

THE NATURE OF PHILOSOPHICAL ARGUMENTS

An Anthology

An appreciable number of Readers are available in Philosophy, some of them very useful. In selecting the articles which go into such anthologies, a number of considerations play a role. If the book is for example in the Philosophy of Ethics, the editor will endeavor to ensure that all the major views on the foundation and nature of ethics are represented and that the reader becomes acquainted with the more important arguments for and against the various standard positions. In other words, the main objective is to cover a given area of thought adequately and evenly. This is to be achieved as best as possible through collecting a number of representative essays which combine to a decided degree, lucidity, comprehensiveness and competence.

The present anthology is of a different nature; it attempts to do what is not, as a rule, attempted in other anthologies and adopts a method not adopted, to my knowledge, elsewhere. It does not aim to cover any given area in philosophy. Little consideration is given as to what topics are being treated; the major concern is with illustrating the nature of philosophical argument in general. The following method is adopted for the purpose:

An essay is presented, for example, by a first-rate philosopher like Hilary Putnam who argues very cleverly and lucidly about the status of the famous problematic statement "Nothing can be red and green all over", which has been a source of ⁺conservation to logical empiricists (since the statement seems a priori true, yet its truth does not seem derivable from the meaning of the terms employed).

Putnam provides a clear and compelling demonstration that the truth of the statement follows logically from the definitions of some of the relevant terms involved. Most readers find the article stimulating, instructive and completely convincing. Next, we have a short review of the same article by Nelson Goodman, who points out that Putnam's paper contains a glaring fallacy through which the whole argument collapses. The review is so concise, clear and conclusive, that after reading it one finds it hard to recall what made Putnam's essay so beguilingly plausible. This is followed by J. J. C. Smart's essay on the topic in which the tables seem to be turned once again, for he points out that only on a certain assumption -- one which we are, by no means, compelled to make -- has Goodman's criticism validity, otherwise everything Putnam said is impeccably correct.

All this is rounded up by a short summary in which an attempt is made to assess which argument is valid and which is not and more importantly perhaps, to identify the special features of the problem which is to be held responsible for the fact that what seems obvious at one moment looks impossible at the next and which gives rise to a situation in which the acutest minds seem unable to avoid serious logical traps. The editor -- or a philosopher specially commissioned for the purpose -- would at the end of this section, like at the end of every other section, try to articulate the inherent ambiguities which reside in the problem under discussion and which render the grounds upon which the arguments are to be conducted so slippery; to express the strong prejudices which come into play and which tend to blind one to certain pitfalls.

One of the major characteristics of philosophy, which distinguishes

it from other disciplines, is that the essence of an important contribution to the subject lies not so much in the conclusions presented, but rather in the arguments devised and employed in order to reach those conclusions. In philosophy we are subjecting our most ingrained and basic assumptions to scrutiny, we are standing at the perilous edges of our reasoning capacity where the very ground upon which we stand is kept being removed from beneath us for examination and repair. The task quite often is not to provide a specific solution to a well-defined problem, but to enable us to see what a problem amounts to and what kind of things might count as solutions, and the skill required is rarely how to choose and employ adequate arguments from our collection of stock-in-trade arguments, but rather how to devise new arguments and even the criteria which vouchsafe the validity of these arguments.

It is because of these unique characteristics that it is possible to find in the literature of philosophy groups of essays which display such dramatic exchanges/^{as} we witnessed in the example cited before, in which, as we pass from one opinion to the other, our assessment of what a problem is about and what might constitute a relevant and compelling argument and what simply misses the point or is incoherent, is subject to violent oscillation. One of the best ways to make the student gain an insight into the special nature of philosophical argument is to make him read articles in which such exchanges among philosophers take place.

One further point about the pedagogical usefulness of the proposed collection of articles. When students are given philosophical essays to read, it is extremely difficult for their teachers, or for that matter for they themselves, to judge whether or not they

understood what they have been reading. The standard test, of course, is to ask students to summarize essays assigned to them, a practice which has often led to the development of a facility to paraphrase arguments one does not understand. In fact, the standard test is not even a foolproof means to ensure that the candidate has read the article carefully from the beginning to the end -- a task of some arduousness for newcomers to the subject. But suppose an essay is assigned to the student with the following remarks: Here is an article written by a leading contemporary philosopher, in which he sets out to establish in a novel way a considerably exciting thesis. The article will strike you as provocative, yet authoritative. However, the whole argument seems vitiated by a profound confusion the writer is guilty of. Can you find and articulate what his confusion is?

The student is given a defined task, he is searching for something concrete while he is reading and this provides him with an incentive to study closely the assigned essay. I think there can be no better evidence that he has understood what he has been reading than if he succeeds in discovering the supposed error. An alternative way for the teacher to use the articles of this collection is to assign a whole set of papers to the student to read and then ask him to adjudicate among the disputants.

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