

CHAPTER I

METAPHYSICAL PRELIMINARIES

“That the mind of man will ever once for all give up metaphysical inquiries is as little to be expected as that we shall sometime stop breathing altogether in order not to be always breathing impure air.” So true is this assertion of Kant¹ that, although I regard the ethical thesis to be set forth as completely detachable from every metaphysical doctrine, I find it desirable to begin by a general statement of my metaphysical position in order to leave no ambiguity as to any lurking assumptions in the reasoning. For although ethics has to be constituted as an independent doctrine, there are certain relations of congruity between general positions regarding the foundations of ethics and of metaphysics. A modification in the traditionally empirical direction of English thought, bringing it nearer to philosophical rationalism, is likely to be simultaneous in all the philosophical sciences, and not limited to one. The modification of this kind which I agree with others in thinking necessary in metaphysics can be very briefly stated; and the statement of it will have the advantage of showing that the modification

¹ *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können*, Anhang.

2 METAPHYSICAL PRELIMINARIES [CH.

in ethics is not an incongruous patch, but organically connected with a systematic readjustment. Further, at the end of the present essay, I shall have to point out that the ethical thesis suggests a certain metaphysical conclusion. For this reason, even if there were no other, a brief statement of metaphysical doctrine in so far as it is undetermined by ethics must come at the beginning. Thus it will be made clear exactly how the two philosophical doctrines are interrelated.

The preliminary statement of metaphysical positions can be limited to theory of knowledge. First, what is the meaning of the propositions we make about existences? Philosophers agree in recognising the existence of minds as apparent unities to which perceptions are referred, and of the external world as an apparent order scientifically calculable because it goes on in accordance with what is called the "uniformity of nature." But what is the method by which minds are to know about nature and about themselves? The antithetic views are those that have taken for their watchwords Reason and Experience. The philosophic Rationalist, if he is consistent, denies the name of science to the collections of facts and empirical generalisations which in the study of nature precede deductions made from principles. Of course experience is not on this view neglected; it admittedly furnishes the problems; and admittedly deductions from principles are shown to be wrong if the experience to which they refer does not confirm them. Still, reason with its first principles is predominant; and the sciences that have in them most of the matter of experience and least of the form of reason are in the lowest place. Rationalism in this sense, in spite of differences of relative

I] METAPHYSICAL PRELIMINARIES 3

stress in the schools of antiquity as in later schools, may be said to have predominated in the ancient classical conception of science. A change that can only be called revolutionary, both as regards the sciences of nature and man, was brought into the notion of the general method to be followed in seeking truth, by what has come to be known as the English school of philosophy. The line of thinkers of which the great names are Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Mill and Spencer, placed a stress on experience that had never been systematically placed before¹. The general position stated by Bacon was that in all our investigations we must above all take care to avoid importing the ideas of our own minds into nature. Only if we set ourselves to determine by all devices what happens in all circumstances may we hope at last to arrive at the true law of events and so to rule nature by obeying. A mark of "historical sense" in Bacon is that he detected a certain resemblance as regards method between the pre-Hellenic science of the ancient East, with its empiricism and its application to works of utility, and the aim that he was himself setting before the modern world². The formal logic and deductive mathematics of the Greeks, which were the inspiration of their

¹ By no one has this been more decisively accepted than by Comte, who in theory of knowledge is to be classed wholly with the Experimentalists. This in part explains his especially powerful influence in England.

² Cf. Comte, *Système de Politique Positive*, i. p. 429; "Quelque éminent que soit enfin devenu l'esprit positif, il ne doit jamais oublier qu'il émana partout de l'activité pratique, substituant graduellement l'étude des lois à celle des causes. Le principe universel de l'invariabilité des relations naturelles, sur lequel repose toute notre rationalité, est une acquisition essentiellement empirique." The principles themselves of mathematics Comte held to be empirical in basis.

4 METAPHYSICAL PRELIMINARIES [CH.

philosophical rationalism, he was inclined to depreciate; disagreeing in the latter point with the Continental innovators who were his contemporaries. For, while Descartes was quite at one with Bacon in depreciating the logic of the mediaeval schools, with its basis in the Aristotelian formal logic, his hope was especially in the application of mathematical method. For the rest he was far from ignoring experience; and his practical aims had much in common with Bacon's, as may be seen by looking into his prefaces. He and the other leading Continental thinkers had also a perception that something new was coming from English thought. Yet the fundamental difference remains. For Descartes as for his great successors Spinoza and Leibniz, the test of truth is finally clearness in the principles and evidence in the reasonings. It was through the English mind that the distinctive spirit of modern experimental science first found expression in philosophy.

