations are intrinsically limited, because they only serve to assimilate the sophists to a standard of philosophy that is itself Platonic. They suggest that in effect, if not in fact, the sophists were Presocratics, i.e. intellectual forerunners of Socrates and thus merely precursors to philosophy proper.



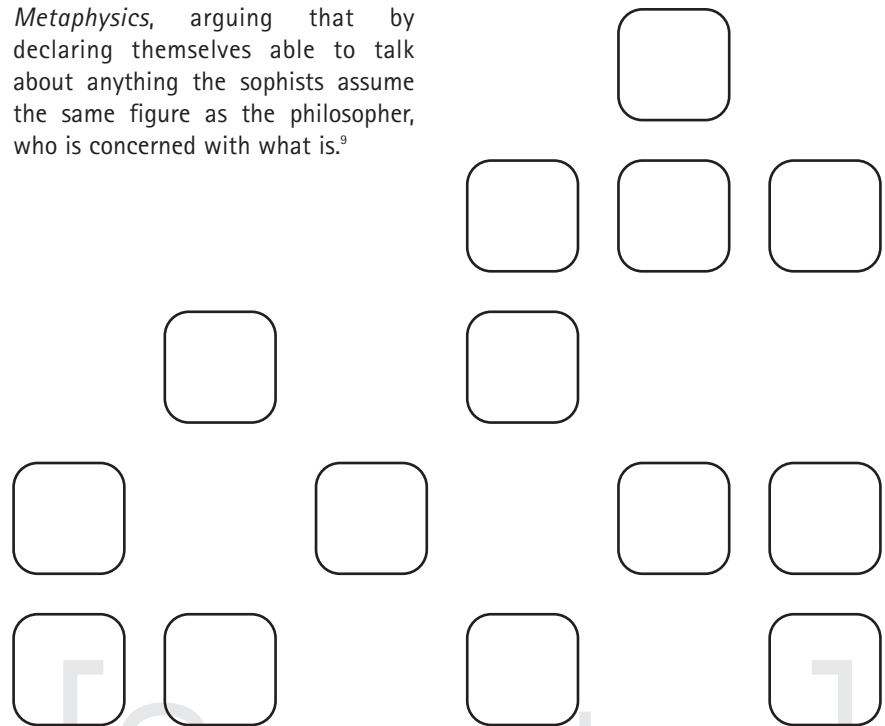
However, if, as the great 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel suggests, 'the antithesis between Socrates and the sophists [...] is the literary form in which the philosophy of Plato works out its development through the criticisms of contemporary opinions and doctrines',<sup>7</sup> then the interest of Plato's portrayal lies not only in what tells about the sophists, but in what it tells us about his philosophy. We can profitably consider this portrayal because whilst the Platonic opposition of the philosopher and the sophist has itself come to be accepted as self-evident, it is, as Hegel argues, 'very unlike what later interpretations have made of it'.<sup>8</sup> In what follows, I want to show how slippery the distinction between Socrates and the sophists is, and then I want to try to suggest how Plato exploits this slipperiness.

In the dialogue entitled *Sophist*, Plato attempts to clarify the nature or being of the sophist. In the course of the discussion between the two principal characters, Theaetetus and the Stranger from Elea, several definitions of the sophist are advanced. The sixth is that of 'the refuter', that is, someone 'who cross-examines a man's words, when he thinks that he is saying something and is really saying nothing and easily convicts him of inconsistencies in his opinions' (230b). By making apparent these inconsistencies, the refuter purges his interlocutor of his or her prejudices and thus achieves a positive good. This definition recalls Socrates' cathartic maieutics, and the Eleatic Stranger who has advanced it shrinks from calling the one who practices it a sophist, for 'fear of ascribing to [him] too high a function' (231a). However, as Theaetetus notes, the 'description has some resemblance' to the sophist (231a). The Stranger admits the

similarity, but cautions that a 'man should above all be on his guard against resemblances; they are a very slippery sort of thing' (231a). The Stranger concludes by declaring that the practice of refutation is 'sophistry that is of noble lineage (*he genei gennai sophistikē*)' (231b).

This definition serves to bring the philosopher and the sophist close together, and risks confusing rather than clarifying the latter's being. The risk is, however, unavoidable. As the Stranger goes on to argue, the sophist is a 'wizard and imitator of real things' (235a), who by feigning to speak of divine things, of all things visible in the sky and earth, of becoming and being, puts on the appearance of the philosopher. This picture of the sophist has exercised a powerful hold over the philosophical imagination. For example, Aristotle repeats it in the *Metaphysics*, arguing that by declaring themselves able to talk about anything the sophists assume the same figure as the philosopher, who is concerned with what is.<sup>9</sup>

Under the influence of this picture it is easy to assume that it is the sophist who imitates the philosopher. But things are a good deal more slippery in Plato's dialogues. Take the *Lesser Hippias*, for example. This early dialogue gets its name from Socrates' interlocutor, the sophist Hippias, who, we are told, is an expert in almost every conceivable art and branch of knowledge. When the dialogue begins, Hippias has just finished an epideictic speech on 'Homer and diverse other poets' (363c). Socrates begins by asking Hippias whether he agrees with the traditional view that of the two Homeric characters, Achilles and Odysseus, heroes of the *Illiad* and *Odyssey* respectively, it is Achilles who is the better man. Hippias follows tradition, citing as evidence Odysseus' epithet *polutropos*.



[Socrates]

One of the meanings of the Greek word *polutropos* is 'much-travelled' or 'much-wandering'. In this sense it has a very obvious application to Odysseus. However, the term also had the meaning 'turned in many different ways'. It hence carried the metaphorical sense of craftiness or wiliness, of being able to shift this way and that, displaying this or that facet of oneself whilst concealing others. Hippias understands or interprets the epithet to mean that Odysseus is false (*pseudēs*), in contrast to Achilles, who is straightforward and honest. Socrates thus attributes to Hippias the view that 'the true man is not the same as the false' (365c). From this point, Socrates proceeds to put the argument through a number of devious turns, confusing the separation of the true and false man, and concluding with the distinctly sophistical claim that those who do wrong voluntarily are better than those who do wrong involuntarily.<sup>10</sup>

But it is not just Socrates' conclusion that is sophistical: to reach such a conclusion Socrates employs a whole gamut of sophistic devices and techniques. For example, the sophists were famed for making paradoxical claims, claims that contradicted established opinion. This is what Socrates does when he denies the common belief, espoused by Hippias, that Achilles is a better man than Odysseus. Instead, Socrates argues that since only the man who knows the truth about something can convincingly and consistently be false, Odysseus and Achilles are alike: 'If Odysseus is false he is also true, and if Achilles is true he is also false, and so the two men are not opposed to each other, but they are alike' (369b).

Hippias protests the wrongness of Socrates' argument and reiterates the conventional distinction between

Achilles and Odysseus. Socrates' response this time is to invert the distinction, arguing that it is Odysseus who is straightforward whereas Achilles is false and wily. Hippias protests that Odysseus is intentionally false, whilst if Achilles is false, he is so unwittingly. To this Socrates responds that not only does Achilles mislead Odysseus intentionally, but he is so cunning that he deceives most people, and remains undetected.

The complex argumentative strategy used by Socrates is the eminently sophistic one of *retorsion*. Aristotle was the first to formally identify this strategy. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle speaks of the retorsion, or turning back of an argument against the one who makes it.<sup>11</sup> Not only is the sophist a master of argument in the sense that he or she can always issue a retort to an adversary, but he or she can turn their adversary's argument back against them, showing that the arguments they thought favourable are unfavourable. For Aristotle this technique is exemplified by an argument attributed to Corax of Sicily, the tutor of Gorgias. Corax takes the case of a strong man, accused of assault. According to Corax, the claim made against his client, namely that he is strong and therefore likely to have committed the crime, is implausible precisely because it is so plausible. His client's strength is enough to accuse him in advance, and so rather than it being likely he committed such an act, it is all the more likely that he steadfastly avoided all brutality in order to avoid such an indictment. Corax makes what the prosecution thought counted for them, speak against them. Similarly, Socrates *retorts* Hippias' every concession. When Hippias admits Socrates' contention that Achilles does speak falsely, but with the

qualification that he does so unintentionally, Socrates seizes on it as evidence of Achilles' supreme duplicity, for he is able to dupe even the wily Odysseus. And when Hippias repeats the claim that Achilles is innocent, Socrates turns it back against him: if, as Hippias claims, Achilles lies unintentionally whilst Odysseus does so intentionally, then it is the latter and not the former who is the better man, since as Socrates has already argued, the better man is the one who does wrong voluntarily.

Like Homer's Odysseus, the cunning and wily Socrates of the *Lesser Hippias* could himself be characterised by the epithet *polutropos*. Turned in many different ways, having many different facets or faces, the *polutropic* individual is able to show one particular aspect of their self whilst concealing others from view; he is able to display himself in different lights, and thus disguise himself. This is exactly what Socrates does, taking on the guise of sophist. It is not by chance that Socrates should do this in a dialogue that hinges around the term *polutropos*. The *polutropic* ability is inherently sophistic: as an imitator and artificer, the sophist would put on many guises, including that of the philosopher, in order to win an argument.<sup>12</sup> Here, Socrates imitates the imitator, making use of certain sophistic resources, repeating the tricks and techniques of sophistry, turning its argumentative resources, its *tropes*, back upon the sophist Hippias.

Because of the nature of its depiction of Socrates, and because Socrates argues for a position that Plato will in subsequent dialogues show to be false, the *Lesser Hippias* has excited much perplexity amongst commentators. In a recent study, Charles H. Kahn has suggested 'we can well imagine that,



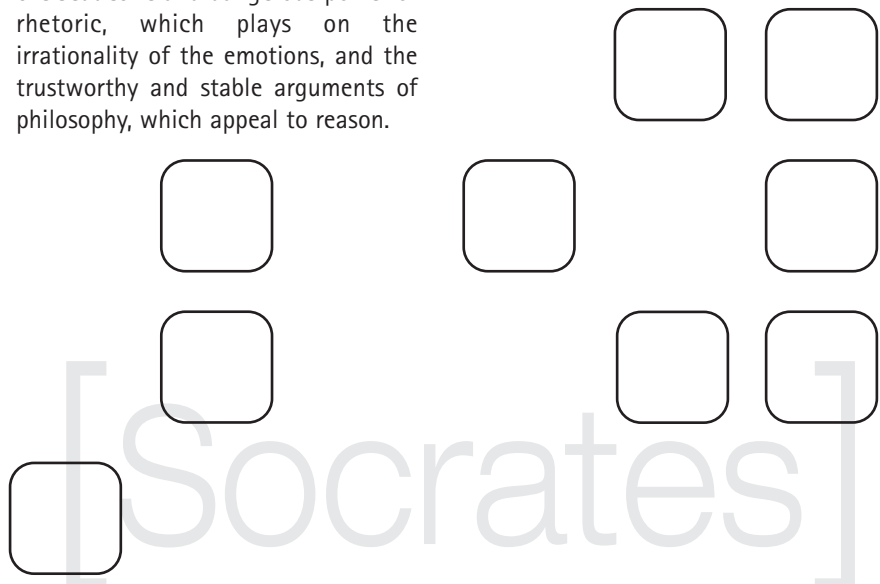
if this dialogue were not expressly cited by Aristotle, many scholars would have judged it as unworthy of Plato and hence inauthentic.<sup>13</sup> If Kahn is correct, and without the authority of Aristotle many commentators would have judged the dialogue unworthy of Plato, this cannot be because it is lacking in literary qualities: although it is short, the dialogue produces a subtle, sophisticated, picture of Socrates and Hippias, dislocating the identities of sophist and philosopher, just as Socrates dislocates the traditional identities of Odysseus and Achilles. What, I imagine, would concern commentators, and what would lead them to judge the dialogue unworthy of Plato, is the prevalence of literary technique over philosophical substance. The Plato who wrote the *Lesser Hippias* looks like he was a more sophisticated Plato than we are used to admitting.

Without doubt, it is possible to argue, as Kahn does, that by having Socrates maintain the obviously sophistic thesis that voluntarily doing wrong is better than involuntarily doing wrong, Plato intends to provoke the reader to a *philosophical* reflection concerning the nature of virtue, of right and wrong. Less positively, it would also be possible to argue that Plato's intention is to expose the frailty of the sophist Hippias' pretensions to wisdom through his inability to show Socrates where the flaws in his argument lie. I do not want to claim that either interpretation of the *Lesser Hippias* would be wrong; however, I do want to introduce another consideration.

This consideration is suggested by the final lines of the *Lesser Hippias*. At the end of their discussion, Hippias tells Socrates that he cannot agree that it is the better person who does wrong voluntarily. Socrates is moved to admit

that, even if such a conclusion is the inevitable result of his argument, he cannot agree with himself. That Socrates should end by admitting to being at variance with himself is certainly in keeping with the entire pattern of a dialogue in which identities and differences are constantly confused; but it is also something more than a final flourish. In order to see this it is helpful to consider the opening of the *Apology*, Plato's record of Socrates' trial. Socrates opens his defence by admitting that the words of his accusers (which Plato has not recorded), whilst not true, were effective: for they had moved him, carried him away, and almost induced him to forget himself (17a). Their words (*logos*) are intended to function like spells or drugs, 'bewitch[ing] the soul with a kind of evil persuasion'.<sup>14</sup> Socrates goes on in the *Apology* to contrast his own manner of speaking to that of his accusers: he will not use 'flowery language like theirs, decked out with fine words and phrases' (17c); rather, he will use 'straightforward speech' (17c) to say the truth. Here we find the supposedly standard Platonic contrast between the seductive and dangerous power of rhetoric, which plays on the irrationality of the emotions, and the trustworthy and stable arguments of philosophy, which appeal to reason.

However, the *Lesser Hippias* shows that this abstract opposition of reason and emotions, philosophy and sophistry, is not wholly true to Plato. The dialogued depicts a Socrates who *argues* sophistically and who, by doing so, reaches a fallacious conclusion, but it ends with a Socrates who admits to a philosophical *feeling*. Having argued as he has, that to do wrong intentionally is better than to do so unintentionally, Socrates *feels* at odds with himself, despite the apparent necessity of the conclusion of his argument. It is no argument, nothing rational, but a mute emotion (*pathē*), that draws him back, recalls him to his true self, and that possesses the intelligence to see that the conclusion is wrong in the face of the argument itself. Indeed, if the sophist Hippias can stand firm against Socrates' sophistic argument, and if Socrates can himself resist his own conclusion, it is because it is *passion*, and not reason, that moves us. The *Lesser Hippias* recalls us to this essential aspect of Plato's philosophy and philosophising; it reminds us that the word philosophy names an affective disposition, the *love* of wisdom, and it is, in this respect, more sophisticated than is normally assumed.





- 1 G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), p. 1
- 2 J. Dillon & T. Gergel, eds. *The Greek Sophists* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. x
- 3 Gorgias appeals to this 'irrational', magical, power of words in *The Encomium of Helen*: 'Inspired incantations conveyed through words/ become bearers of pleasure/ and banishers of pain;/ for, merging with opinion in the soul,/ the power of incantation beguiles it/ and persuades it/ and alters it by witchcraft!' This translation is taken from *The Greeks Sophists*, p.78. The same association of words with charms is found in Homer and Aeschylus, and later in Plato, where the connection is critically exploited in relation to sophistry.
- 4 *Protagoras*, 316c-d. All references to Plato's dialogues are taken from *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1996). Subsequent references to the dialogues will be given in brackets in the main text.
- 5 For example, Jacqueline de Romilly, in her seminal study of the sophists, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), notes that Plato is our richest source of information about the sophists. However, she is, she says, 'also a biased one, for although Plato sets the sophists on stage, he has Socrates refute their theses. We are accordingly to be wary of following his testimony, sensing that the sophists are in danger of being served ill by this distorting spotlight' (p. x)
- 6 See, for example, G. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (op. cit.)
- 7 G. W. F. Hegel: *Hegel's Logic*, trans. W. Wallace (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975), p. 325
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 See *Metaphysics*, trans. H. Tredennick (Camb. Mass: Loeb Classical Library, 1933), Book Gamma 2, 1004b
- 10 See, for example, the immoralism of the sophistical Callicles, the third of Socrates' interlocutors in the *Gorgias*. Callicles effectively argues that the better person is the one who does wrong voluntarily rather than suffers wrong.
- 11 See *Rhetoric*, trans. J. H. Freese (Camb. Mass: Loeb Classical Library, 1926), 1399a 15
- 12 The term *polutropos* is also applicable to the sophist in a slightly different, if related, sense. Antisthenes, a contemporary of Plato, draws out the etymological connection between *polutropos* and *tropes* or figures of speech. Someone who is said to be *polutropos* is someone who knows many *tropes* and can express something in many ways, someone who is clever in conversation, who can turn a phrase, and who is consequently skilled in dealing with men; in other words, the sophist.
- 13 C. H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), p. 118.
- 14 The phrase is Gorgias': see *The Encomium of Helen*, in *The Greek Sophists*, (op. cit), p. 82

# Janne Mantykoski

# Truth as the Way to [Meaning]

## 1. The problem

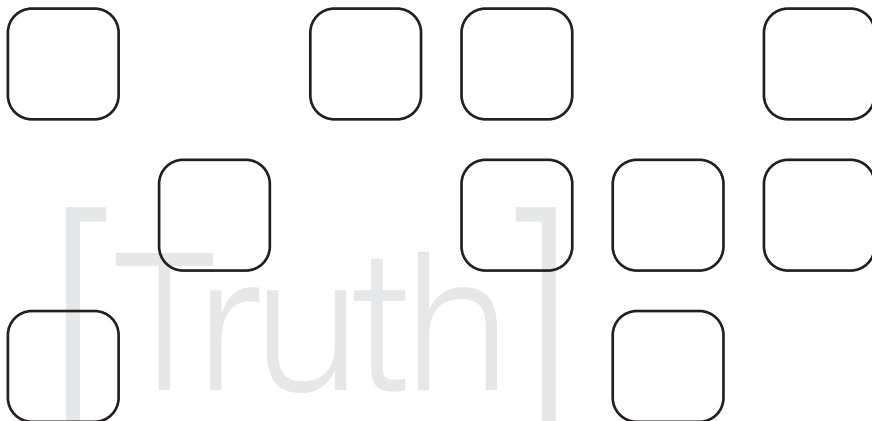
Not so long ago during a semi-intellectual pub conversation a journalist friend told me that there was no objective truth. The claim was delivered with an air of throw-away triviality in the midst of a catalogue of other practical problems involving the life of a reporter. One could see her point, of course. I fully appreciate the obstacles in discerning for instance what actually is and isn't said behind closed doors by politicians. Did the government lie about its Iraqi WMD dossier? One can see how deeper inquiries with new sources and wider contexts might simply serve to unearth increasingly conflicting claims and points of view. In a way, the more we try, the further away the objective truth seems to slide, with a likelihood that our interpretations of the facts are forever open to revision.<sup>1</sup>

This problem is hardly restricted to journalism, but is notoriously intractable in numerous other respectable academic disciplines such as social anthropology and history, and many academics share a similar scepticism about the possibility of objectivity. History will always remain open to revision by the next generation of historians, even in the absence of new sources or interesting discoveries. If there is no convergence of facts within these disciplines, then perhaps there indeed is nothing we could call objectively true about them.



