

October 21, 1992

Dear Brian,

We haven't been introduced, but I see that you have been introduced to my philosophical 'system.' Bryan Caplan sent me your letter replying to some of my papers, and I can scarcely resist the urge to answer it, so I will undertake this, paragraph by paragraph, presently. Hopefully, you recall what you said or have a copy of it.

1. "Begging the question" is my favorite charge in philosophy. The reason is that it is a sort of generic reply to any argument. It's usually (though not always) a sign that the philosopher making it has run out of ideas. Let me explain: Suppose that I offer the argument, "A. Therefore, B." Now, irrespective of what A and B are, if my argument is valid, any philosopher who disagrees with B may reply:

You are begging the question in asserting A, because anybody who didn't accept B would not accept A either, because if B were false then A would also have to be false.

The reason he can always make this reply is that, given the validity of the argument, A entails B, so A can't be true unless B is also true. To put the point another way, "If A then B" is logically equivalent to "If not B then not A." Therefore, any time A implies B, it will also be true that if B were false A would have to be false. So if the fact that the falsity of the conclusion implies the falsity of the premise is enough to make an argument a case of 'begging the question,' then any valid argument begs the question. (Note: in formal logic, an argument is 'valid' when the conclusion follows from the premises.) This, I am convinced, is the reason why I so often hear charges of begging the question raised against me and other people who have otherwise unanswerable arguments. I suspect you may be using this concept of begging the question. A better conception of question-begging would be that the conclusion is called upon to justify the premise. I do not see that I have done this.

You claim, what Professor Sarich also said to me, coincidentally enough, that the comparison between ethics and cosmology 'begs the question' against relativism. However, Bryan's reply was correct. I was not giving a positive argument for objectivism (viz., "Ethics is like cosmology; cosmology is objective; so ethics is objective"); rather, I was refuting a particular inference commonly made by relativists. Relativists commonly argue, "There are many disagreements about ethics. Hence, ethics is subjective." I presented a counter-example to that form of inference (viz., there are many disagreements about cosmology, but cosmology is not subjective). In general, if someone argues that all x's are ~~B~~^B because all x's are ~~B~~^A, then he implies that being A is enough to make something B. Hence, if I can find some object, any object, that has A but does not have B, then I show his argument is not valid. I show that for x's merely to be A is not enough to make them B. For instance, if someone said that I am a libertarian *because* I went to Berkeley, then, although the premise and conclusion are both true, it would suffice to refute the claim to note that many other people who went to Berkeley are not libertarian at all.

After accusing me of begging the question, you note a number of other properties that cosmology has that ethics ostensibly lacks (something about visibility and tests with scientific

instruments). It is unclear to me what the relevance of this litany is. Assuredly, cosmology is not identical with ethics. The two fields differ in many respects. Did you mean to advance these characteristics as conditions on objectivity - that is, to make the veiled claim that to be objective requires testability by scientific instruments? If so, some different counter-examples can be adduced to that claim, which Bryan has ably noted (other minds, galaxies a trillion light-years away, logical principles, etc.) This is a logical positivist view for which I can see no good reasons. There are probably infinitely many unobservable facts; they remain facts nonetheless.

2. You say that actually you do accept the existence of values and ethics, but only as mental evaluations, not as "observable objective events in space/time." First, I hope those aren't the only two possibilities for something - I think there are plenty of objective facts that are not observable, not in space, and/or not in time. (As examples of the first, see the previous paragraph; as for the second, consider mental events; and as for the third, consider $2 + 2 = 4$.) And goodness and rightness happen to be not perceptually observable nor in space.

Second, how would you reply to the 'chemical relativist' who told you that he does not deny the existence of the subject matter of chemistry: "Actually, I do accept the existence of chemistry ... and I observe that it consists entirely in internal mental evaluations, not as objective events in space/time"? This sounds like the idealist Bishop Berkeley. Berkeley believed that the only things in the world that existed were minds and ideas in them. When called a skeptic, he vehemently denied it: I believe in tables, mountains, and the like, said Berkeley; I just think that they are all ideas in the mind and not independently existing things. Few people have found this protestation convincing. See my carefully drawn distinction in "Moral Objectivism" between beliefs, evaluations, or intellectual studies, on the one hand, and the things that these beliefs or disciplines are about, on the other, for the reason why.

