

Pathways to Philosophy

PROGRAM F: METAPHYSICS

The Ultimate Nature of Things: Unit Two

(a) the reality principle

23. THE reality principle is a term that comes originally from Freud. An essential part of the process of human development, he argued, was the child's recognition of the distinction between the way things are in reality and the way one would like them to be. The idea in itself, however, is purely logical. The principle is no more valid for humans than it would be for intelligent asexual beings who were born as fully-fledged adults and nourished on pure fresh air. Such alien beings would, if one takes the Freudian view, have a psychology totally different from our own. Whether the reality principle could acquire the importance for them that it has for us is a question about which one can only speculate. What is not a matter for speculation is that it is through the desire to gain a proper appreciation of the significance of the reality principle that one is drawn to undertake metaphysical inquiry.

24. Metaphysics seeks 'nothing less than a definition of reality' (Unit 1/§4: hereafter, '1/4'). The major question that we shall be concerned with in this course is just what the reality principle entails in respect of the task of defining reality. Considered purely on its own, the principle is impotent to generate a single world of metaphysics. It is rather to be thought of as a powerful weapon of criticism of what one might term the 'proto-theories' that we are tempted to formulate when we first become aware of reality itself – or the world 'as such' or 'as a whole' – as a problem. To carry out our metaphysical inquiry we must first allow ourselves to succumb to the temptations, letting our minds be captivated by the philosophical illusions concerning the nature of reality and its relation to mind, before subjecting

those illusions to sustained criticism. The hope is that an adequate definition of reality – our account of the ultimate nature of things – will emerge as a consequence of that critical process.

25. The simplest formulation of the reality principle is: there is such a thing as reality. But that is not much help given that reality is the very thing we are seeking to define! In the introduction, we emphasised the infant's discovery of the difference – apparent as such, of course, only to the philosophical observer – between its beliefs and its desires; and also the closely related distinction between perceiving and imagining. It is virtually impossible for us, who have long ago safely negotiated that stage, to conceive of a form of thinking where these distinctions are erased. Dreaming might seem to provide a model, but even in a dream there is something experienced as real, as given, whatever extra powers the dreamer appears miraculously to acquire. Freud speaks of the infantile fantasy of the 'omnipotence of the ego'. Yet this idea really only makes sense against a background of a given world or body of facts which one believes oneself to have unlimited powers of altering according to one's desires. (Suppose in my god-like state that I do something I later come to regret: even allowing unlimited powers for making amends for what I have done, I cannot go back into the past and undo my actions.)

26. Perhaps we are wrong to talk of infantile thinking. 'Consciousness' would be a better, more neutral term. Thinking implies believing or judging things to be thus-and-so. Such is its aim, which thinking can either succeed in attaining or fail, depending upon whether or not things are in fact thus-and-so. That in turn implies the existence of norms of judgement. There is such a thing as judging *incorrectly*, going against or in conflict with the relevant norms. – The infant thought 'breast' and no breast was there (1/15): that was its error, not its mother's.

27. Here then is a second formulation of the reality principle: thoughts can sometimes be wrong. But this still needs sharpening before it can be put to work. Given that thinking is subject to norms, it remains to be settled just what it is that the norms stand in relation to, their foundation or source. Or, rather, what we are seeking to discover is just how the norms of thinking are

able to generate the peculiar, double-aspected relation of 'possibly correct/possibly incorrect' between thoughts and – what?

28. Looking at the proto-typical case, it is tempting to say, simply 'physical reality'. The model is something like this. Our cognitive map helps us negotiate our way around a world of physical objects; when we get the map wrong, we are liable to trip over, or bump our heads, or fall into a hole in the ground. But that naive pragmatic response ignores the role of language, and its capacity to postpone indefinitely the practical consequences of wrong thinking. (There are still people today who believe that the earth is flat.) The question of the relation of the reality principle to language will be of major importance to us in our investigation.