Still, this line of argument is unlikely to impress philosophers, who could easily diagnose the problem as just journalists and historians confusing an epistemological problem (how we come to know the facts) with a metaphysical one (what the facts are regardless of how they may be found out). That objective truth is often hard, perhaps even impossible, to come by is not yet an argument against its existence. It is easy to see why this is likely to be the case. For instance, consider some obscure historical fact we can confidently expect never to be uncovered by historians, such as what Julius Caesar's grandmother's blood type was. Nonetheless, as sure as you have a blood type, so did she, and it seems foolhardy in the extreme to question, let alone deny, this. The probable impossibility of the epistemic task seems wholly irrelevant to the question of the fact's actuality. Truth, in other words, is not determined by epistemological constraints alone, there is more to truth. How much more? (And what is this 'more' anyway?) In fact, many philosophers argue that it is not an epistemic notion at all and I am inclined to agree with them. Some things, according to this kind of view, are true or false regardless of its inquirers. Facts, the view suggests, are completely observer (or mind) independent. Call this view realism, and its rejection antirealism.

This dispute about the nature of truth is usually put in terms of the realism-antirealism debate, suggesting a



simple dichotomy, but it does more justice to the complexity of the debate to see it as a more fine-grained issue. Rather, we can see philosophers arguing that truth is more or less mind-dependent, with the absolute realists at one end of the spectrum, with radical relativists and other deniers of objective truth, at the opposite antirealist extreme. The argument for mind-independence of facts about the physical constitution of Caesar's grandmother clearly supports those situated towards the realist end of the spectrum, but the considerations my friend took to be crucial, i.e. difficulties concerning political facts, clearly seem to pull in the opposite direction. The difference between these two kinds of facts seems to be in the way we come to know them, if we do. Facts about physical properties seem to be less vulnerable to conflicting interpretations than those about politics. What did Tony Blair really say, and according to whom? And what was the exact context? This problem of interpretation, usually called the indeterminacy of interpretation problem, is at the heart of the debate about truth. Interpretation is about meaning, and meaning clearly matters to the question of truth. If we are to know a fact we have to understand the fact. And if facts are objective, then two people who know the same fact must understand that fact the same way. If truth is objective then so must meaning be. To have a grasp of truth, it seems we have a grasp of meaning as well, and so a philosophy of one is likely to become a philosophy of the other as well. But, I will also argue, this notion of truth serves to undermine the realist-antirealist dichotomy, showing that the dichotomy can't be about truth in general, but rather about types of (supposed) facts; we are all realists

and antirealists about *something* (e.g. many are likely to be realists about biology and antirealists about astrology).

In what follows I will try to clarify and contrast two related philosophies of truth and meaning, which are widely debated in contemporary philosophy, the Tarski-Fregean Building-Block model and the Tarski-Davidsonian Holistic model.<sup>2</sup> A choice between the two lands us at different points (if this kind of talk is helpful) on the gradient between the relativists and the absolutists, with the Fregeans closer to the absolutists than the Davidsonians. The differences between the two are slight but absolutely crucial, and my purpose here is to argue that the Holistic model of truth and meaning has some crucial virtues the Building-Block alternative lacks, and fewer of the failings. But to make better sense of the debate (and for chronological validity) I will start with the Tarski-Fregean model.

## 2. Tarski-Fregean Building-Block model

First a word about the nomenclature. There is a reason why both models carry the name of the Polish logician Alfred Tarski, who famously defined truth in terms of satisfaction for well-behaved formal languages (I will describe how in a second). This was one of the seminal achievements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century semantics, indeed in philosophy in general, and the two models discussed here are really identical in their formal semantic properties, and differ only in terms of practical application that is best characterised as a dispute about the constitution of meaning. Exactly how will hopefully come clear during the course of the current and the

following section.

A formal definition of truth is not an intuitively obvious notion, so allow me to start by an important qualification. Tarski stressed that he hadn't defined truth for natural languages, and proved that the general notion of truth could not be thus defined. Satisfaction is itself defined as a formal semantic relation that holds between sentential functions with formal structures similar to sentences and certain other objects such as sentential and logical connectives (e.g. 'and', 'or', 'because'), nouns and adverbs, e.g. the predicate 'ist Weiss' is a sentential function of the form 'x ist Weiss'.<sup>3</sup> Those who know a bit about programming languages will be familiar with these types of functions, and of course a programming language is a paradigmatic example of a formal language. So this particular sentential function has one free variable which accepts nouns, e.g. it can be filled by the word 'Schnee'. If all the free variables in the sentential function are filled with appropriate objects we get a sentence, and if the sentential function is satisfied by those objects, we end up with true sentences. Tarski was able to show that the objects available to fill the free variables of the sentential function always either satisfy the sentential function completely or not at all, giving us an elegant definition of truth as a satisfied sentence.<sup>4</sup> Because the definition is recursive, it can be used to derive all and only the infinitely many true sentences from a finite stock of sentential functions, connectives and objects, taking advantage of the recursive properties of languages.<sup>5</sup> The definition of truth for a (formal) language then turns out to be just the infinite list of sentences that are true, produced by the finite list of theorems that lists the formal

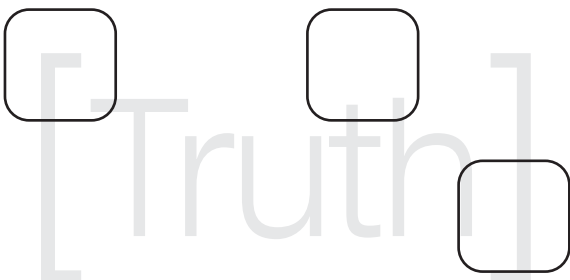
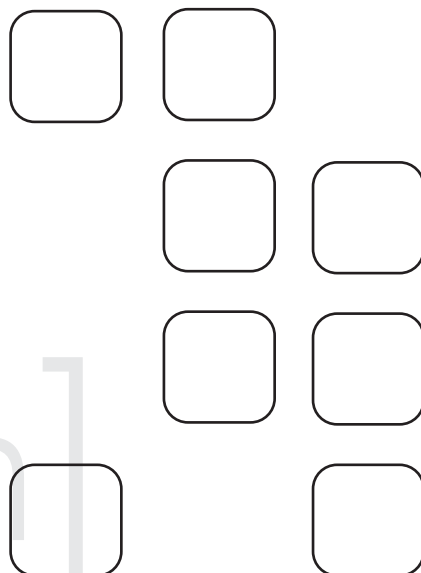
semantic units and specifies their properties. Given together, this list of theorems constitutes a *theory of truth* for a particular (formal) language.

Reference is a relation words have with things in the world. According to the great 19<sup>th</sup> century German logician and philosopher of language Gottlob Frege, words in general have both a sense (or meaning) and reference, i.e. the thing in the world that the word somehow represents or picks out. The meaning of a word is like a function that is true if it refers, so for instance the word 'Schnee' means the same as 'snow' in part because it refers to snow in the world. 'Weiss' means the same as 'white' in part because it refers to white, and so on. Of course something like a colour isn't really a 'thing', but we can think of it as a property that is instantiated in things, so the reference of 'white' would be just the property of white, or whiteness. The way philosophers sometimes make sense of this kind of talk is by suggesting that the reference is an extension, because it is literally extended in space, so the extension of whiteness would simply be all the white things in the world. The reference-extension couple can be contrasted with the corresponding meaning-intension couple: the meaning of the word is the concept that we grasp with our minds, i.e. the intension of the word. The intension is ultimately what determines the extension.

It is obvious that reference is a notion intimately connected with satisfaction. Since we understand the notion of reference in general as the relationship that holds between the word and its extension, i.e. the reference of 'Schnee' is snow, the reference of 'Weiss' is white, or more carefully, the set of all things that are white, we can understand satisfaction as a matching of extensions in the appropriate way, for instance the subject 'Schnee' satisfies the predicate 'ist Weiss' because the extension of 'Schnee' is a subset of the extension of 'Weiss'. This just means that if you gathered all the white things in the world in the same place, those things would automatically include all the snow in the world (and much else besides). In Tarski's framework satisfaction is a formal property of formal languages that we can simply stipulate between sentential functions and semantic objects, but it is easy to see how real languages have this same property with the crucial difference that it is not so open to stipulation. In real languages, satisfaction is quite a complicated property that depends on meanings of words and the way the world is.

This becomes clearer if we follow Frege in thinking that knowing the full meaning of a referring expression entails that we know what its reference would be, because meaning of a singular term just is its reference condition. So if we fully understand the meanings of the words 'Schnee' and 'Weiss', we know what their referents are. But to know whether the sentence 'Schnee ist Weiss' is true we have to know more than just the meanings of the individual words, we have to also know whether snow is white, or, equivalently, whether 'Schnee' satisfies 'ist Weiss'. It is natural to think that it is our knowledge of the extensions which allows us to make this check, e.g. we investigate samples of snow to determine what colour they are. But we can see how, according to this picture, satisfaction is determined by the sense and reference of the words, and if these are objective, we can see that truth of sentences is itself entirely objective. The meaning of the sentence is its truth condition, which means that understanding a sentence is knowing what the world is like if the sentence is true. Let's see how this is supposed to work.

Although Tarski's definition of truth strictly speaking only concerned formal languages, his obvious intention was to say something interesting about truth and natural languages in general. In his own words he wanted to '...catch hold of the actual meaning of an old notion.'<sup>6</sup> What he showed was that, together with the more commonplace logical connectives, truth could be defined in terms of satisfaction. Satisfaction itself is strictly speaking also a technical relation, but we can see how it would be applicable. If we take our German sentence 'Schnee ist Weiss', we notice that if 'Schnee' refers to





snow, and 'Weiss' refers to whiteness, and 'ist' acts like a mapping procedure that maps all things snow onto all things white, then if the set of all things that are snow is included in the set of all white things, the sentence is true. In other words, 'Schnee' satisfies 'ist Weiss'.

The Tarski-Fregean philosophy of language gives us a neat and attractive model of how language works that explains how meaning is related to truth. According to Tarski-Fregeans, sentences are composed of sentential functions (e.g. predicates), semantic objects (e.g. nouns, adjectives, adverbs) and sentential connectives (e.g. and, or, but, because), and when we put them together in a complete sentence, we can work out according to the satisfaction relations what the truth conditions of the sentences are. If we knew all the satisfaction relations beforehand, we could just work out all the true sentences formally, but of course the point is that the words of natural languages have meanings that are not automatically known to us, and we have to find out what the satisfaction relations actually are by doing real empirical research. For instance, we used to think that 'whale is a type of fish' was a true sentence, but of course it is false because whales are actually mammals. This was an empirical discovery; we were wrong about the extension of the property of being a type of fish and mistakenly thought that 'whale' satisfied the predicate 'is a type of fish', and now we know better.

Because the semantic units are discrete, well-defined and objective, this picture is sometimes called the Building-Block model of language. As we have seen, satisfaction for natural languages in turn is completely determined by sense and reference,

and given that these are themselves objective properties of words of a language, in principle any sentence we care to put together is objectively true or false in a given language, regardless of what any number of people might insist. According to the Building-Block model, our actual interpretations of sentences are incidental to their actual meaning and truth; if interpretations of two sentences seem to be inconsistent (i.e. we get two sentences that we think are both true, yet they can't be true together), then this just shows that at least one of the interpretations must be wrong. According to this model, my friend's claim about objective truth is clearly false. Things are not that simple, because I'm now going to argue that this is in fact a bad model. We can see why when we contrast it with another one, which I think can easily be considered as an improved shake-up of the Building-Block model: the Tarski-Davidsonian Holistic model.

### 3. Tarski-Davidsonian Holistic model

As we have seen, Frege showed how sense and reference are two crucial interrelated aspects of language. Tarski's achievement was to show how we can define truth for formal languages with his notion of satisfaction, in keeping with the intuition that the truth of natural language sentences might be defined in terms of logical connectives and correspondence relations between words and their extensions (or, more accurately, their sense and reference). Tarski showed exactly how the truth of a sentence depends on the semantic features of parts of the sentence, especially reference. Of course, Tarski didn't define the actual concept of reference either, all he did was

introduce a relation he called satisfaction that connects the formal syntactic structures of a formal language, the point being that a relation of this kind is essential to the definition: we can't define truth without it.<sup>7</sup> A definition of truth can thus be taken completely formalistically as a tautological definition of the interrelated notions truth and reference.<sup>8</sup> But, equally, if we apply at least one of these concepts to the relevant feature of reality, we can get something with empirical applicability.

We have seen how, in order to give content to a theory of truth, we must first define a sentence, and then provide a recursive characterisation of a satisfaction relation. Truth can then be defined on the basis of satisfaction: if all the referring terms in the sentence satisfy the sentential function, the sentence is true. Since both truth and satisfaction are formally related semantic concepts, one is not prior to the other and so we are free to define either in terms of the other. According to Davidson, Tarski defines satisfaction as the relation that gives the correct account of truth, so he starts with a prior understanding of the concept of truth and therefore doesn't require any prior understanding of the concept of reference. He could have chosen the opposite route, the more traditional, and perhaps initially more intuitive method of defining truth in terms of reference, which is exactly the tactic of the Building-Block model. After all, it makes intuitive pedagogical sense that we learn to understand whole sentences only after we've learned to understand parts of sentences, i.e. words, giving us a method which is applied to, for instance, second language teaching in schools. But Davidson's revolutionary insight is based on the thought that truth is the



semantic concept we have the best pre-theoretical grasp of. The notions of reference, sentential connective and singular term are (by comparison) obscure and theoretical.<sup>9</sup>

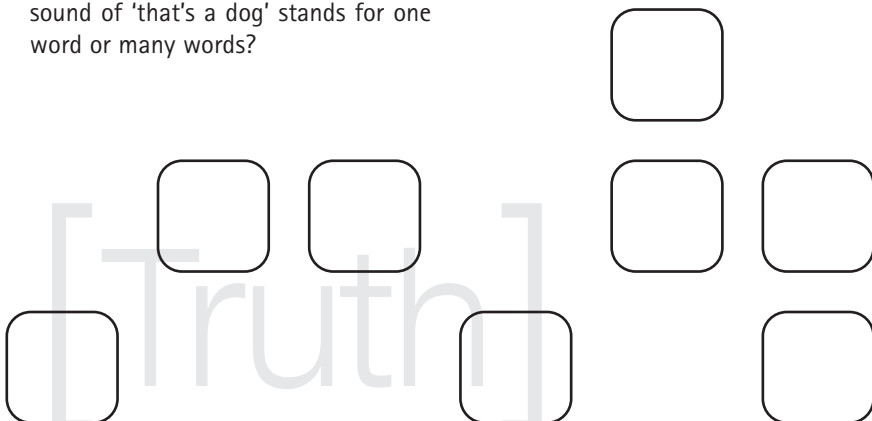
The import of the insight comes to this: we can tell whether the speaker of a sentence holds the sentence true or false prior to understanding the sentence. Once we know that a given sentence is true we can start theorising about the finer structural subtleties of the sentence. What count as a sentence are utterances and scribbles by creatures we can usefully recognise as language-users, and so truth itself only has application in the context of language-users. When we try to give content to a theory of truth that might apply to a real language, the sentences produced by the theory must have meaning that is independent of the theory, and consequently the best evidence we can hope for is in the facts that are publicly available about how speakers use the language.<sup>10</sup> To see the sense in this consider the case of children acquiring their first words. If the children didn't have some sort of pre-theoretical sense that the sounds emerging from people's mouths had something to do with the way things are, there would be no hope for them ever to get their linguistic development started. How could a child know, for instance whether the sound of 'that's a dog' stands for one word or many words?

The point is that she doesn't, nor does she need to, all she needs to be aware of is that the sentence is held true by the speaker, and that it seems to have something to do with the friendly fluffy creature in the room, as that is where the speaker's attention is directed towards while uttering the sentence. The realisation that the sound of 'that's a dog' is composed of four semantic units, or words, some of which refer more specifically to the fluffy creature, comes later, once the child has a more refined, or post-theoretical, grasp of truth and language.