We are now, it seems to me, at the end of the period characterised by this division as regards method. It has several well-marked stages, of which the chief can easily be passed in review. For theory of knowledge, considered by itself and no longer as a direct means of approach to actual science, Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* first definitely set the method of experiential, or "historical," inquiry into what we can know, against Descartes' statement of rational principles in the form of "innate ideas." The great importance of this was that it fixed for the future the English method of approach to philosophical problems through psychology. Locke, however, partly misapprehended Descartes' meaning; for Descartes did not suppose his

I] METAPHYSICAL PRELIMINARIES 5

“innate ideas” to be principles that were simply there once for all and could be discovered by itself in every human mind without trouble. It might sometimes appear as if he meant this; but he said himself on occasion that the innate ideas are only present potentially and need experience to develop them; and Leibniz, in his *Nouveaux Essais sur l'Entendement Humain*, expressly defended the Cartesian rationalism in that sense while making many concessions to Locke. The next important phase on the rationalist side was when Kant again restated the position, with new developments of the highest reach philosophically, in relation to the deduction of the ultimate consequences of experientialism by Hume on the basis of Locke and Locke's successor Berkeley. Ever since, the whole question of “theory of knowledge” has centred in Kant. Kant's general position being that certain rational principles, applied by the mind to experience, are necessary to constitute experience yet not derivable from it, whence they are called in his terminology *a priori* or “transcendental,” these terms have since attached themselves to the rationalist view in philosophy; all the older forms of that view having yielded to Kantianism. For in fact Kant incorporated much from the thinkers who represented the opposite direction. His “transcendental” principles, he explained, though not derivable from experience, have no proper application beyond its limits. Thus the next great thinkers on the experientialist side, Comte and Mill, always spoke of him with respect, though their work was little affected by him; and Spencer, with hardly any direct knowledge of Kant, made spontaneous approaches to a theory of knowledge which included *a priori* forms. At the same

6 METAPHYSICAL PRELIMINARIES [CH.

time, Kant's disciples or successors both in France and in England succeeded in keeping the problems he had raised well before the minds of philosophers. The problems were never set at rest; and yet, somehow, we find that we are in a new phase. The oppositions are different. We are no longer distinctively Empiricists or Rationalists, but perhaps (for the present) Intellectualists or Volitionalists. And yet we are not very clear as to how it has come about, or where exactly we stand as regards the older controversies. For philosophy, which at least aspires to be self-conscious, this is not a satisfactory state of things. It seems desirable, if possible, that we should know our own minds. As I am not acquainted with any recent works that put the points more clearly than Mr Bertrand Russell's smaller and larger volumes, *The Problems of Philosophy* and *Our Knowledge of the External World as a Field for Scientific Method in Philosophy*, I shall try to define my own positions in relation to his.

First, I perfectly agree that "Logical knowledge is not derivable from experience alone, and the empiricist's philosophy can therefore not be accepted in its entirety¹." "There are propositions known *a priori*, and among them are the propositions of logic and pure mathematics, as well as the fundamental propositions of ethics²." Soon, indeed, I come to a difference; and this is far-reaching, being a subtlety that seems to mark the beginning of divergence between the complete idealists and those who remain in some sense realists. To develop the difference,

¹ *Our Knowledge of the External World*, p. 37.

² *The Problems of Philosophy*, p. 125. I give the end of the sentence as well as the rest, though it is of course irrelevant at the present stage. This also I myself accept, as will be seen later.

I] METAPHYSICAL PRELIMINARIES 7

however, will make clear the element of underlying agreement: for it does not affect the ratio between the factors of reason and experience in knowledge.

My most important difference on logic is that I regard the laws of formal logic as laws of thought, not of things. Here I follow Kant, who held them to be simply the principles of "analytic judgments"; that is, judgments that only make explicit what was before implicit, but do not add new knowledge, like the "synthetic judgments" (*a priori* or *a posteriori*) of mathematics and natural science. Yet I quite agree with Mr Russell when he points out that they are not psychological laws, that is, laws of our actual thinking. "What is important," Mr Russell says, "is not the fact that we think in accordance with these laws, but the fact that things behave in accordance with them, the fact that when we think in accordance with them we think *truly*¹." "Thus the law of contradiction is about things, and not merely about thoughts; and although belief in the law of contradiction is a thought, the law of contradiction itself is not a thought, but a fact concerning the things in the world. If this, which we believe when we believe the law of contradiction, were not true of the things in the world, the fact that we were compelled to *think* it true would not save the law of contradiction from being false; and this shows that the law is not a law of *thought*²." To this I reply that certainly the law is not a law of thought merely as intellection (to use a term suggested by Croom Robertson). The establishment of the law belongs to metaphysics, not to psychology. It is a law of valid thought, not of

¹ *The Problems of Philosophy*, p. 113.

