



Philosophical Fallacies

Ways of Erring in Philosophical Exposition

NICHOLAS RESCHER

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For Patrick Grim
Collaborator par excellence

PREFACE

Philosophers address large problems regarding mankind and our place in the scheme of things, difficult issues where deliberations all too easily go off track. And this is particularly so because the discipline tries to meet almost unachievable high standards in its demand for the concurrent realization of generality and precision. This renders certain various modes of error—certain fallacies of reasoning—particularly tempting. The present deliberations will endeavor to illustrate and clarify some of these.

Perhaps it was the bleakness of the yearlong isolation during the 2020–2021 pandemic that led me to contemplate the somber scene of philosophical error; thereby, resulting in this book. But be this as it may, I found the exercise instructive and hope that the reader will do so as well.

I am grateful to Estelle Burris for her patience and conscientious efforts in preparing this material for the press and to the publisher's reader for cogent constructive commentary.

Pittsburgh, PA, USA
May 2021

Nicholas Rescher

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CHAPTER 1

Error, Mistake, and Fallacy in Philosophizing

PHILOSOPHICAL ERROR

Aristotle said it well: “Man by nature desires to know.” For us, the absence of information can be almost as distressing as that of food.

Philosophizing is a purposive enterprise that addresses the “big questions” of the human condition: man’s place in the universe and the proper management of the obligations and opportunities of human life. It is a venture in rational inquiry that begins with problems and seeks solutions. And the big issues that preoccupy it relate to fundamentals of human concern, being universal in dealing with humans at large rather than particular groups thereof (farmers or doctors or Europeans or contemporaries of Shakespeare). Philosophical deliberations must have a bearing—direct or oblique—upon the key essentials of the human condition—knowledge and truth, justice and morality, beauty and goodness, and the other “big questions” about our place in the world’s scheme of things.

In philosophizing, we accordingly engage a range of issues of a scope in generality and fundamentality that removes them beyond the range of our ordinary idealizing and consciously available experience. But the more deeply we enter into the range of matters remote from the course of commonly available experience the more uniform our claims become and the more likely we are to fall into error. And these basic facts of (cognitive) life put our ventures into philosophical speculation on a shaky and problematic basis. In answering our philosophical questions, we have no

alternative but to do the best we can in the full recognition of how that it may well not be good enough. By the very nature of the enterprise, avoiding loose and fallacious thinking is of the essence.

A fallacy is a mode of failure in substantiative reasoning. When an argument for a conclusion is fallacious, this truth shows and accounts for its ineffectiveness. And what is crucial here is not the truth of the conclusion but the cogency of its supportive argumentation.

When someone falls into error, some crucial questions arise: (1) why did the individual fall into error?; what sort of motivation was at work?; what led the agent to go wrong? This first is a matter of the MOTIVE or RATIONALE for erring—if accounting or the occurrence of error. But there is also another question, (2) What sort of error did the individual fall into?; what sort of error is at issue?; what is wrong with what the agent did? This is a matter of the MODE or MANNER of erring. Fallacy—our present concern—has to do (only) with the second issue. This distinction between motive and mode is critical. The *manner* of error may be a misspelling or a slip of the tongue or a miscalculation. The motive for its occurrence may be confusion or over-haste. These latter are explanations for the error, and this is for the occurrence of fallacies. They are not themselves fallacies. They explain how it is that the agent comes to commit a fallacy, but are not themselves the particular sorts of error is at issue with the commitment of the fallacy.

Committing a fallacy is always a flaw in philosophical exposition. But not all flaws are fallacies. Leaving significant matters hanging as unseparated loose ends in one's position is a significant flaw—consequentially a defect in philosophizing. But it is not a fallacy. For example, it is clear that in matters of social-political policy and practice it may well be unavailable to ask the individuals of the present to make a sacrifice and pay *a priori* to enhance the safety and well-being of the populace of the future. But the classical precept of “the greatest good of the greatest number” never really confronted the *crucial issue of how to count*. But it occurred as a matter of neglect more than of fallacious thinking. Were those at issue to be only one's living, breathing contemporaries, or were future generations to be taken into account—and how many of them? This lack was inherently a flaw and a significant failure in developing the position.