3. That your logical analysis fails you when facing comments like "good is good, and that is all I have to say on the matter" is evident. The remark means that "good" is not to be defined. See *Principia Ethica*, sections 5ff. for the reasons why Moore says this. It does not mean, by the way, as you appear to have read it, that it is impossible to ever provide any moral arguments. I believe that the concept of equality cannot be defined (the mathematical concept), but that by no means implies that I think it is impossible ever to give arguments about whether some quantities are equal.

4. About mathematics and intuition: first, there is a difference between saying mathematics is based solely on intuition and saying that mathematics has no empirical or 'real-world' consequences. Talking about the source of some thing is generally quite different from talking about its results. Second, I don't know what you mean by "real-world". It is a fact that $2 + 2 = 4$. Is that 'real world'? Do you mean *physical* consequences? Third, contrary to modern physicists who believe that Euclid's fifth postulate has been empirically disconfirmed, I doubt that any mathematical statement requires empirical evidence. And moreover, fourth, I don't see what difference it makes.

5. On Hume and gambler's logic: Incidentally, I think the gambler's logic is actually the opposite of induction. That is, the classic gambler's fallacy is to think that because some result has occurred many times it is less likely to occur again (e.g., because I have gotten four heads in a row, it is more

likely that I will get tails next), and this is uncontroversially invalid reasoning. But inductive reasoning generally consists in concluding that because some result has occurred many times it is *more* likely to occur again.

That gravity example of mine wasn't really convincing or well-explained. I think what I had in mind was the fact that even most ostensibly empirical knowledge requires some intuitive element. The observations alone don't force (logically entail) a unique conclusion to be drawn. They don't even force a probability estimate, as many failed attempts to make probability theory solve the problem of induction have attested, unless some prior estimate of probabilities is given (that is, prior to empirical evidence).

Hume concludes from this that there is no such thing as inductive knowledge, because there can't be any knowledge that isn't the product of observation alone, and you seem to express agreement in saying you accept his 'logic.' I suggest it would be a much simpler and less absurd approach to admit that it is not the case that all knowledge must be purely empirical.

6. I hope the arguments by which that snake-oil salesman Robert Anton Wilson convinced you of libertarianism were a good deal better than his 'arguments' against the law of excluded middle.

First of all, nobody should ever say anything bad about Aristotle (beyond the occasional tentative suggestion that *perhaps* his physics was a wee bit too teleological). He was probably the greatest thinker of all time and founded several academic disciplines, writing seminal works in formal logic, physics, metaphysics, ethics, politics, etc. that expressed what became the dominant theories in the fields for several centuries in most cases. Second, it is hardly the case that the only reason anybody believes in laws of identity, non-contradiction, and excluded middle is because Aristotle said so. People believe them because they strike us as such patent truisms. Third, Wilson's alleged counter-examples are confused. To point out that there are multiple interpretations of certain utterances, is nothing that Aristotle or other logicians have not been aware of for the past two thousand years; and to point out that some of these interpretations are true and some false is a poor argument to show that there are propositions that neither are nor are not the case. Aristotle himself urged explicitly that it was necessary to fix a univocal meaning to every term (and I'm sure he would have agreed it was necessary to fix a univocal meaning to the whole sentence).

If a French speaker says "L'eau est chaud" and an English speaker says in the same context "The water is hot," then there is something that their utterances have in common. They are different utterances, but they mean the same thing. That is, the *sentence* is not the same, but the *proposition* it expresses is; there is one possible state of affairs that both of them purport to describe. This is an important distinction. The law of excluded middle does not assert that every sentence is either true or false; it asserts that every proposition is either true or false. And believe it or not, it was not Robert Anton Wilson who first discovered the existence of ambiguities - i.e., that a single sentence could express multiple propositions, some of which might be true and others false.

So, as Bryan pointed out, it doesn't matter to the truth of the Law of Excluded Middle whether you interpret "Water boils at 100 degrees C" as meaning always under every condition or just approximately at standard temperature and pressure, since however you interpret it it is either true or false. (Incidentally, the second is probably the standard interpretation.) Now let's look at the other examples.