The Holistic model turns the Building-Block model on its head. Whereas the Tarski-Fregeans define satisfaction in terms of sense and reference, with truth simply following as the property of satisfied sentences, Davidsonians start with a true sentence and then attempt to derive the satisfaction relations, and the sense and reference of words, as theoretical notions as a part of the process of coming to understand sentences uttered by speakers. In other words the theory of truth is not something we start off with, it is the end product of a competent language user. We shall see that this end product is not an ideal we strive towards, or that at certain point we reach a stage which can't be improved upon—the end product itself changes organically with the speakers.

Whatever the other virtues of this move, it is important to see that Tarskian formalisms are neutral to it. If we accept that truth can be defined in terms of satisfaction, then it is just a logical fact that satisfaction can be defined in terms of truth. A definitional relation is an equivalence relation, and this relation is symmetric: if a is b by definition, then b is a by that same definition.

We have seen the initial motivation for this move, the problem of how children actually acquire the understanding of languages. The two models make different predictions about this process, the Fregeans would suggest that children need to learn words before they can understand sentences, Davidsonians that children start with sentences, and only then learn to abstract the meanings of individual words. The feasibility of this process depends on one practical and two necessary conditions. First of all there needs to be a sufficiently large pool of utterances (i.e. sets of sentences) which allow theoretical extrapolations to take place. Secondly the prospective language-users must have some of pre-theoretical grasp of truth, and thirdly there must be a way to distinguish between true and false utterances, and thereby to correlate the utterances with features or regularities of the world. The first consideration is just equivalent to the near truism that to learn a language we must be exposed to language—that children raised in linguistic isolation will not become language users is a well confirmed empirical fact. But since, out of all the creatures on Earth, only humans seem fully capable of accomplishing this feat, more is needed. That would shoulder the philosophically interesting burden on the second and third conditions. Davidson's response to the problem was to propose a set of heuristic



assumptions that all language users must share, which he called the 'Principle of Charity':<sup>11</sup>

Davidson's assumption is that the ability to process utterances in the analogous manner to constructing theories of truth which allow the interpreters to abstract the atomic units of meaning out of sentences, i.e. get at the words. But this is only possible if the interpreters know in advance which sentences are true and which false. We also need a starting point in order to theorise about the contents of the sentences to begin with. This is where a second consideration comes in. When we start learning a language we must start with the assumption that the sentences we hear are true—without this assumption the process couldn't even get started. Also, we assume that we can somehow start by correlating some of the sentences of other speakers with some salient observable features of the world. We must therefore add to the assumption that we can correctly guess from our judgement of the direction of the attention of the speakers what the probable content of the sentence may be. Testing our budding theories about the meaning of the utterances by producing our own utterances is a crucial part of the theory construction, and in this we must recognise acts of assent and dissent of other speakers. Consider again a toddler's first attempts at language—they are always likely to concern observational claims about people and everyday objects—it is intuitively absurd to think that a child's first utterances might just as likely be about abstract entities. The further assumption is that in time the toddler's theory becomes more sophisticated, allowing the possibility to incorporate errors in the interpretation process by noting

inconsistencies among speakers. This is crucial, and becomes relevant later on.

#### 4. Why we should be Holists rather than Blockers

Although I've presented the model in the context of language acquisition, we should be clear that (even if we only considered speakers who have acquired full-blown linguistic capacities) the two models make importantly different claims about meaning and language. Consider the phenomenon of language evolution and the drift of conventional meanings. It is a well-known fact that languages evolve in time, divide into different dialects, which eventually may become wholly incomprehensible and thus fully different languages. The Romance languages, such as Portuguese, French and Romanian are reasonably described as descendants of Latin, in the sense that we can see traces of historical records that fairly accurately suggest how the Latin spoken two millennia ago in the relevant regions gradually drifted into these three mutually incomprehensible languages. Linguistic drift as a real phenomenon is not open to dispute, and I want to emphasise how absolutely prevalent this phenomenon actually is, everyone notices the differences in the ways their much elder or younger relatives speak, even if from the same dialectical region. Languages are in constant state of change, and in fact linguists such as Noam Chomsky think there is little reason to think there is any serious reality to a well-defined object such as English Language in some semantically interesting sense.<sup>12</sup> There are only languages that are

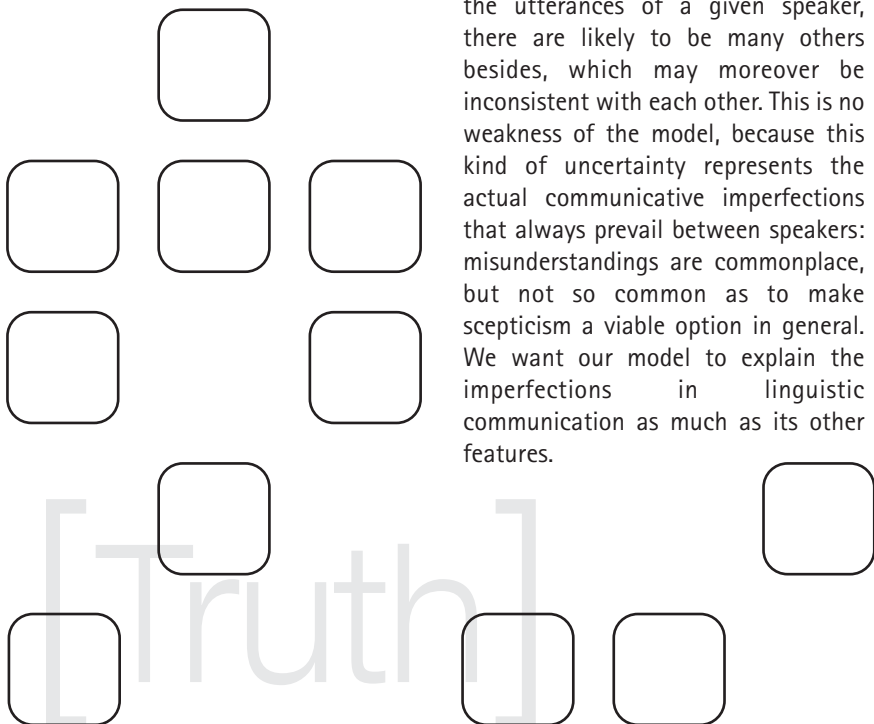
more or less mutually comprehensible, but all language users can learn any other language.

This is an empirical point that seems to be reasonably well agreed on by most linguists, and the point is, of course, that only the Davidsonian holistic model is compatible with it. According to the Fregean Building-Block model, meanings of words are objective (speaker-independent) entities, which determine the references and thereby satisfaction relations of sentential objects and eventually the truth of the sentence itself. But if this is the case, then a language such as English consists of an objectively inert stock of atomic semantic units, which we can combine in various ways to express our thoughts and make true or false claims about the world. But how could it accommodate, let alone explain, the fact that English manifests itself in countless dialects, which moreover continuously mutate, branch and assimilate in and out of existence? It seems that a Fregean Building-Block theorist would have to insist that all dialects are in fact different languages, since a sentence which is true in one dialect, 'Michael is wearing pants' is false in another (because Michael is wearing trousers—pants are undergarments). But this then seems to push the theorist into holding an absurd claim that speakers must know countless different languages in order to communicate with different people. If there is no objective way to delineate dialects we'd eventually be pushed into a view according to which everyone spoke a different language, which is where the Building-Block model becomes intolerable. It would amount to a claim that all speakers, by virtue of speaking slightly different dialects, had different, unmatching building blocks. But the whole, initially

intuitive, project of the Building-Block model was in the attempt to explain linguistic communication by the fact that meanings were objective and shared. Of course a diagnosis of this problem can be discerned from the impossibility of acquiring these building blocks—how can one acquire the meaning of the term 'carburettor' without already somehow being in possession of that meaning. After all, how can you understand the sentence beginning with 'carburettor is...' if you completely lack the sense of the word 'carburettor'. But if you can't understand this sentence prior to learning about carburettors, it seems it is impossible to learn what a carburettor is. And this is absurd.<sup>13</sup> What the Tarski-Fregean model fails to account for is the organic nature of language which could explain its communicational flexibility by the fact that new words and constructions are so readily learnable.<sup>14</sup>

By contrast, the Tarski-Davidsonian Holistic theory is primed to explain exactly this crucial flexibility in the way we communicate. In his seminal papers 'Communication and Convention' and 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' Davidson explains how communication doesn't depend on any shared knowledge of meanings or other conventions, all we need is the ability to incorporate speaker utterances into theories of truth out of which we can extrapolate the meanings of words.<sup>15</sup> This is no mean feat, of course, and the way we actually do it is unlikely to bear identical resemblance to Tarskian truth theories, but Davidson's point is that if we can provide one framework with which to model it, we have removed the mystery of the process. If there is one way, there are likely to be many. It is also clear that since we are dealing with a finite stock of evidence for our theories, we are always up against a possibility of error. Whenever we have hit upon a theory of truth that seems to correctly account for the utterances of a given speaker, there are likely to be many others besides, which may moreover be inconsistent with each other. This is no weakness of the model, because this kind of uncertainty represents the actual communicative imperfections that always prevail between speakers: misunderstandings are commonplace, but not so common as to make scepticism a viable option in general. We want our model to explain the imperfections in linguistic communication as much as its other features.

This explains finally our opening dilemma: the reason why a fact about some physical property, such as a blood type of an individual, is in some sense more objective than a fact about what someone said because a fact about some physical property is not dependent on the speakers' interpretation about what the correct way of describing it may be. Certainly mistakes do occur here as well, scientists sometimes postulate properties that don't exist at all, and when they do exist they are commonly incorrectly described and/or characterised, but the mistake, when it is made, is itself objective in the sense that further inquiry can show it to be such. This is precisely the reason why we can expect present science to disagree with its previous theories and findings. But things are not so straightforward when it comes to interpreting utterances and intentions. Whereas the outside world shared by all the speakers provides the clear foundation for claims about it, there is no such obviously objective foundation for facts about correct interpretations. This is clear to anyone who has ever studied literature, but the phenomenon is much more



universal, and applies to communication in general. Just as there is no objective fact of the matter<sup>16</sup> whether Hamlet intended to kill Polonius, there may be no objective fact whether the government lied about the WMD dossier. That is not to say that there can't be such a fact—if Tony Blair sometime in his future memoirs confessed to having lied, then there clearly would be such a fact (even now). It may be that there is evidence to suggest that the government clearly didn't lie. But it could also be a fact that there was no unambiguous intention to lie, even if certain untruths were inadvertently passed on to make the case for war. In that case it seems a matter of interpretation to make a case for either, but such a balanced situation would elude any objective assertion of fact of the matter. The point is not epistemological, as there is nowhere in the world where such a fact may be determined (even in principle), any more than there are likely to be facts about correct interpretations of Shakespeare's plays.

This lack of facts is not odd nor debilitating, for there can surely be propositions camouflaging as truths. Truth, as we have been discussing it, is not simply identical to the facts (which presumably just are the infinite list of true sentences). The notion of truth is rather what we have grasped when we understand how beliefs work in the world, i.e. that they apply to sentences that describe some state of affairs either correctly or incorrectly. Even if it may be true that there is no determinate fact about whether Hamlet murdered Polonius, we know that if we held this as a fact, we couldn't at the same time hold that Hamlet didn't murder Polonius (and many other more subtle consequences besides—all truths must cohere with

one another). Indeed, we can easily imagine an emergence of a tradition of dogmatic Shakespearean literary orthodoxy according to which it is simply a fact that Hamlet murdered Polonius. But real facts aren't matters of tradition or consensus, nor do they depend on epistemic access. With matters of interpretation there often isn't enough evidence even for the ideal interpreter, so a fact, if such there be, will not be recognisable as such. This is not a place to advance arguments on whether we should or shouldn't believe in such facts if they are interpretation-transcended, *prima facie* there could be such facts. On the other hand, I don't see why there should be, and prefer to remain agnostic about them.

This is in itself of course a less than an absolutely realist position. The point is, as I suggested in the introduction, everyone is a realist and an antirealist about some things, and so to express the issue as a simple dichotomy is to grossly trivialise it, and indeed a single one-dimensional gradient between realists and anti-realists is probably also too simple. The underlying point is, though, that the dispute itself is undermined by the realisation that it doesn't really depend on the concept of truth, nor does our concept of truth directly affect the debate. The debate is, rather, on how the world is and how our ways of exploring it are restricted—a much more practical problem than the deeply philosophical one it is often construed as.

## 5. Conclusion: Truth as the way to meaning

It is worth emphasising that the point is not to attribute to Fregeans absurd views such as that learning a language is impossible, or that we are born with

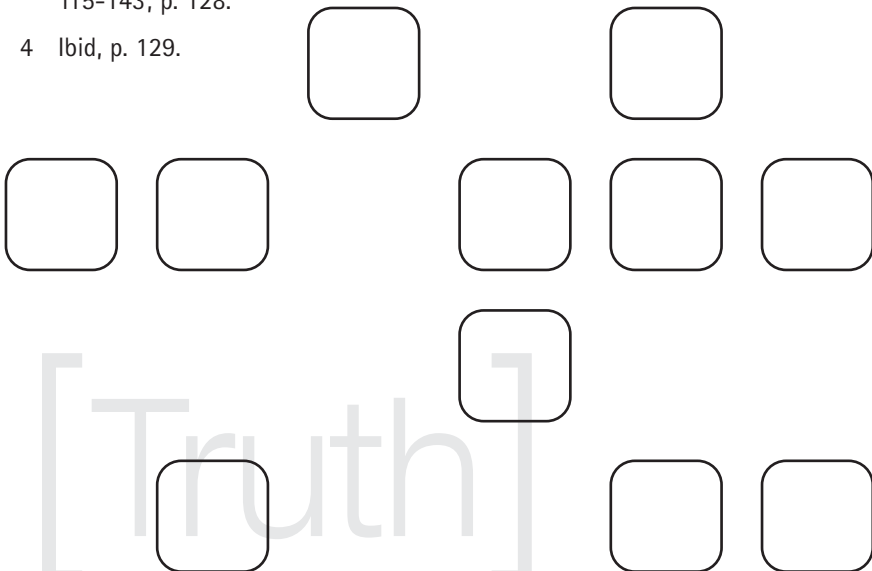
all the senses innately in our heads. These are views few serious philosopher are likely to entertain, and helps to emphasise the philosophically important point that it is the model we are criticising. The Tarski-Fregean model provides us with no method for the acquisition of meaning, and for related reasons can't account for the organic way languages are in constant state of change. This is primarily an empirical point, the model doesn't seem to correspond with the way speakers (and languages themselves) are actually observed to be, but it can be applied to philosophy as well. A philosophy that is at odds with what we clearly perceive to be the case is just bad philosophy! It is perhaps unfair to criticise The Building Block model for such practical problems, since it could be defended as an ideal of what all natural languages approach (but never achieve). It can still successfully represent other crucial aspects of languages, and how these aspects tie truth in with meaning. But, on the contrary, my point about Davidsonian Holism is precisely that it embodies all the virtues of the Building Block model, as it is in its formal properties based on the same Tarskian framework, and as I have argued, much less of the sins. Tarski-Davidsonian Holism is thus rightly viewed as an improvement, a step in the right direction for philosophy of language. Its greatest virtue is in showing why truth matters so much, what makes it such a central concept, and why we can't do without it. An understanding of truth requires us to understand that we share the objective reality with others, and our words are about the objective reality. Truth is the connection between language and reality, a correct description of the world is a true sentence, and this can be ascertained only if we understand the sentence

correctly. Understanding a sentence is knowing what it means, knowing what the reality is like if the sentence is true. Prior to having meanings, knowing that a sentence is true gives us the only method of finding out what it means: this is the method of truth. Take away truth and you take away our ability to understand one another or to describe the world—it is a good philosophical question what, if anything, would remain.

- 1 I will talk about facts throughout this essay, but want to resist any strong ontological commitments about them. What I mean by 'facts' are simply true thoughts expressible as sentences, without advocating any specific theory of thought.
- 2 I've adapted these labels from Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) p. 221.
- 3 Alfred Tarski, 'The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundations of Semantics' (1944) Reprinted in Simon Blackburn and Keith Simmons, *Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 115-143; p. 128.
- 4 *Ibid*, p. 129.

- 5 For instance if we have a sentence 'a is b' and the conjunctive connective 'and', we can create an infinity of different sentences like this: 'a is b', 'a is b and a is b', 'a is b and a is b and a is b', and so on for ever. Note that because of the truth-functional properties of the conjunction 'and', if 'a is b' is true, then the rest of the produced sentences are too (and if it is false then so are all of them).
- 6 Tarski (op. cit.) p. 116.
- 7 Donald Davidson, 'The Structure and Content of Truth!' In *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990) pp. 279-328; p. 296.
- 8 Or really, satisfaction, but since satisfaction for natural languages is crucially dependent on reference, it is reasonable to say that meanings of words are really their reference conditions which determine their satisfaction relations.
- 9 Davidson, 'The Structure and Content of Truth' (op. cit.) p. 300.
- 10 *Ibid*, p. 301.
- 11 See Davidson 1984 (op. cit.).

- 12 Compare this with the linguist's joke in John Collins, 'Language: A Dialogue.' In *Richmond Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 1 Issue 5 (2003), pp. 18-24; p. 22.: 'A language is something with an army and a navy.' He explains a few sentences later, '[According to linguists] there is no thing – English – which all and only those we want to call English speakers know.'
- 13 One is reminded of Louis Armstrong's immortal reply when asked to explain what jazz was: 'If you gotta ask, you ain't never gonna get to know.' I disagree with the spirit of Armstrong's nativist elitism.
- 14 This common complaint is given voice by for instance Leslie Stevenson in his article 'Dummett on Frege', asking, '...can we distinguish the respective contributions of meaning and fact? Is there always one standard way, common to all speakers of the language, of establishing the reference of an expression? Quine's scepticism on this point must be faced. Frege's picture is not generally true of our actual use of language; he himself realised that different users of a proper name referring to the same person may attach different sense to the name.' In *Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 24 (1974), pp. 349-359; p. 352.
- 15 'Communication and Convention' is in Davidson (1984) (op. cit.) pp. 265-288, 'Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' is in Ernest LePore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) pp. 433-446.
- 16 No *knowable* objective fact, at any rate.