29. Meanwhile, we have to remain content with a formal account. Call the kind of correctness that consists in thinking X when X obtains, or no-X when no-X obtains, 'thinking something true'. Call the kind of incorrectness that consists in thinking X when no-X obtains, or no-X when X obtains, 'thinking something false'. (The childishly simple definition of truth comes originally from Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1011b 23.) Then as a third formulation of the reality principle we can say: it is possible for thoughts – that is to say, beliefs or judgements – to *be false*.

30. Now we have our critical weapon; how are we going to use it? The reality principle has not arisen in response to any particular philosophical problem. It has been handed to us, as it were, on a plate. We have merely refined it a little. – According to a popular myth (it may even be true), the very first thing the samurai warrior did when he took delivery of a new sword was slaughter a peasant; just in order to test its sharpness. Young or old, healthy or sick, it made no difference. Now you might think that that is needlessly cruel. surely a stout bundle of straw would be just as effective. – The problem is the same as the use of straw men in philosophy: a theory that doesn't even look as if it stands a chance of success is useless, even as fodder to practice on.

31. For a suitable victim, I have chosen a philosophical conceit lifted from Jostein Gaarder's book *Sophie's World*. I shall make up my own version of the story. – I find to my horror that I am not whom I thought I was, the son of an Austrian father and an English mother, born in London forty-five years ago, but a character in a novel that someone else is writing. In despair and rage at

this discovery, I make various attempts to spoil the story, by doing things deliberately against what I perceive to be the author's intentions, but every plan of action I undertake, to my complete surprise, turns out to be cleverly incorporated into the plot. All I am free to do is argue with the author about how the story ought to go. But can we argue about matters of fact? Is it possible for me – or for the author, for that matter – to have false beliefs about the world depicted in the novel? Is the situation we have just described a coherent description of a reality, a world?

32. In order to make our thought experiment work, we need to simplify. We also need the help of a little bit of ordinary magic. First, however, we have to say just what kind of entity 'the novel' is in this case. It would be difficult, even with the help of magic, to attribute self-consciousness to words in a dusty book lying on a shelf somewhere. Supposing an evil demon brought into existence a soul whose thoughts corresponded to those of the main protagonist, the soul would still be logically capable of surviving even if all copies of the book were destroyed. In any case, if the novel is finished, there is nothing to argue about. So let the novel-in-progress consist in a running monologue in the author's mind. As the author recounts the story silently to herself, she is surprised to hear a voice rudely interrupting her: 'I don't like that!' She looks up, but there's no-one there. As the voice continues with its remonstrations, she discovers that she is the only one who can hear it. – And so on.

33. The voice is mine. But how did I get to discover my true identity? There are various ways that could happen. To keep things simple, let us say that one day as I lie awake in the early hours after a hard night's drinking session I hear the voice in my head of a woman debating with herself how to continue the novel, and trying out different continuations of the plot. Thereafter, all I need to do to communicate with the author is think certain thoughts and mean *her*.

34. There is no great difficulty in establishing the reality of the novelistic world for the author. There is a perfectly good sense in which one can have false beliefs about one's past thoughts; it follows *a fortiori* – from the stronger premiss – that one may have false beliefs about events recounted in a story one has been telling to oneself. Bringing the main protagonist somehow to

life, let us say 'by magic' – the philosophical problems that arise with that idea need not delay us – surely cannot make the thought-world of the novel less real, less of a target for true or false beliefs.

35. The question is more problematic in my own case. If the novel and its author are merely figments of a bad continuing hallucination I am suffering from then, provided that I have not fallen into complete psychotic withdrawal, I am still capable of making judgements about the real world I inhabit. Then my reports of my hallucinations would have exactly the same status as the novelist's account of her thoughts. The contents of my hallucinations, just like the contents of the novelist's thoughts, are objective, datable events in the real world. However, if things really are as we have described, then serious difficulties arise. Say, according to the novel I was drinking beer in the pub with Ian and Dave on that fateful night. Later, tossing and turning in my bed, I seem to remember that Sonya was there too. Is that a false belief? The problem is finding a way in which my belief could be *corrigible*. Suppose the woman's voice tells me that Sonya wasn't there: 'You split up the day before, don't you remember?' – I refuse to believe a word of it. She was there, wearing a tartan skirt and the green mohair sweater I bought for her last Christmas. 'She couldn't have been wearing that, because she gave it to Oxfam after it shrunk in the wash.' – Then it was another green mohair sweater. 'Look, she was at her sister's twenty-first birthday party. What's more, you were supposed to go with her!' – Sonya doesn't have a sister, she never had a sister. – And so on.