I don't know what " $PQ = QP$ " means. Wilson tells us it's true "in ordinary mathematics" but

not in some other mathematics. I can only assume this means either (a) that ordinary mathematics assign definitions to that statement such that it expresses a proposition which is true, while in the other mathematics it means something different, something which is false; or (b) that mathematicians disagree over whether a certain proposition is true, in which case how am I supposed to know who is right? Why is this interesting? I can come up with much more commonplace examples. For instance, I hereby define "people" to refer to elephants. Now I can say, ala R.A. Wilson, that "There are 250 million people in the United States" is true 'in ordinary demography' but false in the demography used by me. But presumably no one would think this shows that the number of people in the country is indeterminate.

Some facts, as I pointed out earlier, are unobserved. Thus, I'm sure that either there is a tenth planet beyond Pluto or there is not a tenth planet beyond Pluto, but I'm not sure which is the case. Again, so what? Only a dummy would confuse "uncertain" with "indeterminate".

Some sentences, even, fail to express any proposition at all. "Congratulations on your new job," or "How may I help you?" for instance, express no propositions because they aren't statements. "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously" likewise doesn't express a proposition.

The status of "*Behind the Green Door* is a dirty movie" is debatable. I have never heard of the movie. Someone could argue (a) that the sentence is a veiled description of the reaction that the speaker feels towards it, in which case it is true just in case the speaker does have a feeling of disgust towards it. That is, one could argue that "x is dirty" means something like that x causes a feeling of revulsion in the speaker. (b) Someone could argue that for something to be dirty is for it to be filled with explicit sex scenes and intended for stimulating sexual desire in the audience. (c) It could be argued that "dirty" is really undefined or poorly defined so that "*BtGD* is a dirty movie" doesn't express a unique proposition. (d) One could say that the sentence expresses a combination of a descriptive judgement (that the movie contains explicit sex scenes) with a normative judgement (that this is bad). Finally, (e) it could be argued that the sentence contains a presupposition that promiscuous sexuality is bad (plus a claim that the movie contains explicit sex) and can be true only if that presupposition is true. Now I really don't care which of these theories one takes on the metaphysics of smut, because whatever one says the law of excluded middle holds.

This business about "game rules" is simply idiotic. It may be true that a certain group of people believe a certain proposition and that you must believe the thing to be admitted to the group, but that tells us nothing about what it is that is believed, or whether it is true or false. I suppose R.A. Wilson would say that the fundamental theorem of calculus is a "game rule" because mathematicians won't take you seriously if you don't believe it. For that matter, anything is potentially a 'game rule' since I could always attach some consequences for people believing or not believing it. But the people in the Catholic church are not playing some kind of game; they really believe that the Pope is infallible (and falsely at that).

I suppose Wilson hopes that his pseudo-scientific jargon will cow the reader into accepting his arbitrary assertions on religious faith - e.g., "neurosemantic", "existential reality-labyrinth" - but the question tougher than any of the quiz questions that I kept pondering is whether Wilson's own statements are true, false, or meaningless.

7. You simply have to get straight the distinction between things and knowledge of things. You keep implying that for something to be 'objective' it must be measurable. You say that as Karl Popper

points out universal generalizations are never completely demonstrable (is this a universal generalization?) If this is true, it in no way implies that universal generalizations are never *true*. This is really the same point as I've made a few times before, that plenty of unobserved and even unobservable facts exist.

8. Again, my thesis that certain moral concepts, namely, 'right' and 'good', are indefinable is not the thesis that it is not possible to argue about whether they apply to some thing. Can't we reason about whether a thing has a property without reducing the property to something else? Also, the fact that mathematics is based on intuition never led anyone to think that no mathematical discoveries or arguments are possible; likewise, I do not see how the proposition that ethical knowledge is based on intuition could be taken to imply that rational moral arguments are impossible. It just means that these arguments will have to start from some (intuitive) premises, which is no surprising discovery.

9. I don't happen to agree with your analysis of color; however, I was not, in "Moral Objectivism", actually asserting that colors are objective. I was merely trying to explain the debate about whether colors are objective. I picked that as an example because some people have said that colors are objective and others that colors are subjective, and I wanted to explain what they meant by this.

10. I think I was careful to say, not that there are propositions that are neither true nor false (meaning, states of affairs that neither obtain nor fail to obtain), but that there were sentences (purely linguistic entities) that were neither true nor false.

