USE OF THESES

TRANSCENDENTAL ARGUMENTS

AND THE

CONCEPT OF SELF-REFUTATION

Thesis submitted for the degree

of

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by

D.A. WHEWELL

In general, all parts of the thesis describe the candidate's own original work. Whenever the candidate makes use of ideas propounded by other philosophers due acknowledgement is made in the text. The candidate is of course indebted to his supervisors for their many helpful suggestions and criticisms.

Signed:

D. A. Whewell.

(D.A. Whewell).

OUTLINE OF THE ARGUMENT

The overall aim of this thesis is to find out whether any version of the transcendental method could be made to yield conclusions which are both factual and indubitably certain. In other words, could any sense be given to the notion of an a priori-synthetic principle, and if so, could such a principle be arrived at by means of a transcendental deduction? An affirmative answer is given to both these questions.

Part I.   'The search for a transcendental proof'.

I try to show that although Kant recognizes at least two kinds of transcendental argument - transcendental deductions and transcendental expositions - only transcendental deductions are capable of giving rise to principles which are, in some sense, a priori-synthetic.

I defend the concept of an a priori-synthetic principle against the objections of radical pragmatists (like Quine) on the one hand, and traditional empiricists (like Russell) on the other.

I criticize Kant's reasons for thinking that transcendental deductions, as he conceives them, logically guarantee the truth of their (synthetic) conclusions, and I explain how the structure of his arguments would have to be changed in order to achieve this.

Main conclusion: The initial premise of a transcendental deduction must be self-guaranteeing in the sense that any attempt to deny it would be self-refuting.

Part II.   'The concept of self-refutation'.

I examine a wide range of self-refuting statements, and produce a comprehensive system of classification. This is designed to show why some forms of self-refutation can be used as the basis of a transcendental deduction, but not others.

I point out that some of the things which have been said about self-refuting statements would seem to suggest that transcendental deductions based on any form of self-refutation are impossible, but that these suggestions are unfounded. Main conclusion: A transcendental deduction may be described as an argument of the transcendental form in which the initial premise is operationally self-guaranteeing.

Part III.   'The composition of a transcendental deduction'.

I consider what other requirements an argument must satisfy in order to count as a transcendental deduction.

I argue that it should be based on a Cartesian-style premise and should be presuppositional rather than implicational in form. This leads to a comparison of the transcendental and Cartesian methods.

I explain that the only way in which ultimate principles or axioms can be justified, on other than pragmatic grounds, is

by some form of transcendental deduction.

Main conclusion: Our revised notion of a transcendental
deduction has much in common with Kant's original conception,
although his claim that this method of argument is 'entirely
different from any hitherto conceived' is not altogether
justified.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Vanity, according to A.J. Ayer, is 'the <u>sine qua non</u> of philosophers'.[1] The reason he gives for this seemingly extravagant claim is that in philosophy there are no established criteria of truth and falsehood - as he presumes there are in the natural sciences - so that its practitioners are extremely reluctant to admit error.

Whether philosophers are as reluctant to admit error as Ayer claims is at least debatable, but the charge is by no means a new one. Immanuel Kant, for example, accused metaphysicians* of being, in general, arrogant in their intellectual aspirations and dogmatic in their approach.[2] He saw this as being due to their failure to agree on an objective procedure for settling philosophical disputes. In other words, he realized that in metaphysics there was, as yet, no commonly accepted criteria of truth and falsehood:

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[1] Ved Mehta, <u>Fly and the Fly-Bottle</u>, p.75.   [2] e.g. <u>Critique of Pure Reason</u>, Ax and Axiv.

*For Kant, a metaphysician is simply a philosopher who is not a natural philosopher (i.e. one who employs empirical methods).

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So far are the students of metaphysics from
exhibiting any kind of unanimity in their
contentions, that metaphysics has rather to
be regarded as a battle-ground quite peculiarly
suited for those who desire to exercise
themselves in mock-combats, and in which no
participant has ever yet succeeded in gaining
ever so much as an inch of territory, not at
least in such manner as to secure him in its
permanent possession.[1]

If metaphysics is to regain the respect in which it was formerly
held it must, according to Kant, be set 'upon the secure path of
a science'[2] by the introduction of a new philosophical method.

