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PRÉCIS OF *THE EMPIRICAL STANCE*

What is empiricism, and what could it be? I see as central to this tradition first of all a pattern of recurrent rebellion against metaphysics, and in addition a certain aspiration for epistemology, guided by the empirical sciences as a paradigm of rational inquiry. But neither is to be narrowly conceived. The main epistemological concerns appear saliently in philosophical problems about scientific and conceptual revolutions. They appear also in the not unrelated ruptures between the traditionally religious and increasingly secular orientation of Western philosophy. Accordingly, the first and second lecture present a general empiricist philosophical stance, while the third through fifth focus on epistemology, broadly conceived.

1. AGAINST ANALYTIC METAPHYSICS

Analytic philosophy began in a series of revolts against all forms of metaphysics, especially against 19th century Idealism, while at first retaining the understanding – achieved in the Kantian and Idealist tradition – of the pitfalls of the 17th century metaphysics. But since then we have seen the rebirth and growth of metaphysics in analytic philosophy. Its realm of postulated entities includes universals, propositions, objective chance or propensity, haecceity, time slices, space–time points and substantival space–time, mereological sums, substances, and possible worlds. But it is vulnerable to the charge that it presupposes an unacknowledged philosophy of science (scientific realism). Secondly, as an enterprise it lacks any rationale that could fit accepted decision theoretic evaluations.

To explore the failures of analytic metaphysics this chapter uses a test question: *Does the world exist?* This was addressed by Aristotle, by Kant in his pre-Critical writings, and again



recently by Peter van Inwagen and by David Lewis. This provides a typical case: a subject of great initial significance but difficult to understand is in effect replaced by a simulacrum, perhaps well understood but losing that significance. Even this may be too charitable an assessment. The products of such metaphysical theorizing have the logical and grammatical form of truth-value bearing propositions, but in general lack any demonstration that they have more than this form, shared by coherent nonsense.

2. WHAT IS EMPIRICISM AND WHAT COULD IT BE?

The empiricist tradition is identifiable by ostension in the first place as a recurrent revolt against the sorts of metaphysical theorizing which

- (a) give absolute primacy to demands for explanation, and
- (b) are satisfied with explanations-by-postulate, of certain entities or aspects of the world not already evident in experience.

The empiricist critiques I see as correspondingly involving

- (a) a rejection of demands for explanation at certain crucial points, and
- (b) a strong dissatisfaction with explanations (even if called for) by postulation.

I argue that an empiricist position cannot consist in a factual claim – a dogma or doctrine – but must be a *stance*. A stance consists of a cluster of attitudes, including propositional attitudes (which may include some factual beliefs) as well as others, and especially certain intentions, commitments, and values. Secondly I submit that philosophical positions presented in the apparent form of factual claims actually are often stances, involving primarily something quite different from factual claims. As telling illustration I offer a critical analysis of materialism or physicalism, a prime example of a current philosophical position presented as a factual claim. In such cases we see striking examples of false consciousness in philosophy.

3. SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION/CONVERSION AS A PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM

Empiricists have traditionally made their main contributions, whether constructive or polemical, in the area of epistemology. The guiding example for this chapter and the next is *scientific revolution*: the putative occurrence of revolutionary changes in how the sciences have depicted nature. Hanson, Feyerabend, and most saliently Kuhn insisted that these changes genuinely involve radical conceptual transformations. By this insistence they precipitated the *question of the rationality* of such revolutionary episodes.

My response to this question is first of all that Yes, there are such changes. They are so radical that they are characterized by a remarkable historical asymmetry. From the posterior point of view, the prior can be made intelligible and the change ratified. From the prior position, however, the posterior view was absurd and the transition to it possible but incapable of justification.

Does our epistemology properly allow for this? I see that as a touchstone for any empiricist position. After all, we now endorse and even glory in those scientific revolutions. It would certainly be a paradox if our epistemology simultaneously classified the participants as seriously defective in rationality. Yet to fit any such decision to convert into, for example, our familiar decision-theoretic pattern seems at first impossible. For in that pattern the relevant parameters are the probability and value assessments possessed *prior to* the decision, which are precisely the embattled factors at that point.

This guiding example is used here first of all to advocate a turn to voluntarism with respect to belief and opinion generally, of roughly the sort introduced in William James' version of Pragmatism. Our doxastic and epistemic life is then conceived of as itself an enterprise, involving certain ineliminably subjective choices. This brings with it a permissive conception of rationality: not "what is rational is what is rationally required, mandated, justified, or obliged" but "what is rational is whatever is rationally permitted": *rationality is bridled irrationality*.