## Steve Grant

# Talking about [God]



One of the perennial problems encountered within the philosophy of religion is how it is that we can talk meaningfully about God when he is so utterly different to anything else we have ever encountered. When we say 'Socrates is wise', we make a claim which can be justified with regard to the behaviour and actions of a specific individual, where we have reliable eyewitness accounts and a record of what he said and did. But when we say 'God is wise', we predicate wisdom of God in what looks like much the same way as we do of Socrates, despite the fact that an immaterial, all-powerful all-knowing being is the subject of countless disputes over his precise nature and over whether or not he even exists. How can we justify using 'wisdom' or any other predicate in this way when we talk of God? The aim of this article is to consider one of the classic attempts to answer this question by claiming that there is no justification for attributing wisdom, omnipotence, omniscience or any other property to God, because such talk is meaningless.<sup>1</sup> That is to say, the writer I shall look at does not claim that God doesn't exist, but that when we try to talk of him it is nonsense.

### Falsificationism

The approach I wish to consider was advanced in a short piece by one of British philosophy's most famous atheists, Antony Flew.<sup>2</sup> Flew begins

with a parable from the writer John Wisdom. Two explorers come across a clearing in the jungle, and one claims that there is obviously a gardener who tends it. The second is sceptical, so they construct a series of increasingly elaborate tests to see if the gardener can be spotted. After each attempt fails, the believer suggests that this is because the gardener must have certain properties which mean that the guard dogs, electrified fence and ongoing observation cannot detect him. This means that the original claim that there is a gardener has now mutated into the claim that there is an invisible, intangible gardener which cannot be smelled by the dogs. Flew asks us to consider how such a figure would differ from an imaginary gardener, or no gardener at all, and claims that the process of qualifying the original claim by providing the gardener with an ever wider set of properties leads us eventually to the point where we are saying something far removed from what we started out with.

This line of argument is now used to move us towards a much more damaging claim about how theists talk of God. Flew argues that this process of qualification is one which is typical of theism, in that whenever one attempts to pin down a theist, she qualifies her original statement, rather than defending the view of God originally put forward, and he uses the problem of evil to highlight this. We are told that God loves us, and the

sceptic points to a child dying of inoperable throat cancer. The loving father is frantic with worry, but God does not intervene. We then ask about the claim that God loves us, and the claim is then qualified such that it now becomes 'God's love is not merely a human love, or God's love is an inscrutable love.'<sup>3</sup> Flew claims that this process of qualification throws into doubt whether or not the theist can really be making an assertion at all. If allowing a child to die horribly when one has the power to prevent it does not conflict with the claim that God loves us, then it starts to become unclear as to whether or not the theist is really using the word 'love' in a way which is recognisable. Flew ends with the question, 'What would have to occur...to constitute for you a disproof of the love of God, or of the existence of God?'<sup>4</sup>

How then does Flew move from the claim that theists will not allow any evidence to count against the claim that God exists and that he loves us, to the claim that they are not really saying anything? The answer to this lies in what one must know if one can be said to understand any statement. More specifically, Flew claims that if I understand the meaning of a positive assertion, then it follows that I must understand its negation. That is to say, if I genuinely understand the meaning of a statement such as 'snow is white', it must follow that I would understand the meaning of 'snow is not white'. And if I understand both the positive



assertion and its negation, then I must have an idea as to what evidence would help to rule out one or other of them. With the example of the colour of snow, I can simply suggest that we consider lots of examples of snow, checking the colour in each case, and see if it either is or isn't white. In other words, because I understand the meaning of the terms, I can say what sort of evidence would support my claim or disprove it. And it is here that we come back to the difficulties with religious language. If the theist genuinely understands what she is saying when she says God exists or God loves us, then she must understand the negation of each (God doesn't exist, God doesn't love us), and she must be able to state what evidence would settle the dispute one way or the other. But if the theist's strategy is to qualify her original claim at every turn, and not to allow any evidence to count against her claims, then this is said to indicate a failure of understanding, for if the theist genuinely understood what she was saying, she would be able to tell us what evidence would count against her claims. It this putative failure which leads Flew to conclude 'the Believer's earlier statement had been so eroded by qualification that it was no longer an assertion at all'<sup>5</sup> – she isn't really saying anything.

It may help to understand Flew's attack if we put his line of argument into context. The name of his approach on the question of the meaning of religious language, falsificationism, comes from a theory advanced by Karl Popper with regard to what counts as a good theory in science.<sup>6</sup> According to Popper, the best theory is one where we do everything we can to falsify it. It is this which we try to do when we conduct a controlled experiment, and if the

theory stands up to the experimental method, then it is a good one. Poor theories will be exposed (shown to be false) through experiment. Once one adapts this approach to the subject of religious language, then Flew's claim is essentially that the strategy of the theist is analogous to that of a scientist who never allows any experiment to count as one which can be used to test her theory. And just as we would argue that the theory cannot be deemed valid until some means of falsifying it is agreed upon, a statement about God could only count as a proper statement if we can say what evidence would demonstrate it is false.

### Responses to Flew

Flew's argument has a compelling quality to it, and carries the sort of force that many arguments have when bringing forward the problem of evil as means of attacking religious belief. But there is widespread agreement that he falls short of establishing the conclusion that theists aren't really saying anything when they talk of God. Perhaps the most telling response to this theory comes from R M Hare,<sup>7</sup> who provides a counter example to Flew's claim that we are not really asserting anything if we won't accept any evidence to count against our claims. Hare asks us to imagine the following sort of scenario.

Imagine a student who is convinced that her teachers secretly wish to murder her. Let us say she confides this to one of her tutors who then goes out of his way to introduce her to the friendliest teachers, who all treat her with unflinching charm. But far from changing her views, this simply reinforces the paranoid student's belief that a particularly devious plot is underway and that the outward friendliness of the teachers is simply a means of luring her into a false sense of security. No matter what the tutor says or does, the student refuses to accept that she is not the subject of a deadly plot. Now, Hare points out that there are many things that one can accuse the student of, but it is surely *not* the case that she isn't really saying anything. Indeed, it is possible to disagree with her and to try to bring her to see things differently only because we attribute to her statements a series of meanings which correspond to what we ourselves understand to be the meaning of killing someone, engaging in a conspiracy etc. Flew might wish to respond that it is nevertheless possible that the student doesn't really understand what she is saying, and isn't therefore asserting what we take her to be saying. But this does not follow from the fact that she will not allow any evidence to count against her claim. It is entirely coherent to argue that she won't accept any evidence, but she is nevertheless asserting something, and what she is asserting is clearly meaningful.



Hare's counter example would appear to establish that a failure to allow any evidence to count against what you believe will not justify the conclusion that your claims are without meaning (which I take to be entailed by their not really being assertions at all). But a further series of arguments against has been put forward by Basil Mitchell. Mitchell begins by simply denying Flew's claim that theists do not allow the problem of evil to count against their belief in God. Indeed this is widely regarded as a monumental challenge to the belief in the God of classical theism as an all-powerful, all-loving morally perfect being. It is precisely for this reason that so much literature has been generated on the part of those who feel the need to reconcile the existence of this God with the existence of evil in the world.<sup>8</sup> Mitchell further contends that belief in God can't be understood in the way in which Flew presents it, rather as we might try to justify a belief in the existence of some alien species towards whom we have no specific attachment. To approach religious belief in this way is to misunderstand the nature of faith, and Mitchell responds with a parable of his own to make his point.

Mitchell asks us to imagine a resistance fighter in occupied France during the Nazi occupation, who meets a stranger who claims to be on the side of the resistance. There are moments when the stranger appears to offer great help and support, but other times when he is seen helping the enemy. The resistance fighter retains his belief in the ultimate goodness of the stranger despite the obvious doubts which arise, and argues in favour of him despite opposition from others. It is this sort of struggle which captures the nature of faith in God in the face of the difficulties posed by the problem of



evil, and Mitchell claims that Flew's account fails to address the distinct nature of religious faith. Discussion of faith needs to be couched in terms of loyalty, friendship, trust and other such personal commitments, and cannot be captured entirely in an approach adapted from determining the quality of scientific theories.

## Conclusion

There can be no doubt that the problem of religious language is one which poses a considerable problem for both theists and sceptics alike. The theist must offer an account of how it is we can talk of something so far removed from what we encounter in ordinary experience. The atheist is in a surprisingly similar situation, in that unless she wishes to take something like Flew's line, and deny any meaning at all to religious language, then she must also provide a theory of meaning which explains how it is that life is breathed into the language used to describe something which she claims does not exist. What we are left with is the rather perplexing philosophical problem of how to reconcile the intuition that we do indeed speak meaningfully when we speak of God, with the intuition that meaning is surely related at some level to the way in which we experience the world. Failure to overcome this problem will

ensure that it remains an enduring issue within the philosophy of religion.

- 1 Another famous attempt to defend such a claim is to be found in A J Ayer's *Language Truth and Logic* (Dover Publications, 1946).
- 2 Antony Flew, 'Death by a Thousand Qualifications', reprinted in *Philosophy of Religion: a Guide and Anthology*, ed. Brian Davies, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2000)153-155.
- 3 *Ibid*, 154.
- 4 *Ibid*, 155.
- 5 *Ibid* I,154.
- 6 Popper's ideas in this area were originally put forward in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London; Hutchinson, 1959). A summary of his views can be found in Carl Hempel's *Philosophy of Natural Science* (New Jersey; Prentice-Hall, 1966), 44-45.
- 7 The arguments put forward by Hare, and the ensuing ones by Basil Mitchell can both be found in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, eds Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London; 1955).
- 8 For an excellent cross-section of view on the problem of evil, see Part V of the Brian Davies edited text referred to in FN 1 above.

**Christopher Norris**[ Ethics, Autonomy, and the  
Grounds of Belief: ]  
views from the 'two traditions'

How far can or should we be held responsible for what we believe? From one point of view – call it 'doxastic voluntarism' – such responsibility is the *sine qua non* of any approach that would take due account of our various intellectual and ethical obligations, that is to say, our proper concern as rational agents with the business of sorting true from false or morally acceptable from unacceptable beliefs. From another, more inclined toward some form of doxastic determinism, it has seemed nothing short of self-evident that beliefs are to a large extent non-volitional, or subject to various kinds of causal or socio-cultural influence. Where the former stakes its claim on our capacity for freely-willed, autonomous choice in keeping with the dictates of moral or intellectual conscience the latter requires that we take more account of those other (heteronomous) factors that may limit or constrain the extent of our responsibility in this regard. Moreover, the determinist will then remark that there is a problem for the advocate of free will or doxastic autonomy if their exercise is taken to involve submission to overriding imperatives such as those of dedication to truth, valid inference, evidential warrant, or openness to persuasion by the best (most rational) argument. For in that case they would be subject to constraints of a different but no less binding character, namely

to the norms of epistemic good conduct or respect for those same (in this sense heteronomous) standards of rational debate.

At its crudest this response takes the form of postmodernist jibes to the effect that Kant's great watchword *sapere aude* – 'think for yourself', 'let reason be your guide' – is a plain performative contradiction, proclaiming the virtues of intellectual freedom while enjoining a strict compliance with its own demand.<sup>1</sup> It is not hard to see the confusion here between the general advice that we should strive so far as possible to exercise our powers of reflective, self-critical, conscientious thought and the specific injunction – no part of Kant's claim – that we should think just like him. However there are real problems to be faced when the advocate of free will (or doxastic responsibility) attempts to explain how we can reconcile those values with the fact that any freedom of intellectual conscience worth having must involve a commitment to reasons or principles that will then play a crucial determining role in our various beliefs and actions.

Otherwise the notion of freedom will reduce to that of sheer randomness or unmotivated chance occurrence, as with certain, in my view misconceived arguments that adduce the indeterminate or probabilistic character of events on the subatomic (quantum) scale as evidence that moral philosophy no longer has anything to fear from the old Newtonian bugbear of iron-cast physical determinism.<sup>2</sup> Quite apart from their dubious scientific credentials such arguments clearly invite the charge of leaving no room for the exercise of a responsible freedom, as opposed to just a notional 'freedom from' the otherwise all-encompassing laws of physical cause and effect. Still the autonomist may be hard put to make her case against various objections that are apt to arise when considering the extent to which cultural, religious, ideological, or other such formative influences may play a predisposing or determining role even – or especially – in the case of our most deeply-held principles and beliefs.



Elsewhere, amongst followers of Wittgenstein, it is argued that the problem will simply disappear (like all such 'metaphysical' quandaries) if one sees that there are two different language-games involved, those of reason-based justification on the one hand and causal explanation on the other.<sup>3</sup> Or again, it can be conjured away through a 'naturalised' (or de-transcendentalised) reading of Kant which recommends that we jettison a great deal of his outmoded metaphysical machinery but retain the basic distinction between a physical realm where causal explanations are perfectly in order and a 'space of reasons' where the pertinent criteria are those of valid inference, well-formed argument, or justificatory warrant.<sup>4</sup> However, these strategies are no more effective in resolving the central issue – to put it bluntly, no less of a philosophic cop-out – than the idea that both sorts of talk make sense on their own terms and therefore cannot possibly get into conflict just so long as we regard them as belonging to disparate language-games or modes of thought. For this recourse to language as a means of escape from all our philosophic perplexities is one that leaves the conceptual problem firmly in place, amounting as it does to a placid assurance that 'everything is in order' with our accustomed linguistic practices. Yet the free will/determinism issue is just as pressing or worrisome when couched in everyday, non-specialist terms as when subject to a full-scale 'metaphysical' treatment in the Kantian manner. Quite simply, such problems cannot be wished away by any amount of linguistic therapy or Wittgensteinian attempts to persuade us that they are really just a form of self-induced philosophic bewitchment. Besides, these

approaches are always at risk of implicitly espousing a cultural-determinist view – and thus belying their professions of even-handedness – in so far as they entail the idea that beliefs are intelligible only within some language-game or communal 'form of life'. For then it follows that the freedom to question or to challenge doxastic norms must *ipso facto* be limited to whatever makes sense by those same communal lights.

Outside the analytic line of descent these issues have received some very different kinds of treatment. Among them is Sartre's existentialist idea of human consciousness as the locus of an ultimate, unqualified freedom (a 'hole' in being or a region of absolute 'nothingness') which marks the sole point of interruption in a physical universe otherwise governed by the iron laws of physical-causal determinism.<sup>5</sup> There is much of great interest and value in Sartre's approach to these topics, as likewise in the work of those – like Merleau-Ponty – who have sought to offer a viable account of human moral autonomy while criticising Sartre for his all-or-nothing view and insisting that we recognise

the practical constraints on our freedom in any given real-world context.<sup>6</sup> One strength of their analyses is the fact that they provide a good range of real or imagined test-case scenarios in order to flesh out the issues and bring us flat up against the kinds of dilemma confronted not only by human agents in various sorts of complex moral predicament but also by philosophers who seek to engage – and not evade – their more intractable aspects. Still the basic problem re-emerges very sharply in Sartre's later acknowledgement that if the idea of freedom is to have any genuine, as opposed to merely notional content then it will need to be specified in terms that take adequate account of those numerous factors (whether physical, historical, socio-cultural, psycho-biographical, or whatever) that in practice must be seen as placing certain limits on our scope for moral autonomy.<sup>7</sup>

This allowance becomes more explicit in his politically engaged writings where it is a chief premise of Sartre's Marxist-dialectical approach that human beings make their own history, but not in circumstances or under conditions of their own choosing. However it is also present in his existentialist works to the extent that freedom is here thought of as exercised in a context – that of our relationship to other people under certain, often highly fraught circumstances – which itself requires allowance for just such constraints, though here of a more inter-personal than large-scale collective, class-based, or group-dynamic kind. Indeed the very notion – so crucial to Sartre's early existentialist thinking – that freedom always entails responsibility even when manifested in selfish, morally or socially irresponsible ways is one that must likewise impose significant restrictions in that regard.