A philosophical fallacy is not a special kind of fallacy peculiar to philosophizing and not encountered elsewhere. It is, rather, a general mode of flaw in reasoning that happens to achieve particular prominence in philosophical discussions.

THE RULE OF REASON

In philosophy, as elsewhere, there is a crucial difference between motivation and substantiation. A thinker may be ardent in the articulation and defense of a position that he believes, almost instinctively, on the basis of deep psychic resonance and ideological affinity. But this does not make him a philosopher. For what matters here is not the agent's motivation, however, heartfelt and compelling, but substantiation grounding in reasons why the rest of us should share this sentiment. Reasoning for doctrines rather than their psychic appeal is what matters and the commitment to the counteraction of reason is the crux. Why reason? Because it is of our very essence as rational creations. This last thing we would be willing to sacrifice is our reason, which is as dear to us as life itself.

But as thinkers have realized since the days of Aristotle, reasoning requires premisses and these must somehow be made available to reason from without. But whence can they come? This is a matter of the thematic range of deliberations at issue: in mathematics—intuition, in science—observation; in grammar—communicative practice. And in philosophy—the life experience of the wider community as reflected in; proverbial wisdom, common sense, the consensus gentian, the “wisdom of crowd,” as well as the expertise of science and scholarship, all these provide the data that feed grist to philosophy's mill. The coherent systematization of human experience at large—cognitive, affective, social, and so on—is the definitive task of philosophy.

Philosophizing is subject to two principal modes of error:

Errors of Reason: Inferential flaws in the articulation of conclusions to be drawn from given premisses.

Errors of Judgment: Assumption flaws in the supposition, presuppositions, and grounds of reasoning.

Evaluation in the former case lies in the range valid/invalid; in the latter it lies in the range plausible/implausible. Philosophical cogency lies in drawing valid (or appropriate) conclusions for plausible (or reasonable) premisses. And here their acceptability is not absolute but basis relevant, and depends on the experience-determined context of judgment plausibility that is available to the agent. What is judgmentally acceptable to a contemporary of Socrates may well not be so for one of Kant.

However, this does not make for an indifferent relativism of anything goes. There are facts it is impossible for someone to realize. (Rutherford's model of the atom was not available to the atomists of ancient Greece.) And, on the other hand, there are no facts that are inexcusable for someone to ignore. (The micro-organisms unavailable to the ancients are unavoidable for the moderns.) Doctrinal availability is generally a matter of historical context.

What philosophy strives to develop is an informative and comprehensive view of our position in reality's stagesetting able to orient us—both as individuals and as social groups—in dealing with our human and natural environment. In sum, it seeks to provide the information needed to guide us in life's dealings and illustrates the opportunities at our disposal for action in the realization of the desirable and the good.

ERROR VERSUS MISTAKE

Error consists in getting it wrong—for whatever reason. Mistake is *culpable* error—error the agent could and should have avoided. *Fallacy* is the way of proceeding that leads the agent into error—the pathway to error. (An entire chapter will subsequently be dedicated to one particular fallacy, namely, the Fallacy of Respect Neglect.)

Philosophical error can take many forms: oversimplification, inappropriate presupposition, probabilistic analogy, and more. All of these can occur both by innocent and venial unknowing/inadventure and by heedless and compatible and feckless misjudgment. This latter occurrence—outright mistake in philosophy—is fortunately rather rare. There is, to be sure, the change made against Arthur Schopenhauer (1787–1860) that his bourgeois mode of life was inconsistent with his austere and acerbic teaching. But here Schopenhauer sensibly replied that it was quite enough for someone to *explain* the nature of a good life; that he himself should also *exemplify* it would be asking too much. Such a discrepancy can be considered as rather uncharacteristic or even hypocritical, but it hardly discerns characterization as erroneous. In large measure, the errors in which philosophizing becomes entangled are not culpable mistakes of incompetence or carelessness, but are aspirationally rooted in the systemic structure of the philosophical enterprise, evoked by the nature of the problem situation that philosophy confronts.