11. I don't know what you mean about moral claims being neither true nor false and also corresponding to states of the mind. The statement "I am in pain," when sincerely uttered, corresponds to a state of the mind of the speaker, in the sense that if and only if I am in pain then the statement is true. But that can't be the nature of the correspondence you mean, because then moral judgements would be true, and you want them to be neither true nor false.

The interjection "Ouch" corresponds (in certain circumstances) to a mental state in the sense that it expresses the mental state but does not assert any proposition. If this is your analogy to morals, note that I dealt with it in section 4.2.

Finally, there is the sense in which any sincere statement corresponds to a mental state. E.g., if I say, "It is raining outside" sincerely, then the statement corresponds to my belief that it is raining. If this is what you believe about moral claims, then it's not a very interesting thesis since it applies to any claim whatever.

12. Reply to Hazlitt: It's too bad that the penetration of the man's economic insight did not extend to moral philosophy. Yes, I'll agree that actions cannot be true or false and that they can, instead, be helpful or harmful. Now the question is, what about the statement that an action is helpful or harmful - can *that statement* be true? Well, H.H. must think so, since he just made the statement. But since calling something "harmful" is expressing a moral judgement, moral judgements can be true or false.

13. You state, once again giving Bryan and me much perplexity about just which version of relativism you claim to endorse, that moral judgements are in fact judgements, but ones which we are

prompted to make by our emotions. Fair enough, but earlier I thought you were saying that moral 'judgements' were not judgements at all and hence could be neither true nor false. Now it appears that they are just illogical and unjustified judgements.

There is no question that people make many judgements based on their emotions. For example, many people accept religions because it makes them feel good. If Freud is right, people also often have beliefs about themselves for purely emotional reasons (too difficult to face reality). Some liberal students of anthropology believe that brain size has no effect on intelligence for what I take to be purely emotional reasons. These beliefs also almost always turn out to be false, just because they were formed irrationally. In any case, though, the question of the efficient cause of a belief is entirely distinct from the question of the content of that belief or of its truth or falsity. To urge that certain things have caused people to believe that A is B is simply irrelevant in the context of a debate about whether it is true or false that A is B, or one about what it is for something to be B.

14. Perhaps you are correct to urge that "Asparagus tastes good" logically implies "Asparagus exists" (although I don't think it implies that you have eaten asparagus). What's wrong with that? I did not argue that the fact that a statement has logical relations to other statements alone makes it objective. What I argued in 4.2 was that the fact that a statement has logical relations to other statements shows that it expresses a proposition; that it is, in fact, an intelligible statement. This still leaves open the possibility that it is a statement about psychological events or that it is false (possibilities which are discussed in different sections).

I don't have any difficulty with the result that "Asparagus tastes good" denotes a proposition.

15. The Nazi thought experiment: Well, I not only think mass-murder is wrong; I think it would be wrong even if people liked it, and furthermore, I think that even if I approved of it, it would still be wrong to commit murder. Even if, say, I were captured and brainwashed by the Nazis into thinking they were right, even then it would be wrong to committ genocide, so I believe. And if you think as I do, then you do not believe that the truth of moral judgements depends on people's mental states, not even your own, unless you are inconsistent. It is incorrect to urge that this thought experiment only works because the reader does not approve of Naziism. For in the case where a property really is subjective, the thought experiment will not work. For instance, I think asparagus tastes bad. However, I think that if people, particularly me, were to have different sensations when we ate asparagus, if we had very sweet sensations in our mouths as a result of eating asparagus, then asparagus would taste good, so I think. Thus the fact that I don't like asparagus does not impede me from seeing that if people's experiences of asparagus were changed then it would taste good, nor from seeing that the tastiness of asparagus is a relative property.

You should note the inevitable logic of this argument: If you claim that X depends on Y, then that must mean that you claim if Y were different or did not exist, X would not exist. What else could it mean? So how can you possibly simultaneously say that some state of affairs depends on people having a certain mental state and think that the state of affairs would exist even if people didn't have that mental state??

14. Do you seriously mean to propose as a condition on the truth of a statement that it should help us to make gadgets, like bridges and microwave ovens? Is this supposed to be a criterion of the

existence of some objects or of our knowing about them? It seems awfully anthropocentric and batty.