36. I can have false beliefs about a particular subject matter – a putative 'world' or 'reality' – *only if* there are possible circumstances that would lead me to override my conviction that I was right, other than simply a change in my convictions, or a clash with other, similar convictions. Applied to memory judgements, the reality principle requires a sensitivity to objective evidence concerning the past, evidence whose validity does not depend on one's memory. In the case of the author remembering how the novel has gone so far – or the drunk remembering the hallucinations he had yesterday while sitting at the bar – all it takes is a few scribbles in a notebook, or the testimony of someone who was there at the time, to set the record straight. But there is no such recourse for me in my imaginary predicament. If the author points out that I have contradicted myself, then I will alter my version of events to

whatever subjectively feels right to me. Let the author prove again and again her god-like powers of knowledge and prediction, I need not accept her authority on any point that goes against my own version of events.

37. The reason is simple. Even if we make it part of our hypothesis that the on-going story cannot be altered – ‘The moving finger writes; and, having writ, moves on’ – that is not something I am in a position to accept. I cannot trust the author’s assurances; I cannot trust the ‘evidence’; the only thing I can rely on is my own actual experiences and memory judgements, and whatever inferences I am able to draw from them. Thus, even if in the story I were to discover what purported to be a long-forgotten diary in my handwriting with my name on it that contradicted my version of events, that would have no effect on my beliefs, for as far as I am concerned the author has the power to alter the contents of the diary at will. – In that case, the so-called ‘world’ of the novel is no reality for me, and nothing I supposedly ‘think’ counts as a belief or a judgement, true or false: for ‘whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can’t talk about “right”’ (Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* §258).

38. The series of remarks from which the above quotation is taken has come to be known as the ‘private language argument’. (Wittgenstein, it should be noted, never used such a phrase, nor, it seems, did he ever refer to the argument as a discrete component separable from the remainder of his philosophy.) Controversy over the argument has, up until relatively recently, generated production of philosophical articles in an industrial scale, and kept a number of academic philosophers in full-time employment. What many have missed, however, is that there is no such thing as *the* private language argument, but only an open-ended dialectic in which Wittgenstein, in effect, tries and rejects different ways of sneaking past the reality principle, all centring on the notion of ‘following a rule’. But he never goes so far as to state what it is to follow a rule, other than in nominal terms.

39. The reality principle, is, as we stressed earlier, merely a tool of criticism. It is not a metaphysical theory about the nature of reality. When we come to investigate the assumptions behind Kant’s ‘Refutation of Idealism’ in the second edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, it will become apparent that there are serious problems to be overcome simply in deciding where and how the

reality principle is actually to be applied, the conditions under which false belief is in fact possible. Not all metaphysical theories satisfy those conditions, but those that do, do so in a variety of ways. – We shall be particularly concerned with how immaterialism and anti-realism (1/20–1) satisfy those conditions.

40. Meanwhile, let us tidy up one loose end from our earlier discussion. The amusing fantasy suggested by *Sophie's World*, while it has served us well as practice material, does contain one serious philosophic moral. Theories about reality which base the possibility of false judgement ultimately on the authority of a divine being face the problem of how an omnipotent being, capable of altering the world at will, can have authority in my eyes. The imagined novelist in our thought experiment has no such authority. One is put in mind of Cartesian metaphysics. Far from merely guaranteeing the existence of an external world, it seems Descartes' 'proof', in the 'Third Meditation', that the author of his own being is a veracious god and not an evil demon, is required to underpin the very possibility of objective thought as such. If all that exists is me and the evil demon, then nothing 'exists', nothing 'is the case', for there is no subject matter for objective judgement, no difference between truth and falsity. If the evil demon is to be accepted as a real possibility, then Descartes' original, indispensable axiom 'I think' loses its indubitable status, and with its loss, the whole Cartesian edifice falls.