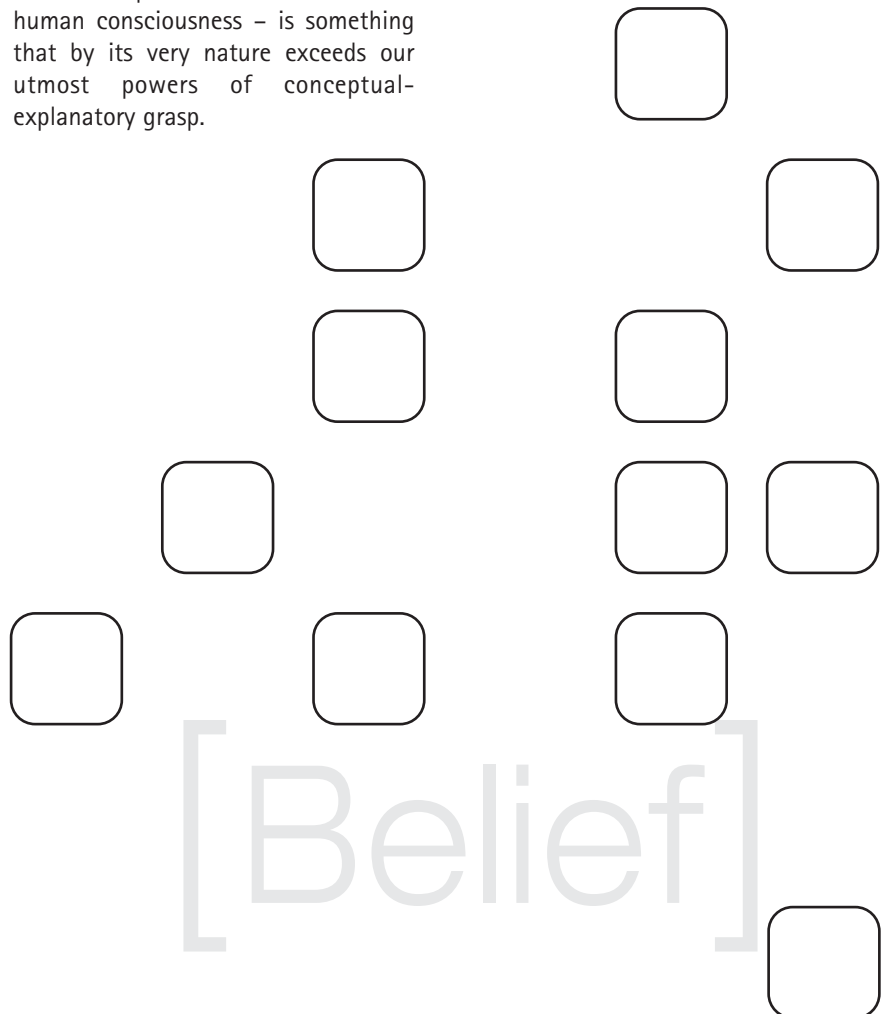


And the same applies to the issue of doxastic voluntarism, free as we are (in principle at least) to adopt any number of possible beliefs on any given topic yet constrained as we are (by factors ranging from passive indoctrination to rational conviction on the basis of empirical evidence or cogent demonstrative grounds) to believe what we do as a matter of involuntary assent. Thus the problems with Sartre's existentialist ethic and his notion of absolute, unqualified freedom can be seen to work out as a close analogue – albeit more dramatically expressed – of those which have constantly re-surfaced in the 'other', i.e., Anglophone or mainstream analytic tradition.

If one thing is clear, to repeat, it is that these problems cannot be resolved by any kind of linguistic therapy aimed toward talking us down from the heights of 'metaphysical' abstraction and leading us back to a sensible acceptance of the different language-games involved. This Wittgensteinian approach is really just a line of least resistance or a strategy adopted in order to evade what is surely among the most pressing issues in philosophy of mind, epistemology, and ethics. That is to say, it avoids facing up to the fact that we are inevitably tugged both ways between the powerful conviction that people *can and should* be held responsible for their beliefs and the knowledge – just as much a part of our basic moral-evaluative competence – that such responsibility is never exercised in total isolation from the various causes, influences, pressures of circumstance, or acculturated modes of thinking that predispose us toward one or another doxastic commitment. In the face of this dilemma it is tempting to adopt a standpoint analogous to that of some philosophers who have 'answered' the problem about consciousness by

suggesting that it is just too difficult (or too far beyond our innate powers of conceptual grasp) to allow of any adequate scientific or indeed philosophical solution.<sup>8</sup> However, as opponents have been quick to remark, this 'mysterian' argument has nothing to commend it except the appeal – perhaps more evident to philosophers than scientists – of preserving a space where causal explanations necessarily run out and philosophy continues to set the rules for what counts as a valid or admissible hypothesis.<sup>9</sup> Besides, there is something intellectually disreputable about any theory that declares straight off as a matter of stipulative fiat that phenomenon x – whether quantum mechanics or human consciousness – is something that by its very nature exceeds our utmost powers of conceptual-explanatory grasp.

Such arguments are not so very different from those items of orthodox Christian doctrine that J.S. Mill denounces with splendid moral vigour when he states his refusal to believe in any God whose ways are so profoundly mysterious (for instance, in the matter of eternal damnation) as to lie beyond reach of mere human understanding.<sup>10</sup> To raise the problem of doxastic voluntarism to a high point of philosophic bafflement is in effect to concede the irrelevance or downright uselessness of philosophy when it comes a matter of the greatest importance for our conceptions of moral, political, legal, and intellectual responsibility.



## II

So where have we arrived at this preliminary stage in our discussion? Not, to be sure, on the verge of suggesting any confident answer or adequate solution. Indeed it might seem that the prospect has receded even further as a result of having canvassed some views on the topic – some more-or-less qualified defences of doxastic voluntarism and the contrary (non-volitionist) stance – and having found them open to various kinds of philosophically cogent or intuitively powerful rejoinder. Now one is faced with a four-way choice between possible ways of proceeding. First there is the option that would most likely be favoured by hard-line 'analytic' types who see no virtue in continuing to fret over age-old metaphysical issues whose lack of any widely agreed-upon solution shows that they were ill-formed to begin with and had therefore better be shelved or re-cast in some suitably modified, e.g., linguistic or logico-semantic form. To this way of thinking the antinomies thrown up by debates about doxastic voluntarism – like those that have bedevilled the free-will/determinism issue in philosophy of action – are such as to call for treatment in the mode of *reductio ad absurdum*, that is, as showing that they must derive from some one or more false (since deadlock-producing) premises. However this 'solution' is rather like Russell's famous but philosophically unconvincing Theory of Types which advised that we could best get over the paradoxes of classical set-theory – those of self-reference or self-inclusion – by laying it down as a rule of good mathematical and logical conduct that systems be constructed and distinctions maintained in such a way that those paradoxes simply could not

arise. Still they are apt to strike home with undiminished force for anyone who tries to get her mind around Russell's various examples of the kind, just as the problem about doxastic voluntarism won't go away – or show up as a mere pseudo-problem engendered by false 'metaphysical' premises – simply through flat declarations to that effect. Nor can it be any more effectively dissolved through the second, Wittgensteinian option according to which it is only on account of our (i.e., philosophers') chronic 'bewitchment by language' that these dilemmas have come to exert such a hold. For here again no amount of linguistic therapy – of patiently coaxing those philosophers down from the giddy heights of metaphysical abstraction – can be of much use when we come to reflect on the real, not illusory or language-induced problem of reconciling moral-intellectual responsibility with a due allowance for the various constraints on our own and other people's modes of belief-formation.

The third option takes a lead from Kant in pressing those antinomies not to the point of a self-refuting *reductio* but rather to the point where they are taken to entail a very different way of conceiving the issue.<sup>11</sup> This confines our knowledge of causality to the realm of phenomenal (perceptual) experience, conceptual understanding, and physical science while conserving a strictly separate domain – or 'space of reasons' – for the exercise of ethical choice under no compulsion save that of the requirement to respect the universal dictates of moral law. Yet there is an obvious problem here in so far as compliance with that law is supposed to be a matter *both* of freely-willed, autonomous assent *and* of something more like a passive acquiescence in maxims or principles that brook no exception and would

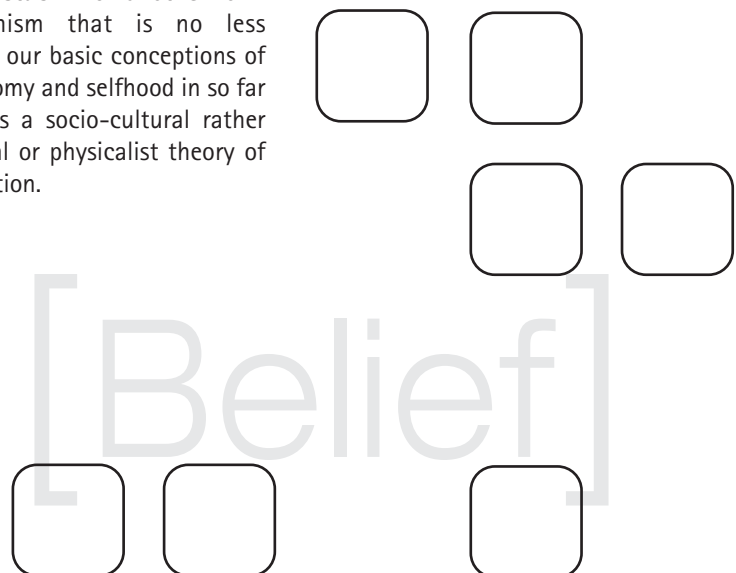
hence seem to leave no room for such moral autonomy. Thus the Kantian 'solution' turns out to be just another variant on the same old dilemma, one that is by no means resolved – rather sharpened – by those revisionist (naturalised or 'de-transcendentalised') readings of Kant that have lately emerged by way of response to the defects and anomalies of old-style logical empiricism.<sup>12</sup> For such readings still have to face the choice of either reproducing that absolute Kantian distinction of realms, in which case they will hardly be rid of transcendental motifs, or else pushing right through with the naturalistic treatment of Kantian epistemology and ethics, in which case they will produce a version of Kant which cuts out some crucial load-bearing segments of his argument. Among these latter – most damagingly for the revisionist case – are just those passages that claim to establish the possibility of free-will and moral autonomy in a world that is otherwise subject to causal determinism in every last detail of every last event. Kant's legacy is plainly visible across a wide range of latter-day responses to this problem, from John McDowell's half-way naturalised and (in my view) deeply problematical version of Kantian epistemology to Donald Davidson's idea of 'anomalous monism', itself – despite the somewhat misleading description – a dualist doctrine that dare not quite speak its name.<sup>13</sup> So there seems little hope of an answer from purported solutions of this third (Kantian or quasi-Kantian) kind, even though they are more responsive to the philosophic depth of the problem and the sheer unlikelihood that it might be laid to rest through some straightforward logical *reductio* or application of linguistic therapy in the Wittgensteinian mode.



So the question remains: what hope of an answer (a fourth-way alternative) if the best efforts of philosophy to date have produced nothing more than a series of dilemmas, deadlocked antinomies, conflicting intuitions, and conceptual dead-ends? Still things may not be as hopeless as this suggests if one just hangs onto the basic principle that whatever else philosophy may claim to do it cannot depart from certain indubitable axioms of human thought and experience. These are axioms – not just convenient working hypotheses – in so far as they serve both as a starting-point for further, more detailed and rigorous reflection and also as a check on the tendency to press toward doctrinal extremes (such as wholesale determinism or radical voluntarism) that are plainly at odds with much of what we know as a matter of self-understanding and shared experience. This tells us that Plato must have been wrong – in the grip of a false theory of mind and ethical motivation – when he argued that knowledge of the good must infallibly lead to virtuous behaviour, or that bad actions could result only from ignorance, stupidity, or misunderstanding. By the same token we are inclined to agree with Aristotle when he makes allowance for *akrasia* (weakness of will) as a complicating factor that often intervenes to prevent our following the straightforward dictates of duty or moral conscience. So likewise with the standard objections to Kantian deontological ethics, i.e., that such thinking both under-estimates the complexity of human predicaments and motives, and over-estimates the binding character of any such abstract-universalist moral creed. Yet at the same time – and here the familiar dilemma crops up once again – we are compelled to acknowledge that there *must* be some

basis for ethical values beyond this potentially all-licensing appeal to the range of qualifying clauses required for any statement concerning the scope and limits of moral responsibility. Thus it is one thing to argue that Plato and Kant got it wrong – albeit on different metaphysical grounds – when they took such a sternly uncompromising line as regards the absolute status of moral truths and the requirement that ethical reasoning not be deflected by merely 'pathological' considerations of this sort. Yet it is another thing entirely to push so far in the opposite direction that one is left with the idea of ethical judgement as involving nothing more than a shared (even if community-wide) consensus as to what should count – in any given case – as a reasonable, decent, or morally acceptable view of the matter. In striving so hard to avoid all the problems with Kantian moral rigorism this approach runs the risk of becoming just another variant on a well-worn cultural-relativist theme, or confusing what is true, justified, or right in the way of belief with what passes as such according to our own communal practices and values. For then we are stuck with another form of determinism that is no less degrading to our basic conceptions of moral autonomy and selfhood in so far as it involves a socio-cultural rather than a causal or physicalist theory of belief-formation.

Still there is no denying the force of our conviction that we *do* have a significant measure of choice in the matter of what we believe and, moreover, that such choice is not drastically compromised or shown up as just a kind of willing self-delusion by the fact that our opting for one or another doxastic commitment can often quite plausibly be traced back to some prior influence, whatever its precise nature. After all, there is a vast (non-denumerable) range of such variously weighted influences that impinge at any moment on any individual in any given life-context and it is absurd to suppose that, even (*per impossibile*) with all the evidence to hand, one could ever predict the future course of that person's actions and beliefs. Yet as a putative solution to the free-will/determinism problem this fares no better – philosophically speaking – than the standard response to Laplace's claim that from a complete knowledge of the present state of the universe right down to its ultimate physical constituents one could in principle retrodict its entire previous history and likewise predict its entire future development.



That 'solution' consists in saying quite simply that we don't possess and could never attain such an ultimate state of knowledge, and therefore that Laplace's determinist claim is beside the point for all practical as well as genuine philosophic purposes. However this just won't do as an answer – least of all a philosophical answer – since it fails to take the crucial point that determinism might conceivably be true (as a matter of fact) quite aside from any merely contingent limits on our powers of comprehension or ability to figure out the whole, endlessly complex concatenation of causes and effects. Nor is there much comfort to be had for the hard pressed anti-determinist from the idea that science has now moved on to a stage where such claims no longer present any threat in so far as they have been superseded by developments like chaos-theory, mathematical undecidability, or (in quantum-physical terms) the uncertainty relations and limits on our powers of precise, objective measurement. For such arguments are open to the threefold charge of (1) confusing ontological with epistemological issues, (2) presupposing the truth of certain highly questionable (e.g., quantum-theoretical) conjectures, and (3) trivialising the whole debate by making it hinge on the outcome of random events – say quantum goings-on the brain – that would surely do nothing to explain our capacities for rational belief-formation or autonomous action.<sup>14</sup> For there seems little point in advancing this sort of case if the only result is to exchange one philosophically unpalatable view (hard-line psycho-physical determinism) for another, equally unwelcome idea (that rationality and free will are just illusions engendered by our post-hoc attempts to make

sense of such sheerly random, unmotivated goings-on).

### III

The reader will perhaps have noticed a recurrent pattern in the last few paragraphs, namely the way that they each start out with a statement of the need to move beyond these vexing antinomies, only to end with a reformulation of the same basic problem in different terms. My excuse is that the problem is a tough one – among the most philosophically recalcitrant – and that any attempted solution is obliged in good conscience to register the various counter-arguments or likely objections that rise up against it at every turn. There is a curious example of this in Benjamin Libet's much-discussed findings with regard to the neurophysiology of decision-making and the temporal relationship or order of dependence between brain-states and conscious mind-states.<sup>15</sup> Most controversial was the fact – as he at first claimed – that neural-imaging experiments had shown a distinct, measurable time-lag between the occurrence of chemical events in the brain that correlated with certain apparently willed or deliberate actions and the moment when subjects reported their decision to execute those same actions. From this it seemed to follow that their 'choices' of action were really no such thing but, on the contrary, epiphenomenal events that occurred only *after* the brain had entered into a certain state whose results were first manifest in overt behaviour and then became accessible to consciousness only as a kind of passive delayed effect. However Libet subsequently modified his claim by allowing that any act 'determined' by any given brain-state could always somehow be

revoked or countermanded by a further, split-second intervening decision not to proceed in that particular way but to fix on some alternative outcome. Of course there is still the option, for diehard determinists, of arguing that Libet's revised claim complicates but doesn't in the least undermine his original thesis, i.e., that it is a change in brain-state and not some immaterial change of purpose or mind-set that produces the change. However this argument is open to various further objections from the voluntarist quarter. Among them is the point that it leads to a form of vicious regress – since the countermanding impulse may itself be subject to further countermanding, and so forth *ad infinitum* – and also that this process cannot be described without at some stage having recourse to an intentionalist idiom, one that involves the ascription of motivating interests, desires, or beliefs.

So there is an odd but revealing and symptomatic sense in which Libet's retreat from the first (strong-determinist) version of his thesis re-enacts precisely that complicating moment – that same split-second intervention of a contrary, action-inhibiting force – which he now incorporates, no doubt on the basis of certain empirical observations, but also (one suspects) partly in deference to our standing intuitions in that regard. For it is a demonstrable feature of all arguments in philosophy of mind, cognitive psychology, and other areas where this issue arises that any statement of the case for hard-line physical determinism will at some point involve a more-or-less covert or surreptitious appeal to the language of agency, volition, and choice. Nor is this merely, as Wittgensteinians would have it, a matter of our using different language-games in different contexts of utterance, e.g., that of causal

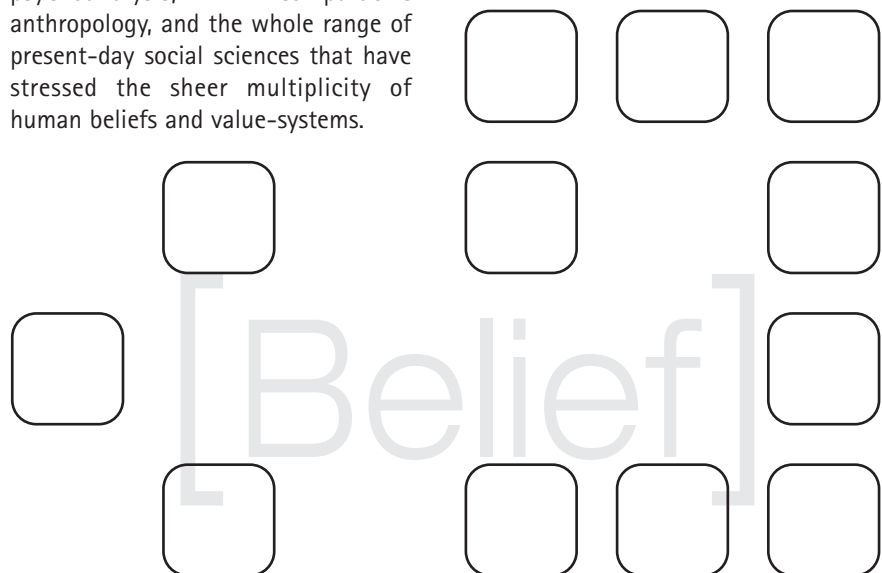
explanation (including empirical psychology) on the one hand and reason-based, normative, or justificatory talk on the other.<sup>16</sup> Rather it is a question of our total inability to make any sense of human actions and beliefs unless by accepting – whether explicitly or (as very often in the case of determinist arguments) through various tell-tale nuances of word and phrase – those basic voluntarist premises which between them constitute *just what it is* to understand our own as well as other people's motivating interests and concerns. Chief among them, as I have said, and absolutely central to the issue about doxastic responsibility is our understanding that beliefs can be arrived at in a great many ways, some of which render them fit candidates for assessment in rational and moral-evaluative terms while others seem to call for explanatory treatment in an altogether different, more diagnostic mode. Of the latter kind are beliefs acquired (or absorbed) through passive exposure to various modes of causal, cultural, or ideological conditioning. In the former case we have to do with those other, more reflective or adequately reasoned forms of doxastic commitment that have taken due account of such factors, allowed for their possible distorting effect, and thereby achieved both a greater degree of self-knowledge and an outlook in matters of moral or intellectual conscience that is more reliable or truth-conducive since less in the grip of unexamined prejudice.