But this does not by itself suffice to answer the question about rationality of scientific revolutions. For how could a person's or community's commitment to a certain epistemic policy allow for a change in any of the parameters that identify that policy? Such a change must almost by definition constitute a breach of that commitment. Yet Pragmatist fallibilism is equally at odds with the idea that such a commitment, freely entered into, is then irrevocable. How can we allow for and describe such "higher order" choices? I draw here on Sartre's functionalist account of emotion. Whatever we put in place to characterize such a radical doxastic transition will fit Sartre's account, and we should accordingly refer to it as *emotion*, in a very general sense.

4. *EXPERIENCE*: (EPISTEMIC) LIFE WITHOUT FOUNDATIONS

Voluntarism in epistemology helps but does not meet the full challenge of revolutionary changes. Hence this chapter focuses on the posterior analysis by which such a conversion is ratified and retrospectively endorsed. First, how precisely do we display our endorsed *results* (our posterior views) as rightful successors of the old? We may call this the "problem of royal succession in science". Secondly, how precisely can we understand the *transition* as having been in accord with reason?

Note first that certain credentials are required to admit a new theory as contender for the throne. It must satisfy certain criteria pertaining not only to its current successes but also to its relation to its predecessors. Crucial here is the possibility of accounting, on the basis of that new theory, for how the old could have been as successful as it was, despite its falsity.

But to fully understand and allow for such a transition, in which the participants convert to a radically different point of view, we need to develop a more nuanced account of our doxastic and epistemic life. We need to recognize the uses and value of equivocation, ambiguity, and vagueness not only in our most precise representations of nature but also in the rules that constitute an epistemic policy. As paradigm example Feyerabend used the Protestants' *Sola Scriptura* rule. For the

sciences I offer for this role Newton's *Fourth Rule of Philosophizing*. These rules play a dual role: in one way they tend to maintain the established theories despite their underdetermination by the evidence, and in another way they offer the admissible pattern for the overthrow of an established theory. It is therefore by a process that falls properly under the rubric of practical decision making. The story of Bohm's interpretation (or rival) of quantum mechanics is displayed as illustrating this process.

To accommodate the sort of dangerous, adventurous, tumultuous epistemic life we actually lead, we need a different way to think about our language, about the opinion we express in that language, and about the assessment of how we change that opinion. The focus must be on the language-user ("pragmatic") relations rather than on the language-world ("semantic") relations.¹

5. WHAT IS SCIENCE – AND WHAT IS IT TO BE SECULAR?

Empiricism has often been closely associated with philosophical materialism and secularism. Chapter II distinguished empiricism clearly from materialism; but does empiricism, as now presented, allow for anything other than a secular orientation? In view of the intimate connections with empirical science of both the empiricist tradition and the 19th century roots of secularism, the answer might seem to lie in "science and religion" studies – currently a distinct academic region. These studies strike me as mainly irrelevant, if not altogether mistaken in intent. To answer the question we need to understand what it is to be secular, and therefore the strong historical and conceptual relationship between that orientation and the sciences.

Accordingly I discuss first of all certain salient characteristics of scientific practice, clustered together under the heading of objectification or *objectifying inquiry*. These characteristics appear to be among the actual conditions for much of the sciences' empirical success. But they do not imply the sort of completeness claims for the enterprise that are here at issue. So the characteristically secular insistence that there is nothing to

be known or learned that cannot be disclosed by such inquiry goes beyond what involvement in the sciences requires or implies.

Hence my contention that empiricists need not embrace a secular orientation. Can we also offer a more positive view of other possible orientations? To begin, there is certainly no sharp division implied in the concept *secular*. This is at best a cluster concept, only vaguely disjoint from *religious*, with both overlapping in such non-theistic religions as Zen Buddhism and in the aesthetic orientations known to us for example from the Romantics, pre-Raphaelites, and *fin de siècle* aesthetes, not to mention Kierkegaard's thoroughly Protestant contempt. But the cluster concept *religious* does seem to be, so to speak, the orthocomplement of *secular*. My attempt to provide some more positive content for my understanding of the latter draws on three existentialist theologians, Emil Fackenheim, Martin Buber, and Rudolf Bultmann.

NOTE

¹ See further Chapter Seven of my *Laws and Symmetry* and the work cited therein, and my "Putnam's Paradox: Metaphysical Realism Revamped and Evaded", *Philosophical Perspectives*, vol. 11 (Boston: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 17–42.

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