(b) truth and existence

41. What would be a definition of reality? The idea, at first sight, seems almost a contradiction in terms. One defines a word, or a concept; or, in a different but related sense, an area on a map. A definition limits, cuts down to size. It captures an aspect of the whole that we happen to be interested in. How could a definition ever hope to capture simply *everything*?

42. Imagine that the 'aspect of the whole' that interests you at this moment is a certain canine aspect: a particular individual exemplifying the concept 'dog'. We are not interested in the individual as an example of an animal, nor a mammal, nor, for that matter, a poodle, nor even a black-and-white seven year old king poodle. Your neighbour's dog has a loud bark that wakes you up regularly at five o' clock in the morning. It makes the noise it does because it's a dog, and dogs bark; not because it's an animal, or a mammal, or a king poodle (there's nothing special about a king poodle's bark). But suppose as a result of this you start to take a metaphysical interest in the poor pooch. You have become intensely interested in its – reality. What concerns you is the fact that it *exists*. Well, it seems one doesn't need philosophy to tell the difference between the poodle sitting in the front pooch yapping away, or lying peacefully six feet under the turf.

43. On second thoughts, that is far from clear. Unless scientists invent an immortality machine, each of us, at some time in the not-too-distant future, is going to die. We shall cease to *exist*, cease to be part of the real world. Most persons, as they go about their daily lives, prefer not to dwell on that fearful prospect. Meanwhile, philosophers from Epicurus onwards have argued that fear is quite the wrong emotion to have towards the mystery of our own finitude. But if we can begin to feel a sense of awe at the contingency of our existence – a sheer matter of fact, no different from the existence of a dog, or my next door neighbour, or the President of the United States – then we may also feel intimations of the philosophical depths beneath the mundane, everyday fact that human beings are born, live for a while, and then die. If we start with our own case, perhaps we can gain a sense of the urgency of the question, What is reality?

44. The reality principle – 'It is possible for thoughts to be false' – provides a formal answer to that question, but not the answer we are ultimately seeking.

The principle yields a *nominal* definition of reality. It does not tell us what reality *is*, in its essence, but merely identifies the concept 'reality'. It does so by stating the criterion that any subject matter for belief or judgement, any putative 'object' or 'world' or 'realm of discourse' must satisfy in order to be an object, a world, a realm of discourse; that is to say, to be part of reality itself, the world as such.

45. What the metaphysician seeks is a substantial or *real* definition of reality: an all-encompassing theory that accounts, directly or indirectly, for all possible 'subject matters', all and everything that satisfies the reality principle, excluding all and everything that does not. (What we have just said is, of course, strictly nonsensical, because that which fails to satisfy the reality principle cannot be *meaningfully* described, or named, or thought of in any way. – The story about the character in the novel who became 'alive' only *seems* to make sense.) We are seeking to draw a map that delineates all that can, logically, be real for us in some sense or other, a map not of our little earth, nor even the whole universe, but of reality itself.

46. That is a rather large idea to take in at one gulp. So let us approach it obliquely. Suppose, just for the sake of argument, that one were to grant everything to the philosophical sceptic. Our intricate network of beliefs, together with its basis in the information continually available to our senses, is but a vast pretension to knowledge. Even if we were to thus distance ourselves in thought from the everyday world, it remains beyond doubt that some objects exist, just as it is beyond doubt that some thoughts are true; only we should no longer claim the right to say with any degree of assurance *which ones*. If this desk, or these hands, do not exist, then surely something else does, something perhaps whose nature I could not even begin to comprehend. If my most fundamental beliefs about my world are merely an illusion, that can only be because other things are true. With our epistemology thus impoverished, however, there would yet remain scope for metaphysics. The question what it is, in general, for an object to exist, or the question what it is for a thought or statement to be true arise equally for sceptic and non-sceptic alike.