² *Ibid.*, p. 138.

8 METAPHYSICAL PRELIMINARIES [CH.

thought as it is ascertained to take place. At the same time it is a law of analytic thought merely, and can reveal to us nothing that was not already contained in some "synthetic judgment," *a priori* or *a posteriori* as the case may be. If we have said that a thing momentarily existed, we must not deny that it momentarily existed; if we have said that it lasted such and such a time, similarly we must not deny this; but by the mere law of contradiction we cannot pass from the assertion of momentary existence to the denial that the existence was only for the moment. Yet, while it is not a law about things, it may be called a law of valid thought about things. What we need in order to make use of it is to furnish ourselves with some true general assertion or assertions of material import. Such assertions, I agree with Mr Russell, are to be found in the fundamental propositions of mathematics and in the law of causation. These are, in Kantian language, "synthetic," not merely "analytic."

Are they *a priori*, and, if so, in what sense? About the distinctive mathematical judgments, on which the existence of mathematics as a science depends, Kant's answer, I hold, is right: they are synthetic judgments *a priori*. Whatever may remain to be said about them psychologically is subordinate and does not affect the philosophical position, that their truth as laws is immediately evident in the construction itself by which the intellect brings them to light. The method of establishing their validity is not, as in the natural sciences, repetition of observations or experiments, but mental constructions within the universal forms of perception, viz., time and space. For their application to things,

I] METAPHYSICAL PRELIMINARIES 9

however, further general propositions are necessary. Of these the most typical is the law of causation.

On the ground of pure experience Hume seemed to have reduced the relation of cause and effect to an ultimately irrational expectation that the future will resemble the past. Hume himself of course believed in natural causation as firmly as any one; witness his classical statement of determinism alike for mind and things, and more especially his "Essay on Miracles." Kant therefore quite rightly treated his sceptical result as a question, not a solution. His answer in general terms is that anything we can call "nature" or "experience" would not be possible without a certain constitution of mind not derived from experience. Given experiential data, and sequences of events among them, we "make" a particular sequence, which presents itself at first as mere sequence, "necessary," by adding something from the mind. That is to say, we impose the relation of cause and effect on mere "subjective" data of sense; and thus for what would otherwise be no more than a play of dreaming phantasy we substitute a system that can be called in the proper sense nature as the object of science.

The unsatisfactory point in this answer was that it seemed to make the relation arbitrary in a way in which it obviously is not. We cannot help thinking of relations of cause and effect as "given" in the sense that the mind has to find them out and conform to them. Is this reconcilable with the validity of Kant's answer, that the relation of cause and effect is a "category" of the mind imposed on the sensible data? Difficult as the reconciliation may seem at first sight, I think it can be attained

10 METAPHYSICAL PRELIMINARIES [CH.

by a further evacuation of the *a priori* forms of Kant,—but an evacuation that is not destruction.

We must not suppose the mind equipped with a set of ready-made forms which it imposes on the flux of feeling. It is not true that we make a particular sequence, which is at first mere sequence, necessary by imposing a “category of the understanding,” and thus constitute a particular relation of a cause to an effect. But also, it is not true that the order of perception simply as given imposes the relation of cause and effect on the mind. In rational science, the movement of thought is this. The mind, having formed an ideal of knowledge by exercise in logic and mathematics—which need not have gone very far—seeks to impose its own ideal of necessary connexion on that which it finds in perception. Already in perception certain uniformities have been established empirically which suggest the possibility of realising this ideal; but most perception goes on without any apparent stringency of connexion, as if things could simply come into and go out of existence, or as if, in Hume’s phrase, anything could cause anything. To make a truly “objective” nature, as Kant said, the mind has to import something. What it does is to assert, and then to seek for, relations analogous to those of logical and mathematical necessity. For the logician, the “consequent” in a hypothetical argument necessarily follows from the “ground.” Then in nature one event must follow from another with similar rigorous necessity. And in fact, not by applying ready-made forms that we have tabulated, but by persistently trying, with a generalised ideal of necessity in the mind, it is found that nature can more and more be interpreted as a system of necessary