This method must achieve two things: firstly, it must
guarantee the validity of its conclusions in such a way as to
prevent them from being seriously questioned. And secondly, it
must define the limits of metaphysical knowledge, either by
providing the key to the solution of all metaphysical problems
or by showing them to be insoluble. Failure to define these
limits would leave some of the problems untouched and so enable
the dogmatists to continue to engage in their 'mock-combats'.

In the transcendental method Kant believes that he has found
the only way of achieving these aims. He is aware that such
pretensions may seem 'arrogant and vainglorious',[3] but argues

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[1]Bxv.   [2]Bvii.   [3]Axiv.

that, in practice, they are

> incomparably more moderate than the claims of all
> those writers who, on the lines of the usual
> programme, profess to prove the simple nature of
> the soul or the necessity of a first beginning of
> the world. For while such writers pledge themselves
> to extend human knowledge beyond all limits of
> possible experience, I humbly confess that this is
> entirely beyond my power.[1]

In the Critique of Pure Reason the task of setting metaphysics

upon the sure path of a science is identified with the task

of defining the limits of philosophical argument. Such an

approach is only feasible, however, if one already knows

what a philosophical argument is. Yet any attempt to define

this concept is bound to be contentious, for there is no

general consensus of opinion amongst philosophers as to what

form their arguments should take. Indeed, it is not even

clear that there should be a distinctively philosophical mode

of argument.

Kant, however, did not recognize this difficulty.

'Philosophy' he confidently declared 'is simply what reason

knows by means of concepts';[2] that is to say, a philosophical

argument is one which proceeds by concepts alone without the

aid of sensory experience. To discover how much can be known

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[1]Axiv.   [2]A732/B760.

in this way is therefore, on this view, to reveal the scope

of the whole metaphysical enterprise. 'the chief question'

said Kant 'is always simply this:- what and how much can the

understanding and reason know apart from all experience?'[1]

In short, the Critique of Pure Reason can be regarded

as an attempt to define the philosopher's task by determining

the scope of a particular mode of enquiry. This approach might

be justified on the grounds that it is by its methods rather

than by its subject-matter that philosophy is distinguished

from other arts or sciences. This is of course a familiar

enough notion and one which is still widely, though by no means

universally, accepted. It is implicit in the often repeated

claim that philosophy 'is not a body of doctrine but an

activity'.[2] However, among the philosophers who believe this

to be true there are differing views as to what kind of an

activity it is.

For Kant, it was the activity of reasoning a priori

from concepts. Hence his claim that 'philosophy can never

be learned, save only in historical fashion; as regards what

concerns reason, we can at most learn to philosophize'.[3]

Wittgenstein came to regard it as the art of destroying

linguistically induced nonsense by bringing 'words back

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[1]Axvii.   [2]Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,
[3]4.112.   A837/B865.

from their metaphysical to their everyday usage'.[1] For John

Wisdom it was, less specifically, the art of analyzing

concepts: 'analytic philosophy has no special subject-matter.

You can philosophize about Tuesday, the pound sterling, and

lozenges and philosophy itself'.[2]

These methods are all broadly a priori in character, in

the sense that they do not require access to a store of

esoteric empirical information, but differ very much in scope.

Wittgenstein, for example, seemed to think that the philosopher

could do no more than expose the fallacies in metaphysical

thought through an examination of the way words are actually

used. Wisdom, however, maintained that such an examination

could perform a wider and more positive role in that it could

give us new insights into the nature of our classificatory

system. Even metaphysical theories could be useful in this

respect by drawing attention to distinctions which ordinary

language tends to conceal. For instance, the theory that no

empirical propositions can be certain, whatever its defects,

does at least draw attention to the fact that empirical

propositions are validated in a quite different way from, say

mathematical propositions, and that the point at which they are

validated is much more difficult to define.

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[1] Wittgenstein, <u>Philosophical Investigations</u>, p.116.
[2] Wisdom, <u>Problems of Mind and Matter</u>, p.2.