47. An informative, global account of the nature of existence, or the nature of truth would suffice for a definition of reality in our sense. Whether such a

definition could take any other, radically different form is a moot question. If the nineteenth-century idealist metaphysician F.H. Bradley is to be believed, there are no objects or truths as such; these are merely 'appearances', makeshift constructs of human thought as it artificially dismembers the Absolute into the familiar things and facts of our everyday world. – Still, it would not involve too great a distortion of Bradley's metaphysic to describe it as a theory of truth, according to which a statement is true if, and only if, it coheres with the one Absolute Truth. – It is indeed hard to imagine a definition of reality that could not be interpreted either as an account of existence or of truth, or both.

48. One may concede that the idea of a real, as opposed to nominal definition of reality faces considerable scepticism. Existence and truth, we are told, are indefinable. Hostility may be felt towards the very idea that the philosopher could ever have anything genuinely informative to say about absolutely everything that exists or all that is the case. How are we to meet these points?

49. We may legitimately ignore criticism that stems from the principled belief that piecemeal analysis is the only legitimate approach to philosophical problems. In the face of such dogmatism, one is entitled to assert the equally dogmatic view that philosophical analysis as such – getting clear about the meanings of words or concepts – has only a very minor role to play, and ideally ought to be capable of being dispensed with altogether. A stand off. (Pushing the alternative view to the limits would, admittedly, put a large number of academic philosophers on the dole queues. However, such necessary pruning would, in the long run, arguably produce a far richer, more valuable crop.)

50. If we put superficial objections to one side, there is a serious logical difficulty with the very idea of defining existence or truth. To begin with, let us consider existence. Asserting any predicate of something – saying *A is F* – logically implies that the thing, *A*, in some sense exists. (To avoid misunderstanding, one would say that Sherlock Holmes does exist – as a character in fiction, and also in the hearts of those who have read and loved the Arthur Conan-Doyle stories. There are many ways of existing; living and breathing is but one of them.) Suppose now that we have our theory of

existence. The theory tells us something substantial and informative about what it is for any arbitrarily selected object A to exist. Call this the existence predicate E. Now there can be little objection to formally defining a predicate E as naming that property possessed by every object. The problem is that if E is genuinely informative it seems it must be logically possible that some object B – that is to say, some *existing* B – lacks E. In which case, on pain of logical contradiction, E cannot be the existence predicate after all!

51. Let us make that clearer with the aid of an example. Here is a simple-minded theory of existence. To exist is, by definition, to be causally dependent on the Big Bang. All that exists (at some time or other) traces back to that one primary physical event. If there hadn't been the Big Bang there would have been, literally, nothing. Because there was the Big Bang, there is the earth, the author of these lines, the reader, Arthur Conan-Doyle, his novels, and a character in those novels called Sherlock Holmes. What could be more straightforward than that?

52. One has no wish to question the credentials of the Big Bang theory as a scientific theory or hypothesis. Our concern is with the theory put forward as a theory of existence, a definition of reality. As such, it is woefully inadequate. Leaving aside the question of the existence of so-called 'abstract' objects like sets or numbers – which according to a widely held interpretation of mathematical statements would still exist even in a world where there was, physically, nothing – it is surely logically possible that if the Big Bang hadn't happened, some object might have just popped into existence for a short while (with a little 'bang'). Say, a black-and-white king poodle. Or, if the reader finds that hard to swallow, the poodle along with the earth and solar system. (That is merely a concession to the imagination; it makes absolutely no logical difference.) – In other words, to be causally dependent on the Big Bang cannot *be*, by definition, what it is for an object to exist.

53. A parallel problem arises with the attempt to give an informative definition of truth. just as we can formally identify the existence predicate E as the property possessed by all objects, so we may define the truth predicate T or 'is true' by the necessary equivalence of any statement P with the statement that 'P' is T. If snow is white, then 'Snow is white' is T(rue); if 'Snow is white' is T(rue), then snow is white. Now a simple theory of truth

might be, say, that a thought or statement is true if and only if it has been written down by the recording angel. It is logically possible – if, perhaps, a little less likely than the Big Bang – that the statement we have just made about the recording angel is factually correct, i.e. true (and the recording angel knows it to be so). The problem is that we can conceive of the possibility that there could arise truths that the recording angel, through laziness or inattention, fails to record. Defining a predicate T as ‘something the recording angel has written down’ is in itself a quite legitimate thing to do. But then T cannot, by the above necessary equivalence, be the truth predicate, because it is not the case that for any statement P, P can always and under any possible circumstances be replaced by ‘P’ is T.