Of course these descriptions apply only to the twin extremes on a scale of doxastic responsibility that includes a great many intermediate degrees, that is say, cases where it is hard – maybe impossible – to distinguish the workings of causal influence from those of rational belief-formation, whether for the individual concerned

or for those who seek to make intelligible sense of that individual's sayings and doings. Also there is a marked asymmetry between our readiness to fall back on causal hypotheses, i.e., imputations of rationally under-motivated thought and action in the case of other people and our much higher level of resistance to any such suggestion as regards our own most cherished or deep-laid beliefs. After all, there is something basically absurd – a kind of performative contradiction – about saying 'I believe *x* to be the case but this belief of mine is most likely a product of my upbringing, cultural background, ideological formation', or whatever. Thus causal explanations of why people think and behave as they do are much likelier to carry conviction when applied to others (especially to people remote from us in time, geographical locale, or socio-cultural background) than when applied to ourselves and those nearest to us in these respects. Nevertheless that resistance has been quite appreciably lowered, at least amongst the more educated sectors of society, as a result of various diffuse yet powerful influences such as psychoanalysis, comparative anthropology, and the whole range of present-day social sciences that have stressed the sheer multiplicity of human beliefs and value-systems.



Even if one wishes to hold the line well short of wholesale cultural relativism – including its more philosophically 'respectable', e.g., Wittgensteinian variants – still there is no denying the extent to which developments like these have altered (and expanded) our sense of what may count as a rational, or at any rate rationally intelligible item of belief. Besides, it is only from the most dogmatic of voluntarist viewpoints that philosophy could afford simply to disregard the latest findings of neurophysiology, cognitive science, evolutionary psychology, and other disciplines with an arguable bearing on the issues here addressed.



What is called for, in short, is an approach that manages to take these developments on board whilst not leaning over too far in one or the other direction. That is to say, it should avoid the kind of inertly 'culturalist' perspective wherein all beliefs and practices are deemed to make sense by their own communal lights, in which case they must be held immune from any form of 'outside' criticism, but also the opposite error of supposing that standards of doxastic responsibility can be applied without regard to the cultural conditions under which those beliefs and practices emerged. In so far as it is difficult to hold this balance – to weigh the strong claims of moral-intellectual autonomy against the need for a thoughtful and sensitive reckoning with such heteronomous conditions – the difficulty is one that will surely arise in all attempts to resolve the free-will/determinism issue. So we might now seem to be back with the same old dilemma and to have shown nothing more than the unfortunate proneness of philosophy to constantly rehearse familiar problems in a range of alternative but equally futile (since non-problem-solving) ways. However this is to take an excessively sceptical or pessimistic view of the matter. What the arguments and counter-arguments bring out is not so much the ultimate impasse engendered by two conflicting (causal-explanatory and rational-justificatory) modes of thought but rather the conclusion that there *must* be some way of reconciling them – albeit one at present beyond our best powers of conceptual grasp – since they both play a strictly indispensable role in all our thinking about issues of doxastic responsibility. What should also have emerged from this discussion is the impossibility of pushing either case (i.e., for the volitional or non-volitional character

of belief) to a point where it would play the other clean off the field by establishing its own irresistible claim to have finally resolved those issues.

Thus it might appear that any hope of progress must lie in the direction of a *via media* between the two extremes, that is, an approach that sensibly acknowledges the limits on our freedom of will as well as the problems that always arise with any full-fledged determinist, causal-explanatory, or anti-voluntarist account. Where this latter goes wrong is in failing to allow for all the evidence we have – not only through intuitive, first-person experience but also in the contexts of social exchange and reflection on other people's acts and beliefs – that there does exist a margin for the free exercise of moral and intellectual conscience whatever the extent of those causal or more broadly socio-cultural constraints. Any theory is sure to be a non-starter if it has to discount the example of various heterodox thinkers or reformers whose moral-intellectual conscience has revolted against the kinds of taken-for-granted belief that defined the currency of 'knowledge' or 'truth' in their own time and place. It is on this objection that determinist arguments must ultimately run aground, as indeed must those other, on the face of it strongly anti-determinist arguments – among them Wittgensteinian appeals to communal 'agreement in judgement' as the furthest one can get by way of rational or moral justification – which likewise leave no room for the values of intellectual and moral autonomy. However these antinomies cannot be resolved (as I suggested above, though prefaced by the cautionary phrase ' . . . it might appear . . . ') through some kind of compromise or middle-ground approach that would seek to prevent them from arising in the first place by

adopting a suitably qualified conception of doxastic voluntarism on the one hand and of doxastic determinism on the other. No doubt it is often best policy in various contexts – law, practical ethics, interpersonal relations, ascriptions of motive to culturally distant (including historical) agents – to work on a generalised 'principle of humanity' which does involve some such compromise stance as a matter of trying to see all around other people's epistemic situations or moral predicaments and not jump straight to a dismissive or critical verdict. That is, we often make this sort of good-willed effort to maximise the imputed rational content of other people's beliefs by achieving an optimum balance between the claims of autonomy and those of due allowance for certain causally or socio-culturally explicable sources of error. Yet philosophically speaking – as Kant recognised, unlike some who purport to have left all those old worries behind – there is a large problem here and one that can only be addressed in metaphysical terms, or anyway in terms that admit of no such straightforward compromise solution. For it remains the case – whether a misfortune or a stroke of good luck from the philosopher's standpoint – that these are *antinomies* in the strict Kantian sense, rather than paralogisms (again as defined by Kant) that can be shown to result from some category-mistake or illicit transposition of concepts and categories from one to another topic-domain.<sup>17</sup> In other words they are the kinds of genuine, deep-laid problem that that are sure to confront any thinker who seriously engages with the issue of doxastic responsibility.

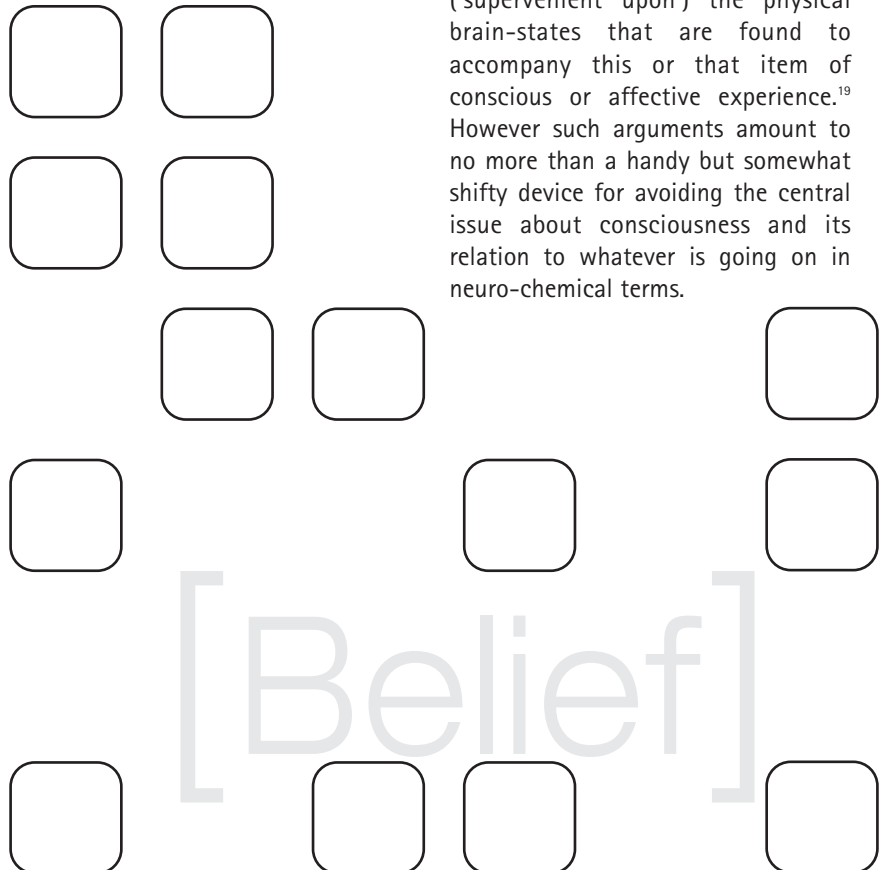
Not that I should wish to hold Kant up as the likeliest source of deliverance from all our perplexities in this regard. Indeed, it is very largely as a

consequence of the various drastic dualisms bequeathed by Kant that philosophy has so often tended to recoil into likewise drastic oscillations from one to another doctrinal extreme on a range of epistemological and ethical issues. Among them are those between the noumenal and the phenomenal, between concepts of understanding and sensuous intuitions, and (most of all) between the realm of autonomous practical reason and that other realm of 'heteronomous' desires, inclinations, affections, and suchlike 'pathological' factors which for Kant have no legitimate bearing whatsoever on issues of moral conscience, especially when they are adduced in order to extenuate or mitigate some wrongful action that would otherwise call for outright moral censure. So if Kant poses the relevant issues with a clarity and force that are often lacking in current debate, he does so in a way that places them forever and intrinsically beyond hope of any adequate solution. This is because he conceives the 'space of reasons' – of our distinctively human intellectual capacities, as opposed to our mere creaturely existence within the chain of concatenated cause and effect – in those same, drastically dichotomous terms. It is a very fine distinction I am trying to draw but one that makes all the difference between an outlook which counts this dilemma as *by its very nature* unresolvable and an outlook on which it remains deeply problematic by our present-best conceptual lights but not, for that reason, to be treated as an ultimate mystery or as requiring the kind of Kantian dualist approach that has found many sublimated echoes in recent debate.

Least of all can it be justified to adopt the kind of sheerly *a priori* approach that would view any attempt to

achieve a perspective atop these vexing antinomies as symptomatic of a basic failure to grasp the irreducibility of mental to physical or – in the currently preferred idiom – intentional to causal modes of describing our beliefs, attitudes, doxastic commitments, moral dispositions, and so forth. Such arguments typically issue in dogmatic claims like that of John Searle with respect to what he sees as the absolute, in-principle impossibility that the 'strong' programme in Artificial Intelligence might ever be successfully carried through, i.e., to the point where some silicon-based and computer-run system might be thought to manifest all the attributes of human consciousness or intentionality.<sup>18</sup>

The main problems with this kind of reasoning are firstly its neo-Cartesian assumption that there *must* be something so utterly distinctive about human mental states that they could not conceivably be realised in any other physical form, and secondly its downright refusal to acknowledge that the brain *just is* one such physically embodied, albeit massively complex and – in our current state of scientific understanding – causally inexplicable entity. To be sure, some philosophers may choose to grasp this nettle (whether in its downright substance-dualist or updated property-dualist form) and thereby reject or at least draw the sting of the mind/brain identity thesis. Otherwise they may resort to some saving compromise like Davidson's 'anomalous monism' or the notion of mind as 'emergent from' ('supervenient upon') the physical brain-states that are found to accompany this or that item of conscious or affective experience.<sup>19</sup> However such arguments amount to no more than a handy but somewhat shifty device for avoiding the central issue about consciousness and its relation to whatever is going on in neuro-chemical terms.





Hence the ease with which opponents of Searle – hard-line physicalists like the Churchlands – can turn his case right around and object to his saying that mental states are somehow 'caused by' brain-states (that is, the sorts of state that can only exist in carbon-based, organic life-forms such as ourselves), rather than saying that mental states just are brain-states under a different, folk-psychological description.<sup>20</sup> Dragging in such redundant causal talk is an example of what they dub the 'Betty Crocker Microwave Cookbook' fallacy. This alludes to a passage where the domestic guru explains that heat is *caused by* the kinetic energy of molecules, rather than saying (correctly) that 'heat' *just is* everyday, phenomenological parlance for what physicists term 'kinetic energy of molecules'. Thus Searle's apparent concession to physicalism – his allowance that there is indeed a strict and exceptionless causal correlation between brain-states and mind-states – can none the less be seen to underwrite his claim (*contra* the advocates of strong AI) that this link exists only in creatures like ourselves with the right kind of neurophysical architecture and just the sorts of conscious or intentional experience that invariably go along with it. Once rid of this residual dualism – so the Churchlands maintain – we shall see that there is nothing unique or *sui generis* about mind, brain, or the relationship between them. Rather we shall come to treat such mentalist talk as just another item of soon-to-be-discarded since scientifically retrograde belief, along with all the other metaphysical baggage handed down by a long tradition of jointly philosophic and folk-psychological thought.

My point is not so much to take sides on this issue of Searle *versus* the

Churchlands but rather to bring out the irony of a situation where Searle's hard-headed causal talk – his overt refusal of Cartesian dualism and insistence on the physical embodiment (i.e., the brain-dependence) of consciousness and intentionality – can be used to charge him with falling into precisely such a dualist trap. It seems to me that Searle is here hung up on yet another of those Kantian antinomies that have typified this whole debate and whose effect is to leave thinkers very often exposed to criticisms and objections which are all the more powerful since arising unnoticed from their own arguments. Thus Searle's attempt to carve out a space for the distinctive attributes of human (i.e., conscious, intentional and organically based) experience while at the same time rebutting any dualist charge is one that leads him to adopt a position – the mind-brain causal dependence thesis – which the Churchlands can treat (not without justification) as a form of epiphenomenalist doctrine that, so far from resolving the Cartesian dilemma, leaves it all the more firmly entrenched. For it then becomes a double mystery (1) by what remotely intelligible process mind-states could 'emerge from' or 'supervene upon' (let alone be 'caused by') physical states of the brain, and (2), if so, how there could be any genuine – rather than notional – appeal to a realm of irreducibly conscious or intentional

experience that would constitute a standing refutation of reductive physicalism in the Churchland mode.

This is why Searle's purportedly knockdown case against strong AI – a case advanced mainly on thought-experimental and hence *a priori* grounds – cannot bear anything like the requisite weight of demonstrative evidence or proof. On the one hand it runs into all the above-described conceptual and logical problems, while on the other it invites the charge of dogmatically denying what must surely be a matter for continued scientific investigation, that is, the possibility that conscious and intentional mind-states might eventually be realised in other-than-human (e.g., silicon-based) systems. Thus, according to Searle's famous 'Chinese Room' thought-experiment, this prospect is *a priori* ruled out by the fact that we could never know for sure whether the English-Chinese 'translator' inside the room (for which read: the 'conscious and intelligent' AI device) was actually translating the messages handed in or merely responding in mechanical fashion by comparing the word-shapes and sequences with those contained in his data-bank (for which read: a software programme set up to give the impression of thinking 'like us' but in fact quite devoid of any such powers).<sup>21</sup> However, despite its intuitive force, this argument falls to the twofold objection that it holds just as much for our transaction with human subjects – as witness the perennial issue of scepticism *vis-à-vis* 'other minds' – and that it flies in the face of Searle's own argument that mind-states are causally dependent on brain-states. For if this is the case and if brains are themselves (no doubt fantastically complex) computational devices then there is just no rational motivation for Searle's claim that



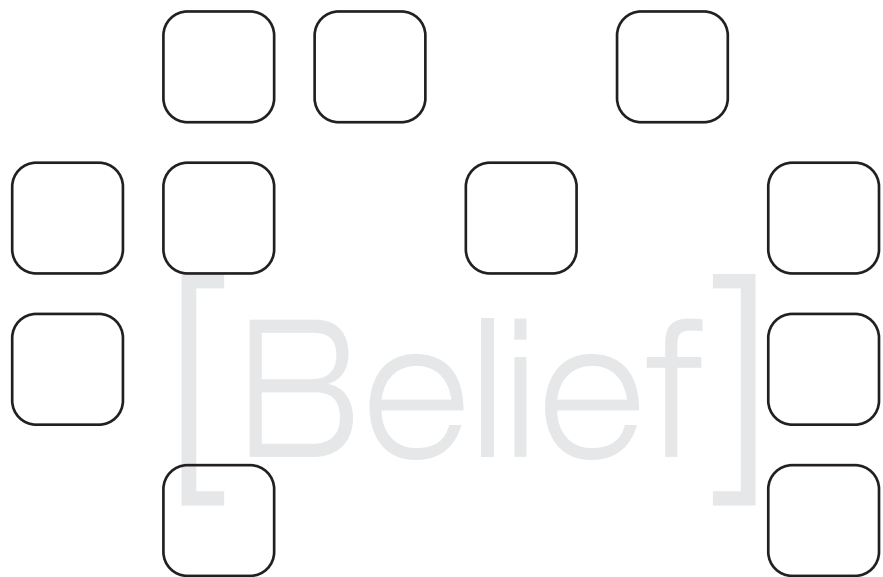
mind-states of a nature qualitatively identical to those experienced by human beings cannot conceivably be produced or supported by different kinds of physical system. Besides, there is something decidedly premature – given the current rate of advance in allied fields like neurophysiology and cognitive science – about any argument that claims to deduce the impossibility of further such advances on a basis of purely *a priori* reasoning and with minimal reference to what's going on in just those pertinent fields.