However, Wisdom agreed with Wittgenstein that it was no part of the philosopher's task to add to our information about the world. 'The analytic philosopher, unlike the scientist, is not one who learns new truths but one who gains new insight into old truths'.[1] In other words, his task consists in making explicit knowledge which is already implied by the concepts we use. In fulfilling this task, we are therefore only reminding ourselves of facts which are already within our grasp, but whose logical significance we have perhaps overlooked.

This account is open to a number of serious objections, not least of which is that, in the end, our concepts are merely ways of organizing experience, and therefore cannot be adequately analyzed without reference to that experience. In other words, we must look not merely at the concepts themselves, but at those elements in our experience to which they are supposed to apply, and this, being a straightforwardly empirical procedure, may easily result in our noticing new facts. For instance, if we attempt to analyze the concept of memory without examining actual memory situations we may easily be influenced by ideas which are both empirically false and philosophically dangerous; e.g. the idea that the memory is a form of perception and that the only

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[1]Wisdom, Problems of Mind and Matter, p.2.

way in which we can recall an event is by conjuring up an image of it in our minds. In refuting such an idea we may well be adding to our information about the world,

Thus, what is termed the 'analysis of ordinary concepts' is in part no different from the analysis of ordinary (i.e. everyday) experience. The only justification for describing this as an a priori activity is that to be successful at it we need only reflect upon the kind of experiences with which we are already perfectly familiar; that is to say, we are not obliged to extend our experience of the world in the way that the natural scientist is.

Neverthless, under Kant's criteria, this could certainly not be regarded as a legitimate philosophical technique. For it cannot be described as a priori in the tough sense of being wholly non-empirical, nor can it be said to lead to conclusions which are indubitably certain. This is not to say that all forms of conceptual analysis are unphilosophical in the same sense,* but only those which rely on, or give rise to, empirically based statements of fact. It remains to be seen

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*Kant does occasionally seem to suggest that only the analysis of a priori concepts can give rise to a priori (i.e. indubitable) knowledge, and that the analysis of empirical concepts can only give rise to empirical knowledge. 'For its (metaphysics) business is not merely to analyse concepts which we make for ourselves a priori of things ...'. B18.

whether or not they must all do so. Moreover, Kant may be right in claiming that not all statements of fact are empirically based. And if some of these statements can be proved independently of experience they could presumably be used as the basis of a more rigorous form of conceptual analysis.

Neverthless, conceptual analysis in general is neither as rigorous as it was intended to be, nor does it appear to have finally solved any of the traditional problems of philosophy. This is evidenced by the fact that A.J. Ayer can still claim that philosophers are peculiarly prone to dogmatism by virtue of the fact that in philosophy (except where questions of formal logic are involved) there are no 'established criteria of truth and falsehood'.[1]

Failure by successive generations of philosophers to remedy this state of affairs has caused an increasing number of philosophers to lose faith in the idea that philosophy could be transformed into an exact science if only the right methodology were found. They have also tended to lose faith in the idea that there is, or even should be, a distinctively philosophical mode of argument. Accordingly they are prepared to argue in any way that seems appropriate to the subject-matter, and see no reason for committing themselves in advance to a

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[1]Ved Mehta, Fly and the Fly-Bottle, p.75.

specific type of methodology. And since the subject-matter itself is no longer determined by preconceived ideas of what may count as a philosophical argument they have tended to broaden rather than reduce the scope of their enquiries.

In the end, this relatively informal approach may prove more rewarding than those earlier attempts to transform philosophy into a highly specialized and disciplined study. Nevertheless, it has yet to be shown that those attempts were wrong in principle. In other words, no overwhelming reason has yet been found for saying that inconclusiveness is the inevitable fate of all distinctively philosophical (i.e. non-mathematical and non-empirical) modes of argument. On the other hand, seemingly powerful arguments have been adduced for saying that Kant's philosophical method, at least, is a non-starter, and that a priori reasoning on matters of fact cannot conceivably lead to conclusions which are absolutely indubitable. The purpose of this thesis is to argue against such a position; to show that a method of argument markedly similar to Kant's can, in some sense, be made to yield conclusions which are both indubitable and factual.