MISTAKES *IN VERSUS ABOUT* PHILOSOPHY

It is important to distinguish between error *in* philosophizing and error *about* philosophizing. The former consists of errors arising when mistaken views are operative within philosophical doctrine, be exemplified by such matters as inconsistency or oversimplification or failure to draw due distinctions.

Mistaken views *about* philosophy arise regarding the objective of philosophy, its limits or boundaries, and its methods or practices. This will include misjudgments regarding the thematic range of the subject—for example, by allocating to it domains which do not belong to philosophy. One key error about philosophy is to believe that it involves the view that there is uniquely one appropriate and correct philosophy so that one system should suit all thinkers. Such a position reflects a misunderstanding of the nature of philosophy.

Philosophy is a particular sort of enterprise. It addresses “the big questions” regarding man’s place in the world’s scheme of things. Thus, there can be mistakes *about* philosophy as well as mistakes in philosophizing. Ethics and metaphysics are clearly in; numeretrics and methodology are out. Philosophy is not opinion-mongering. It is not a venture in simply varying doctrines and assuming affirmations on relevant topics. Philosophy is an exercise in reasoning. To philosophize is not to present—to tell people what to do or think. Its job is to explain: to expand not simply the *what* but the *why*; to explain the reasons why the issues should be resolved as is. If you dispense with reason-why explanation you dispense with philosophy itself.

Philosophizing admits to various sorts of mistakes, not only mistakes of substance about its own nature but also mistakes of procedure. Both in (mis-)reasoning but also in (mal-)exposition.

Thus, mistakes *within* philosophizing would be exemplified by such matters as inconsistency or oversimplification or failure to draw due distinctions. The radical skeptic who claims to know for certain that nothing can be known for certain is clearly in difficulty.

While people can make mistakes in philosophizing, there is no such thing as a winning or erroneous philosophy as such. Granted, every philosopher will think that those who disagree with his position are wrong. But that sort of thing is in fact mere *disagreement* and does really qualify as *error*. Mere disagreement does not qualify as error, it cannot be said that when two philosophers answer a question differently, then at least one of them must be wrong. In these matters, it can be the question that is indecisive and not just the answer.

ERROR VERSUS DISAGREEMENT

The not-infrequent objection—"that's just not doing proper philosophy"—is accordingly one only available to those engaged in on the battlefield of philosophy itself. The external analyst of the matter cannot operate the destructive good and bad philosophizing. Of course, rhetorical matters—good and bad exposition, reasoning, presentation—are at his command. But good and bad issue-resolution is not. At this stage taking a position within the scope of the subject itself becomes necessary. Errors of exposition are one thing, errors of philosophizing another. To be sure, from *within* a given philosophical position, a doctrine there is almost invariably the idea that other variant positions and doctrines are false.

While people can make mistakes in philosophizing, there is no such thing as a wrong or erroneous philosophy as such.

When there is philosophical disagreement on substantive matters, each party—proceeding from its own doctrinal standpoint—will, naturally enough, charge the other with being in error. And the so-regarded recipient will then, of course, simply shrug off such a charge with its counter-accusation. The recipient of such a charge will have to take the matter more seriously as now there is a perceptible need for correction and repair.

Error—philosophical error included—comes in two forms. First, there is an inadvertent and blameless error. The person who proceeds on the basis of available information that happens to be wrong or the person whose experience provides a misleading bias is blameless for any mistaken resolution. Here, error is blameless and outside reprehension. By contrast, there is the prospect of outright mistake, of insufficient heed to the correct indications, of carelessness or incompetence. Here, we have an outright mistake meriting the criticism that the agent "ought to have known better." Error of this more serious kind is fortunately rather rare in philosophizing.

For example, the distinctions needed to avert confusion, of the information needed to evade inappropriate presupposition needed to evade inappropriate presuppositions may simply not have been available in the state of knowledge of the day. The lack of the fallacy-averting information may thus be due not to negligence, lack of effort, or unacceptance on the agent's part. The damaging ignorance can simply be an artifact of inaccessible information. In this matter as in others an agent cannot be reprehended for doing what cannot be helped in the circumstances. Is fallacious reasoning blameworthy? Does a philosopher merit reproach and