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As I have said, this should not for one moment be taken to suggest that philosophers had better now vacate the high ground of expert debate in these matters and give way to others (the neuroscientists and cognitive psychologists) who really know what they are talking about. If Searle's style of argument exemplifies the dangers of an attitude that grants philosophy the right to decide what shall count as relevant, admissible scientific evidence then it is equally the case that proponents of an out-and-out physicalist approach, like the Churchlands, push so far in the opposite direction as to lay themselves open to the charge of just ignoring – rather than genuinely seeking to resolve – the very real philosophic problems that arise with any such programme. Thus they reject as just a remnant of 'folk-psychology' the idea that there is a whole dimension of subjective experience – 'what it is like' to see the colour red, to suffer pain, to hear an oboe, to undergo the gamut of feelings from elation to despair – which cannot and could not be explained in physicalist terms, even were we to possess a completed science of the brain and its neuro-

chemical or cognitive-psychological workings.<sup>22</sup> This is not the place for a detailed discussion of the various arguments for and against the existence of such strictly irreducible qualia or modes of first-person perceptual, affective, or phenomenological experience which supposedly elude any possible description in the terms of a drastically reductionist approach like that espoused by the Churchlands. Sufficient to say, in the present context, that this debate is just as far from any prospect of being effectively resolved either way as are the closely related issues of free-will *versus* determinism or – my chief concern here – doxastic voluntarism *versus* the claim that beliefs are not volitional and hence not subject to moral blame or approbation. What gives them their distinctly philosophic character is the fact that they produce such deeply held yet sharply conflicting intuitions which dispose us to believe that they *must* be somehow resolvable, while their effect is to render the issue more perplexing and its solution more elusive the harder we think about it.

This is not – as it might well appear – just a recipe for endless equivocation or a pretext for philosophers to sit back and contemplate an ever-deepening (and action-absolving) series of conceptual quandaries. On the contrary: the main purpose of raising such issues is to keep them constantly and clearly in view when we are tempted to adopt some other way of thinking that involves less challenge to our normal, unexamined, or communally warranted habits of belief. Thus, for instance, the case for regarding our beliefs as not (or not entirely) subject to our powers of conscious, deliberative will is one that has been made – and that still needs making – at times of rampant doctrinal, religious, or political persecution. In this respect, though not in others, it may be seen as the doxastic equivalent of the moral or legal case for treating certain agents as not fully accountable for certain actions, whether in consequence of social factors, intellectual impairment, mitigating circumstance, or a whole range of causal (among them psychopathological) conditions that are felt to justify the plea of 'diminished responsibility'.



Of course the big difference is that here we are dealing with various kinds and degrees of unfreedom, that is, of restriction on the subject's scope for intellectual and moral autonomy, whereas in the former case – paradoxically enough – freedom of belief is upheld as a matter of socio-political right on the grounds that people are often to some extent *not* responsible for what they believe, and should hence not be subject to penalty or blame on that account. Indeed one can see the paradox emerging at full force in those two occurrences of the word 'subject' in my previous sentence, first with the active-autonomist sense: 'subject (noun) = locus of freely-willed choice and rational accountability', and second with the passive-determinist sense: 'subject (adj.) = under some constraint or compulsion that places limits on the exercise of just those powers'. This is not the sort of problem that might be cleared up by a more precise definition of terms, nor by application of the standard Wittgensteinian therapeutic treatment. Rather, it is one that is apt to strike any thinking individual who considers the arguments on both sides not only from a philosophic standpoint but also in the wider context of debates about law, ethics, and the proper limits – if such there be – on the conscientious freedom to express ideas that go against some existing currency of values and beliefs. For these are questions that are nowhere close to being resolved and which might well be thought – at any rate by those of a sceptical, defeatist, or 'mysterian' mind – as lying beyond reach of any adequate solution.

While the latter view amounts to a strategy of last resort it is none the less important to remind ourselves and others of how complex and intractable these questions remain and also how

we are prone to fall into errors of judgement – even, as I have argued, miscarriages of justice – by opting too readily for one or the other standpoint. After all, it is among the chief functions of a properly trained philosophical intelligence to supply such reminders when required, as they often are in situations (like those instanced above) where social and political incentives or pressures may override the call for such fine discriminations in the matter of moral and doxastic responsibility. This is one area in which analytic philosophers have something to learn from their 'continental' (i.e., post-Kantian mainland-European) counterparts, whatever the degree of mutual mistrust and downright intellectual antagonism that has marked many of their dealings over the past half-century and more.<sup>23</sup> That is to say, this sense of irreducible complexity – of the objections that arise against any too quick or confident solution – is a prominent feature of much mainland-European philosophy, even (or especially) those aspects of it that analytic thinkers are apt to write off as extravagant, linguistically undisciplined, or overly speculative. I have made the point elsewhere with reference to recent interpretations of Kant and the contrast between, on the one hand, broadly 'continental' readings that engage deeply with problems with Kantian epistemology and ethics and, on the other hand, revisionist readings in the broadly analytic tradition that contrive to keep such complicating factors safely out of view.<sup>24</sup>

Of course this is not to suggest that the 'linguistic turn' in its various forms has rendered mainstream Anglophone philosophy devoid of resources for addressing such topics. One need only look to a thinker like J.L. Austin, in particular his essay 'A Plea for

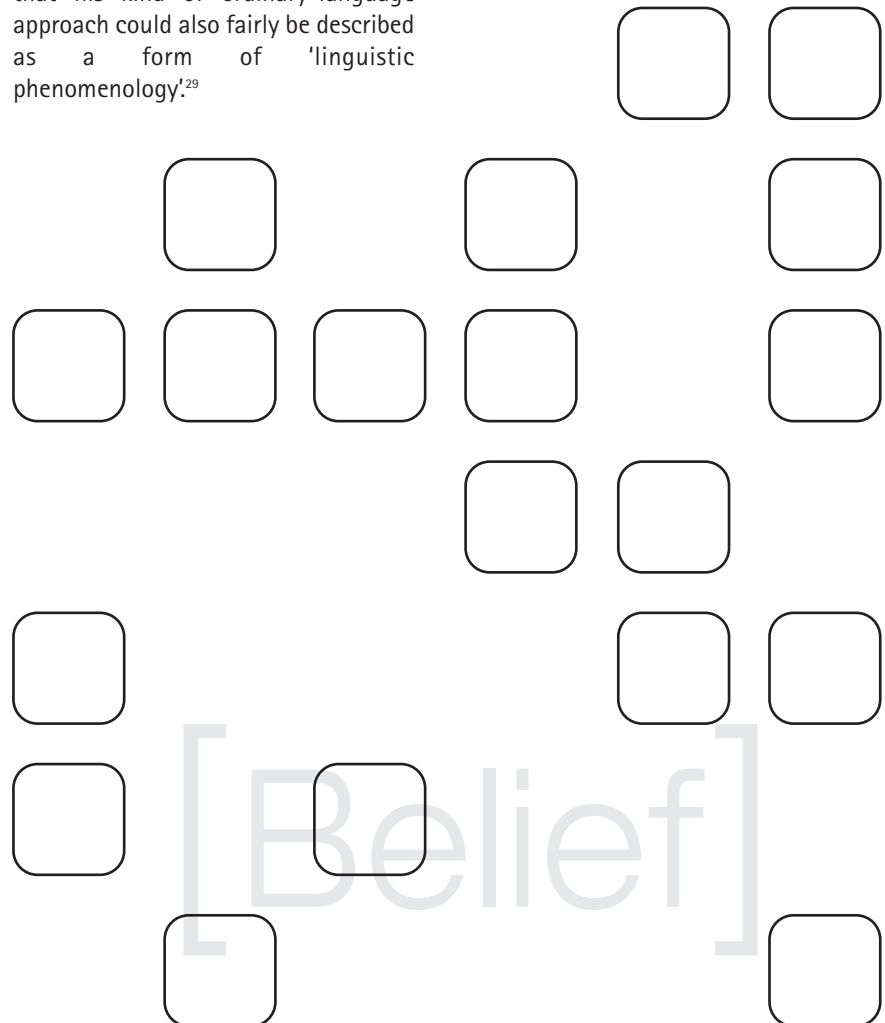
Excuses', if one wishes to find a striking example of the way that 'ordinary-language' analysis can illuminate questions of moral judgement or offer new ways of conceiving the free-will/determinism issue through a patient and meticulous attentiveness to nuances of verbal implication.<sup>25</sup> This is nowhere more apparent than in Austin's reflections on the range of finely-tuned adverbial modifiers – 'he did it "wilfully", "deliberately", "knowingly", "consciously", "intentionally", "absent-mindedly", "inadvertently", "carelessly", "accidentally", "unwittingly", etc. – by which we signal our intuitive grasp of just such nuances and use them to indicate varying degrees of moral culpability. All the same his critics do have a point when they suggest that there is something distinctly parochial about Austin's brand of 'ordinary language' philosophy, an odd mixture of Oxonian *huteur* and complacent acquiescence in the habits of thought – the linguistically encoded mores – of his own cultural locale.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, one result of the linguistic turn in analytic philosophy since the 1950s – and arguably since the Moore/Russell revolt against 'idealist' or 'metaphysical' excesses of whatever kind – has been to rule out any deeper engagement with such issues except in so far as they are taken to involve some category-mistake, some conceptual error, or (after Wittgenstein) some symptomatic instance of the 'bewitchment of our intelligence by language'. For if philosophy is best, most usefully (or least harmfully) employed in clearing away or therapeutically dissolving those old – e.g., Kantian – dilemmas then the free-will issue itself becomes just another suitable case for treatment. And yet, as I have said, it is an issue that cannot be finessed by

any amount of conceptual analysis or any number of placid assurances that 'everything is order' with our language as it stands and that philosophers must therefore be mistaken – in the grip of some (again typically Kantian) metaphysical or transcendental illusion – if they seek to raise problems where no such problems exist.

If Kant famously credited Hume with having shaken him out of his dogmatic slumbers and thereby set him on the path toward a full-scale critical reconstruction of epistemology and ethics then at present what is needed, or so I would suggest, is a similar revitalising impulse in the opposite direction. Thus analytic philosophy might very well benefit from a willingness to abandon its defensive posture and take some account of those developments in 'continental' thought – from Husserlian phenomenology, *via* Sartrean existentialism, to Derridean deconstruction – that have kept alive certain crucial questions (or provocative ways of framing them) beyond what counts as proper or legitimate by its own self-assured criteria. If there is one characteristic that chiefly distinguishes the 'two traditions' it is this greater awareness, on the continental side, of the need to pursue problematical issues – like the Kantian antinomies – to a point where they engage the genuine dilemmas of human existence, rather than supposing that these can best be kept from causing trouble through a mode of conceptual or linguistic analysis that effectively sweeps them under the carpet. Perhaps the most striking example of this latter tendency is the work of Gilbert Ryle where it is pretty much assumed that any problems of so seemingly intractable or deep-laid a character must, for that very reason, be put down to some 'category-mistake' or failure to perceive where

thinking has been misled by its proneness to various forms of conceptual imprecision or false analogy.<sup>27</sup> Ryle is a particularly interesting case since he published a number of critical yet well-informed essays on Husserlian phenomenology during the 1930s, but later swung across to the received (analytic) view that all the talk of 'intentionality', 'eidetic essences', the 'transcendental ego', and so forth, was in truth just a thinly disguised version of psychologism.<sup>28</sup> Another tantalising hint of this path not taken – or abandoned after a brief reconnoitre of the alternative prospects on offer – is Austin's passing remark to the effect that his kind of ordinary-language approach could also fairly be described as a form of 'linguistic phenomenology'.<sup>29</sup>

However he, like Ryle, showed no inclination to pursue this idea any further, unless one construes the term 'phenomenology' in a scaled-down (normalised analytic) sense that would leave it quite devoid of any distinctive or substantive implications. That is to say, if the remit of phenomenological enquiry is confined to a purely descriptive account of our everyday linguistic practices – no matter how sharp-eyed, detailed, or meticulous – then it will find no room for those other, doubtless more 'metaphysical' sorts of question that have continued to preoccupy thinkers in the post-Kantian European line of descent.





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It has been my contention throughout this essay that such issues are absolutely central to any philosophical enterprise worthy the name, and that they cannot be analysed away by some well-practised technique of conceptual or linguistic problem-control. Nor is there much benefit to be had from those recent attempts at a partial *rapprochement* – like McDowell's semi-naturalised, de-transcendentalised, Wittgenstein-influenced and studiously non-'metaphysical' reading of Kant – which evade the most challenging aspects of that 'other' tradition while they simply reproduce all its unresolved dilemmas in a different, less overt but no less troublesome guise.<sup>30</sup> Philosophy does best in relation to intractable issues like those of free-will/determinism or doxastic responsibility by keeping the problems firmly in view, resisting any premature claim to have resolved them decisively either way, but also holding out against the twin temptations of a drive to dissolve them through conceptual analysis and a placid assurance that they cannot arise so long as our language stays in touch with the norms of communal usage. For these counsels cannot get us very far – whether in philosophy or in thinking more clearly about questions of an ethical, legal, social, or political import – when their effect is to close off precisely the kinds of engaged and responsible thought that constitute philosophy's chief claim to attention in such matters. Thus, for instance, Kant's passages in the First and Second *Critiques* concerning the Antinomies of Pure and Practical Reason are germane to any debate about issues of doxastic and moral responsibility, whatever one may think of his proposed 'solution' and the various dilemmas to which it gave rise.

My point – to repeat – is that philosophy risks inviting the charge of triviality or downright irrelevance if it adheres too closely to the mainstream-analytic, i.e., problem-solving (or problem-dissolving) mode of address to these issues and hence fails to register the depth and extent of their bearing on our moral, social, and intellectual lives.

That Kant in some sense got it wrong about ethics – that any too rigid (that is to say, *echt*-Kantian) application of his strict universalist claims might be apt to produce morally repugnant consequences in certain situations – is a case that has been rehearsed by good many recent commentators, amongst them advocates of a communitarian approach with strong Wittgensteinian leanings.<sup>31</sup> However there are ways of getting it wrong whilst none the less posing the crucial questions in a sharply-focused and provocative form that has more to teach us than any such recourse to anodyne, philosophically and morally evasive talk about shared language-games or communal practices. The same applies, as I have said, to Sartrean existentialism and its raising of the claim for human autonomy and free will to such a high point of absolute, intransigent principle that we encounter just the kind of choice that Sartre is so good at depicting in his works of philosophy and fiction alike.<sup>32</sup> That is, we are confronted with the need either to accept his extreme voluntarist position – along with its likewise extreme demands on our allegiance in the face of strong counter-arguments – or else to frame some viable, philosophically cogent alternative that would allow for certain kinds and degrees of unfreedom while none the less resisting any form of determinist doctrine. If relations had been less strained then analytic philosophers

would hardly need telling that this debate has been carried forward to instructive effect by thinkers in the post-war French tradition, from Merleau-Ponty (whose critique of Sartre raises precisely these issues) to Derrida's later writings on the ethics and politics of deconstruction.<sup>33</sup> Moreover – no doubt through its acute responsiveness to episodes in recent French history – it has achieved a far wider and deeper socio-political resonance, as likewise with those various debates within post-war German (especially Frankfurt-School) philosophy where epistemological and ethical issues are often inseparably bound up with reflection on the problems and prospects of the German federal state.<sup>34</sup>

This is *not* for one moment to go along with that other, 'continentally'-inspired variant of the two-traditions story which would have it that analytic philosophy is a narrowly technical, politically disengaged mode of discourse concerned only with footling matters of linguistic or logico-semantic exegesis. Even if – as I have suggested – that charge has some force with regard to certain developments on the analytic side, still it is very clearly wide of the mark when applied to the kinds of conceptual clarification and teasing-out of unnoticed complications in our political as well as ethical thinking that has characterised such work at its best. Amongst the many examples that might be offered I would mention in particular Jonathan Glover's *Humanity: a moral history of the twentieth century*, a book that most impressively combines breath of historical coverage with depth of philosophical reflection and a keen sense of how our moral judgements can be educated – rendered more acute but also less prone to ready-made habits of response – with the aid



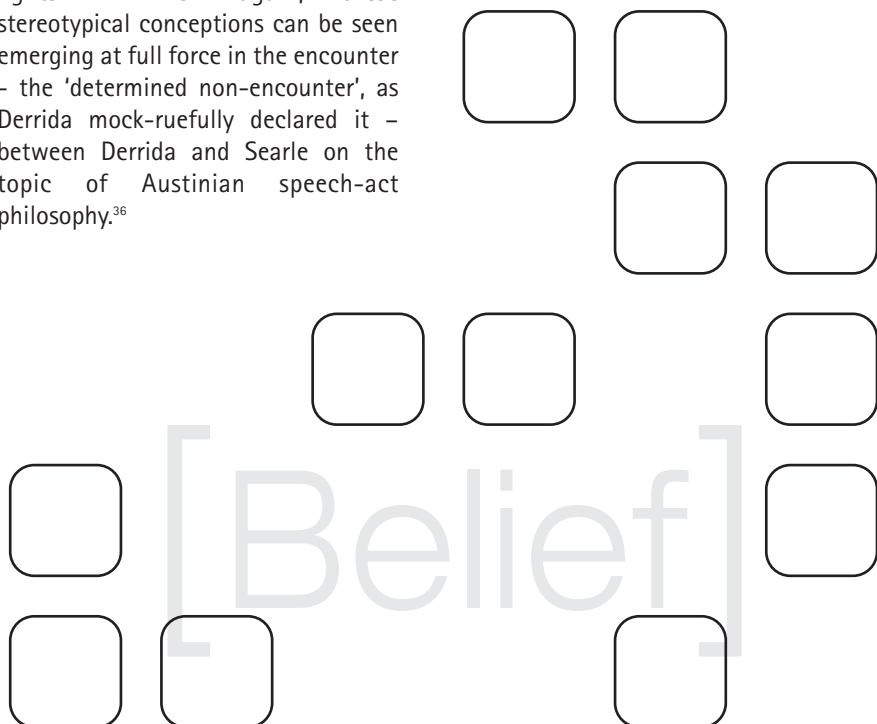
of such reflection. In the case of such work it becomes just a pointless labelling exercise and one with profoundly misleading implications to place it on one or the other side of the Great Analytic/Continental Rift. What emerges, rather, is the two-way relationship between philosophy's need constantly to strive for a more adequate, that is, more intellectually responsible grasp of its own operative concepts and the need that those concepts should be exercised on matters of substantive (which will often mean complex, difficult, and at times sharply divisive) ethical import.