And anyway, I'd say that moral statements have much more obvious and deeper consequences than statements of physics. After all, with as much knowledge of physics alone as you care to gather, you still don't know what to do with your life. Moral judgements tell you that, among other things. How can someone deny this as a real-world consequence? The consequences of being mistaken in moral evaluations can be quite drastic and terrible - for instance, false morals could lead to widespread tyranny, injustice, war, etc. It wasn't as if the rise of Naziism was caused by errors of natural science.

15. I thought that the is/ought problem was just, roughly, the putative knowledge that logically it is impossible to derive an ought from an is, plus some arguments about what this implies for morality - not really a question but an unfortunate alleged fact. My 'solution' consists in an attempt to expose the mistake of the presupposition that the problem is founded on.

In any case, when it comes to philosophical problems that have gone unsolved for hundreds or thousands of years, it is usually a safe bet that they are insoluble, and that's usually because they rest on false presuppositions.

Since nobody ever claimed that mathematical intuitionism was a form of 'emotivism' I don't see why the charge should be raised for ethics.

16. Why do you say that "Granted that I have judged x to be good, but is it good?" isn't an open question? Do you think that "Granted that I believe x to be true, but is it true?" is an open question? I think both of them certainly are. We could make sense of debate about their answers. (It makes sense to wonder if your judgement is correct.)

Anyway, if you think "x is good" is literally synonymous with "I judge that x is good," then it follows that

(1) "I judge that x is good" must mean the same as "I judge that I judge that x is good," etc. That is, anywhere you see the expression "x is good" you can substitute "I judge that x is good," since the two phrases are synonymous, and you can repeat the substitution *ad infinitum* since the new phrase always contains the original one, leading to an infinite regression.

(2) Moral judgements can after all be true or false, contrary to what you said earlier, because it can certainly be true that I judge something to be good. And

(3) In order for me to find out whether something is good, what I have to do is do some depth psychology. I have to introspect to see if I believe it to be good. If I discover that I do, then and only then am I justified in concluding that it is good. That is, since the assertion in question is just an assertion about my own mind, the way to discover its truth is introspection. But now that means it will be a *precondition* on my getting into a certain mental state that I should have already observed introspectively that I have it.

In general, it is incoherent to claim of any proposition, X, that it is identical with the proposition that someone believes that X, for then, among other things, the belief that X would have to be nothing but the belief that one believes that X. But there is no such belief as the belief that one believes that very belief.

17. I believe that moral *concepts* are thought processes; *all* concepts are thought processes. But now what about moral concepts is supposed to differentiate them from all other concepts - do you

mean that their *objects* are nothing but thought processes? This would be true of psychological concepts. Or do you mean that they have no objects? Or is it that some concepts are identical with their objects?

Let me briefly explain: some mental states have a property philosophers like to call "intentionality" (Bryan will be learning about this presently from Searle), which doesn't mean they are deliberate but is a technical philosopher's term. Intentionality is the property of being about, of, or directed at something. For instance, if you have a belief, there has to be something that your belief is about. If you get angry at someone, your anger is 'intentional'. (In contrast, pain, for instance, is not intentional.) There's no need to discuss intentionality at great length, but note that concepts are intentional. A concept is a concept *of* something. The thing it represents is its object. (Note concepts are intentional even if their objects don't exist - e.g., the concept of unicorns is about unicorns, even if unicorns don't exist.) So are you saying about moral concepts (1) that, contrary to appearances, they aren't intentional, so that they actually aren't concepts at all; (2) that they are concepts of non-existent objects, like unicorns; (3) that they are psychological concepts, i.e., they have other mental states as their objects; or (4) that they are not distinct from their objects; i.e., they are concepts of themselves? These four alternatives are mutually exclusive and, I think, exhaustive of your alternatives, since if you don't hold one of these then you think that moral concepts refer to things existing outside the mind. Relativists usually vacillate among the different incompatible interpretations of their theory, and it is this that gives them the illusory sense of having a logically coherent view. The ability to do this is their great strength, which is why I intend to clarify the thesis. Relativism is something that dissolves through clarification (like most false philosophical theories).

If you've read all this, besides my long papers, I admire your patience and expect you will soon be a convert.

Sincerely,



Michael Huemer