54. It is tempting to diagnose the failure of our two simple-minded theories of existence and truth as arising from the fact that they are merely ‘mundane’, not ‘metaphysical’ (cf. 1/8). Each relates one hypothesised part of reality (the Big Bang, the recording angel) to another part (objects coming into existence after the Big Bang, truths recorded by the recording angel). But that defect can be put right. Suppose that we had (this is admittedly a big ‘suppose’) an argument for the existence of God, qua ‘unique necessary being’. The necessary being is infinitely perfect, because existence follows as a matter of logical necessity only from the definition of an object as infinitely perfect. It follows that God is not only omnibenevolent but also omnipotent and omniscient. Being omnipotent, he is quite capable of ensuring that no objects ‘pop into’ existence without his say so. Being omniscient, he is *incapable* (now there’s a paradox) of lapsing into inattention about any detail of his creation, however insignificant. Is that not sufficient to bolster up our two simple theories of existence and truth? To exist is either to be God, or to have been created by God. To be true is to be known by God to be true.

55. One thing we can say this time is that at least our revised theories of existence and truth are not straw men. They undoubtedly provide (or would do, if they were true) substantial information about what it is to exist or to be true. In fact, however, it turns out that the theories based on the existence of a necessary being are vulnerable to a more sophisticated version of the objections we raised against the original, ‘simple-minded’ theories. Let us grant the existence of a God, as defined. Such a being is certainly capable of ensuring that no object accidentally pops into existence, and that no truth

escapes his attention. But to assert that he must necessarily *choose* to exercise these capacities at all times is a completely unwarranted assumption on our part. Who are we to second guess God's omnibenevolent intentions? Is it less intelligible that the deity should ease back and relax his grip on the world a little (for reasons we might never comprehend) than that he should create a world in which there is wickedness, war, hunger, disease, earthquakes, floods – the standard fare served up by theologians and philosophers under the heading, 'the Problem of Evil'?

56. One might be tempted to conclude on the basis of these examples that a 'real' definition of reality – an account of the nature of existence or of truth – is impossible. Arguing from examples is always a hazardous business in philosophy, however. One could equally have argued the case for the viability of a theory of existence or of truth by citing as examples the immaterialist theory of what it is for an object to exist, or the anti-realist theory of what it is for a thought or statement to be true (1/20–1). The problem is, of course, if we are seeking eventually to refute these two metaphysical theories, what use are they to us as examples of the kind of theory we are looking for? It is not as if the refutation of a theory of existence or the refutation of a theory of truth automatically counts as a theory of existence or a theory of truth. There may be nothing *positive* to be extracted out of the negation.

57. At this stage, all one can do is express a strong suspicion: that informative or non-trivial accounts of the nature of existence or truth are necessarily restrictive in some way. An argument is put forward which seeks to limit the range of application of one, or the other notion. Thus, the immaterialist denies the possibility of objects existing independently of their actually being perceived. The anti-realist denies the possibility of truths that remain inaccessible to human inquiry. There is something substantial to say about existence or truth because there is something – a certain mental picture perhaps of a world outside the mind – that our ordinary, pre-philosophical understanding of existence or truth appears to permit which these theories refuse to allow.

58. All we can do in the light of these uncertainties is pursue our inquiries and see what turns up. If no acceptable theory were to emerge at the end of

this process, then we shall have no choice but to make a virtue out of necessity and accept that metaphysics can never go beyond a 'negative dialectic' (1/10). That would not relieve us of the obligation to grapple with the metaphysical attitude in every way we can, but on the contrary would render the struggle all the more urgent.

59. Alternatively, there may be some other approach to the problem of defining reality that is simply not visible to us at this early stage in the investigation. It would be futile to attempt to suggest what such a theory of the nature of reality – neither a theory of truth as such, nor simply a theory of existence – might be, for it will be a long while before we are able to assemble the tools that would make it possible even to state the theory without lapsing into self-contradiction or absurdity. – We shall just have to wait and see.