I have made the case here that both interests could be best served by a far more open and mutually responsive attitude in each quarter, though not without the kind of productive friction that comes of their different histories, interests, and modes of development since the time of that (albeit much exaggerated) parting-of-the-ways after Kant. The main cause of such friction so far – and the reason, no doubt, for its having up to now generated more heat than light – is the belief amongst many analytic philosophers that the other lot are more in the business of creating unnecessary trouble than of solving genuine problems, and the converse belief among many continentals that analytic philosophy amounts to no more than a set of well-practised but evasive techniques for denying the existence of just those problems. The *loci classici* here would include some that I have mentioned already such as Ryle's drastic change of mind with regard to the issues raised by Husserlian transcendental phenomenology and Austin's idea that the problem of knowledge (with its main source in Kant) could best be answered by recourse to the common-sense wisdom enshrined in 'ordinary language'. It is a notion that cuts

across some otherwise deep divergences of view, as for instance between the Frege-Russell claim that such language stands in need of logical analysis so as to clarify or disambiguate its surface confusions and the Wittgensteinian assurance that all such problems can be made to disappear through the straightforward appeal to whatever makes sense by our own (or other people's) communal lights.<sup>35</sup> Then again, these stereotypical conceptions can be seen emerging at full force in the encounter – the 'determined non-encounter', as Derrida mock-ruefully declared it – between Derrida and Searle on the topic of Austinian speech-act philosophy.<sup>36</sup>

They can also be traced through the history of differing responses to Kant's Antinomies of Pure and Practical reason, that is to say, the issue as to whether these should be regarded as conceptual (or linguistic) aberrations in need of coaxing down from the giddy metaphysical heights or as genuine, deep-laid problems with a crucial bearing on the scope and limits of our freedom.



Since that issue is central to the debate concerning doxastic voluntarism – the question as to whether or just how far we can be held intellectually and morally responsible for the content of our various beliefs, convictions, ideological commitments, and so forth – it is one that cannot be raised without reference (however guarded or oblique) to the kinds of discussion carried on within the 'other', post-Kantian continental tradition. In other words it is a distinctly *metaphysical* issue in so far as it involves considerations beyond anything resolvable (or even discussible) on the terms laid down by analytic philosophy either in its 'ordinary-language' (descriptivist) or its logico-semantic (revisionist) mode. To this extent it requires both the kind of far-reaching speculative thought that has characterised philosophy in the Kantian line of descent and (as a necessary complement to that) the kind of meticulous conceptual and linguistic analysis which has typified a good deal of mainstream analytic work. Thus the question of how best to reconcile our often conflicting intuitions in this regard – our sense that beliefs are (or ought to be) purely volitional with our countervailing sense of the need to make allowance for various limiting, e.g., causal or circumstantial factors – is a question that can and should cut right across these conventional boundary-markers.

At present, as I have said, there are strong signs of this awareness in the work of thinkers like McDowell who propose a return to Kant (or to certain select topics and passages in Kant) as offering a useful way forward from the perceived impasse of analytic philosophy in the wake of old-style logical empiricism and of Quine's root-and-branch attack on its governing assumptions.<sup>37</sup> However this proposal

is often couched in terms – like those specified by P.F. Strawson in an earlier episode of 'back-to-Kant' thinking – which go so far toward scaling down the metaphysical or transcendental dimensions of Kantian epistemology and ethics that what remains is more like a warmed-over version of the logical-empiricist programme.<sup>38</sup> Thus it tends to work out as yet another exercise in stipulative boundary-drawing whereby Kant's more unfortunate (metaphysically loaded) kinds of talk can be adapted to the norms of a discourse which remains well within the bounds of analytic acceptability. Such, for instance, is McDowell's idea of a 'space of reasons' wherein thinking can exercise its due prerogatives – those having to do with matters of humanly-intelligible motive, meaning, or intent – as opposed to the domain of empirical enquiry which is likewise subject to the normative standards and constraints of rational inference, but not (or not directly) to those of moral-intellectual autonomy and freedom.<sup>39</sup> According to McDowell it is possible to maintain this distinction – and thereby conserve an adequate 'space' for the exercise of such freedom – without falling into the kinds of vicious dualism which have plagued Kantian and much post-Kantian philosophy, e.g., those between sensuous intuitions and concepts of understanding or the promptings of mere moral 'inclination', no matter how well-disposed, and the absolute dictates of moral law. We can best achieve this, he thinks, by switching attention to Kant's talk of 'receptivity' and 'spontaneity', the latter conceived as 'only notionally separate' (since they are bound up in a relation of strict mutual dependence) and hence as offering a means of escape from the dualist impasse.

However, as I have argued at length elsewhere, when McDowell attempts to spell out the case in detail – to explain just how the autonomous-sounding claims of 'spontaneity' can be reconciled with those of 'empirical constraint from the outside world' – then it begins to look more like just another variant of that same old Kantian dilemma, one that has if anything been sharpened (not resolved or even somewhat clarified) by its recasting in these different terms.<sup>40</sup> If we restrict ourselves to the standpoint of experience itself, he suggests, then

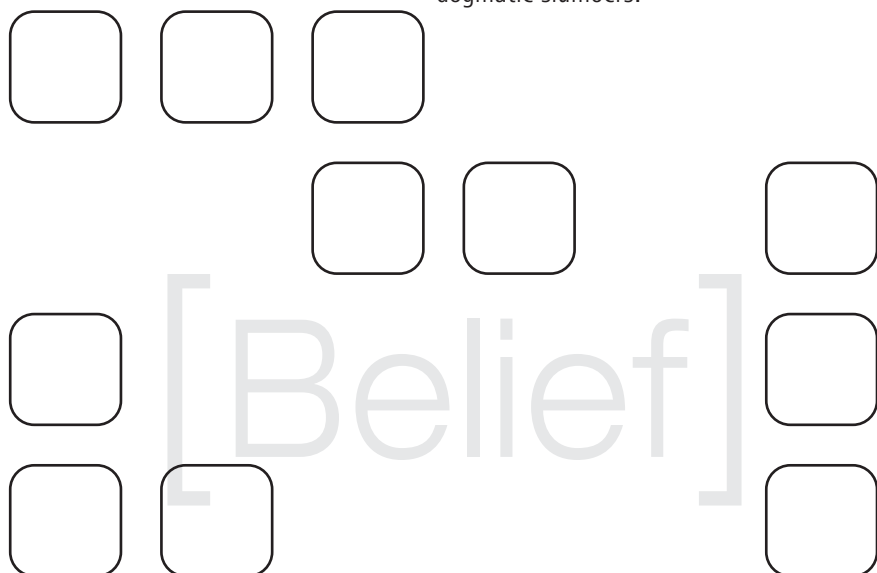
what we find in Kant is precisely the picture I have been recommending: a picture in which reality is not located outside a boundary that encloses the conceptual sphere . . . . The fact that experience involves receptivity ensures the required constraint from outside thinking and judging. But since the deliverances of receptivity already draw on capacities that belong to spontaneity, we can coherently suppose that the constraint is rational; that is how the picture avoids the pitfall of the Given.<sup>41</sup>

One may question whether the claim of 'coherence' is aptly applied to so tortuous and convoluted a passage of reasoning. How 'reality' can possibly be thought of as exerting an external (empirical) constraint on any knowledge we can gain concerning it while all the same 'not located outside a boundary that encloses the conceptual sphere' is quite as problematic as anything encountered in Kant's murkier ruminations on the topic. At any rate, if one thing is clear, it is the fact that McDowell is very far from having finally dismantled from what he calls the 'seesaw' – the chronic oscillation – that has been such a hallmark of epistemology from Kant to the present. Indeed, what gives

his attempted solution its particular diagnostic value is the conceptual strain that emerges so vividly in passages like that cited above. Nor are these problems by any means confined to the epistemological sphere, since the issue of knowledge (of its normative claims or justificatory grounds) is one that cannot possibly be set aside in any adequate, i.e., reasoned and responsible treatment of ethical questions. I have made this case specifically with regard to the debate about doxastic voluntarism since it is here – at the point of maximal conflict between autonomist and cultural-determinist views – that philosophy is brought up against the greatest challenge to its powers of rational arbitration. That is to say, there is little merit in any approach that fails to acknowledge the strength or intuitive force of arguments on both sides of this issue, or which treats it as merely a pseudo-dilemma brought about by our unfortunate proneness to forms of conceptual or metaphysical 'bewitchment'. On the contrary: it is one that often arises in contexts ranging from the most rarefied levels of meta-ethical debate to other, more 'applied' or practical dimensions of moral philosophy and – beyond that – in the public domain where it bears directly on various concerns of a social, political, and legal character. Confronted with such difficulties thinking most frequently tends to react in one or other of the opposite ways I have outlined above. Thus it veers either toward the kind of briskly problem-solving approach that plays them down for the sake of conceptual clarity or deference to common linguistic usage, or else toward a mode of address which keeps them firmly in view though at risk of raising the resultant dilemmas to a high point of paradox and ultimate undecidability.

No doubt it would grossly simplify the issue to identify these two contrasting attitudes with the 'analytic' (i.e., mainstream Anglo-American) and 'continental' (i.e., post-Kantian mainland-European) lines of descent. Still this idea will do less harm if it is taken not, in the customary fashion, as a mark of reciprocal hostility or mutual indifference but rather as describing the tense yet productive – since in certain ways strongly antithetical – relationship between them. Such is the attitude adopted by some philosophers of a broadly 'analytic' persuasion when they read Sartre and register the force of certain existentialist claims even though predisposed by their background culture and intellectual training to cast a somewhat quizzical or sceptical eye on the more extreme statements of that doctrine.<sup>42</sup> With Derrida likewise one can take his point about the irreducibility of ethical choice to rule, precedent, or formal prescription without endorsing the kind of full-fledged decisionist approach that would leave no room for the exercise of rational-deliberative thought.<sup>43</sup>

This is not to treat Derrida, or indeed Sartre, as mere *provocateurs* or intellectual gadflies whose sole claim on our interest is their knack of coming up with sharply-turned paradoxical formulations or skilfully contrived (often fictive) scenarios which may serve to administer a salutary jolt to our more routine or regimented habits of thought. To be sure, there is a prominent aspect of their writing that would seem to justify this rough characterisation, as likewise with a good deal of other work – some of it by Anglophone philosophers – which would count as 'continental' in terms of its distinctive thematic, stylistic, or generic attributes.<sup>44</sup> Still there is a crucial divergence of outlook between those who regard such work as *merely* a standing provocation when judged by the norms of rational, common-sense, responsible discourse and those who see in it the kind of provocation that Socrates offered when he challenged the conventional mores of his time, or that Hume put up against a whole range of orthodox philosophic and religious beliefs, or that Kant acknowledged when he credited Hume with having 'aroused me from my dogmatic slumbers'.



It is this latter, more constructive and open-minded sort of response that holds out the best prospect of advance, not only as a matter of productive (mutually provocative) exchange between the 'two traditions' but also as concerns our central topic of doxastic responsibility. For if their difference can be summarised briefly yet without undue simplification it is the difference between a 'continental' way of proceeding that measures itself against the limits and extremities of philosophic thought and an 'analytic' discourse whose regulative principle – albeit with some leeway for testing or stretching its limits – is to draw such anomalies back within the compass of conceptual or linguistic normality. Such is also the tension that Derrida brings out through his early, meticulously detailed and rigorous (and in this sense properly 'analytic') readings of philosophers from Plato to Husserl.<sup>45</sup> Thus on the one hand he remarks that 'a certain structuralism has always been philosophy's most spontaneous gesture' while on the other he acknowledges 'the principled, essential, and structural impossibility of closing a structural phenomenology'.<sup>46</sup> Otherwise put, it is the constant oscillation between 'hyperbole and finite structure', or a thinking that challenges philosophy's powers of self-assured conceptual grasp and a mode of thought – no less 'principled and essential' – which strives to contain that hyperbolic impulse within the bounds of established rational or logico-semantic intelligibility. This seems to me the most fruitful way of conceiving the relationship between 'continental' and 'analytic' philosophy as that relationship has developed since Kant and, more pointedly, since the two traditions broke step over issues raised by Frege's well-known criticisms of Husserl.<sup>47</sup> At the same time it offers a

revealing approach to questions concerning the scope and limits of our moral-intellectual autonomy, whether raised (as by Sartre) in an overtly thematic existentialist mode or (as by Derrida) in terms of philosophy's freedom – within certain specified procedural constraints – to challenge or to radically revise our understanding of canonical texts. What is involved in each case is a highly self-conscious and self-critical reflection on the character of those constraints and on the ways that such freedom can be exercised responsibly despite and against other, more orthodox (restrictive or coercive) habits of belief.

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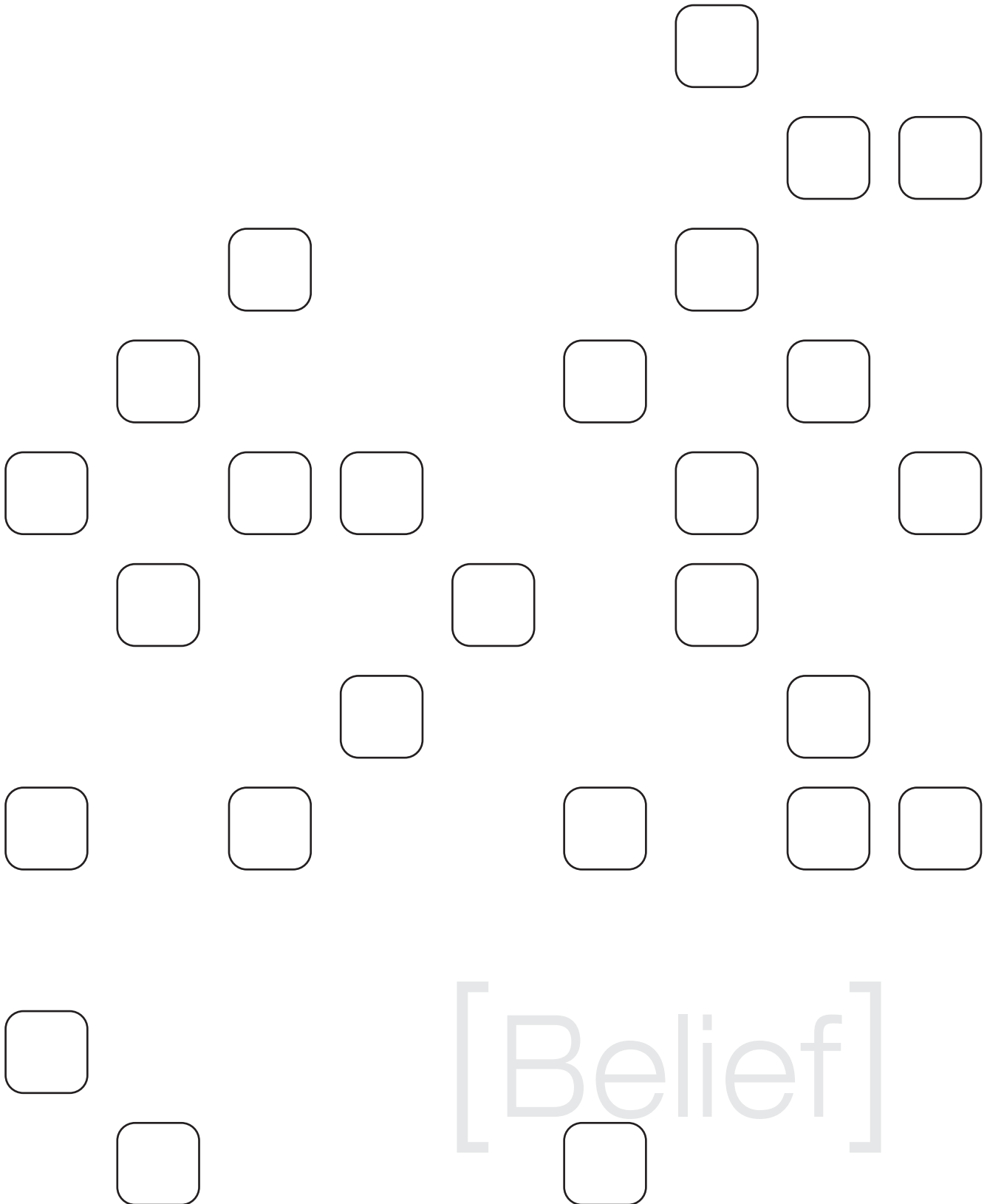


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