Solving, Resolving, and Dissolving Philosophical Problems

Essays in Connective, Contrastive and Contextual Analysis

P.M.S. Hacker

WILEY Blackwell

Solving,
Resolving,
and Dissolving
Philosophical Problems

Solving,
Resolving,
and Dissolving
Philosophical Problems

Essays in Connective,
Contrastive and Contextual Analysis

P. M. S. Hacker

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats and by print-on-demand. Some content that appears in standard print versions of this book may not be available in other formats.

Cover Design and Image: Nina Hacker

Set in 10.5/12.5pt SabonLTStd by Straive, Pondicherry, India

For

Hans Oberdiek

and

Claire Parker

Contents

Introduction

At some stage in their lives, most thoughtful people wonder about philosophical problems. Can one arrive at adulthood without questioning whether God exists, whether there is life after death, or what our existence on earth is good for? A reflective young adult can hardly fail to ask whether human life has a purpose, and if so, what it is, or to query what a good life is and how it should be lived. Many people are liable, at some time or other, to wonder what truth is, and if they succumb to the deceptive appeal of the excesses of postmodernism, they may take perverse comfort in thinking that there is no absolute truth, only your truth and my truth and the truth of the ruling classes. We are singularly ill-equipped to handle such deep questions and to confront such dogmatic and intellectually pernicious relativism without assistance.

Great philosophers throughout the ages have struggled with them. It is not the purpose of this short book to give an account of their struggles. Such accounts are to be found in fine histories of philosophy such as Anthony Kenny's *New History of Western Philosophy*. The great philosophers of the past adopted a wide variety of methods of philosophical enquiry. These different methods have been well surveyed in numerous publications and another such survey will not be essayed here, even though this is a book concerned with methodology. Indeed, it is written to advocate a particular method or interconnected set of methods for solving, resolving, or dissolving problems in philosophy. But it is a method or methods altogether distinct from the those practiced in most current university departments. This book presupposes little philosophical knowledge, but only curiosity and an open mind. It demands only a willingness to learn not doctrine but

method, and the courage to suspend judgement and to challenge received ideas.

Given that we are going to be deeply concerned with method in philosophical enquiry, it might seem that we should start our investigations with a brief and uncontroversial statement of what philosophy is, as one might start a book on methodology in biochemistry with a clear, brief characterization of what exactly biochemistry is. But to try to characterize philosophical problems on the first page of a book concerned with philosophical method would be to rush in prematurely, leaving the angels behind. There are few problems more controversial in philosophy than the problem of what precisely philosophy is and what exactly a philosophical problem is. That itself is an interesting fact, for no other academic subject suffers from such omphaloskepsis (navel-gazing). Physicists do not write lengthy and controversial papers on what physics is. Chemists and biologists do not write passion-provoking books on what chemistry or biology are. Nor do economists or experimental psychologists quarrel over what their subject is, as opposed to how to do it. But what philosophy is, is a perennial philosophical problem. It will not be confronted now, although by the end of this book something of an answer will have emerged.

My purpose in this book is not only to try, by considered argument, to demonstrate to readers *what* they should think on some deep philosophical problems, but also to show them *how* they should think productively. Indeed, my intent is to do the former by means of the latter. I have selected fifteen perennial philosophical topics for scrutiny (Essays 1–15). Many alternatives might well have been chosen, but these struck me as particularly revealing. They should be of concern to any thinking person, and the results of the methods of enquiry are often both striking and unexpected. The essays fall into three groups: (i) the nature of the mind, the mind/body problem and the nature of consciousness, our knowledge of other people; (ii) epistemological problems concerning knowledge, belief, memory, imagination, thinking and dreaming; (iii) the roots of value, the nature of moral goodness, and the differentiation between the bad, the wicked, and the evil; and so as not to end on so grim a subject: the characterization of human happiness.

Each of these essays (with the exception of the one on dreaming) gives a highly compressed overview (between 11 and 13 pages) of a very much longer and far more comprehensive discussion of these topics in a tetralogy on human nature that I published with Wiley/Blackwell between 2007 and 2021: *Human Nature: The Categorial*

Framework (2007), *The Intellectual Powers* (2013), *The Passions* (2018), and *The Moral Powers* (2021). My purpose in the tetralogy was to provide a comprehensive survey of all the characterizing conceptual connections of the salient features of human nature that I had come across in fifty years of philosophical study. It was intended to be, among other things, a repository of logico-grammatical truths pertinent to the philosophical investigation of human nature (what Kant called 'philosophical anthropology' and the British called 'the moral sciences'). For it seemed to me absurd that these should be lost from generation to generation and have to be laboriously discovered afresh. To be sure, philosophy is not a progressive subject: there are advances and regresses, but that does not mean that we cannot salvage enduring insights from the wreckage and pass them on to future generations. The tetralogy employed the methods I had learnt from my betters and from decades of study and writing, but it was not a treatise on method. It was a treatise on human nature.

This short book, however, *is* a treatise on method. But method before practice is like recipes before dinner. The strategy of the book is to display the methods in practice before examining the theory of the practice. But as the various logico-linguistic techniques are employed in the essays, their use and the fruitfulness of their use are recurrently emphasized. There is a degree of deliberate repetition in the methodological comments – one cannot teach a technique, such as playing the piano, without reiteration. A comprehensive *overview* and systematic *defence* of the methods of connective, contrastive, and contextual analysis is given only in the long concluding Essay 16. There, criticisms are rebutted, misconstruals are corrected, and misunderstandings are clarified.

It will quickly be noticed that this book lacks all the usual critical apparatus characteristic of academia. There are hardly any footnotes sprouting at the bottom of the page, very few *contemporary* philosophers are mentioned and fewer still are explicitly confronted in the thrust and riposte of debate. This is no coincidence. Everything has been pared away in the interests of clarity of ideas and transparency of argument. Who actually holds the ideas among our contemporaries and how many *variations on a given idea* can be found in what goes by the name of the 'literature' is of little moment for my purposes. What matters are the ideas, *perspicuously displayed*. Any competent philosopher can build yet more epicycles on erroneous orbits of misplaced planets – but these are of mere scholastic, not substantive, interest. Similarly, *who* advances a given misguided argument in the

bustle of today's philosophical bourse is irrelevant to the display of its invalidity or inadequacy in a book on methodology (a *Prioritätstreit* [priority dispute] over truth may be forgivable, but surely not over error). One consequence of this economy of expression is that the discussions are often extremely condensed. Each essay should be read slowly and more than once.

The methods advocated are at odds with much philosophical practice in the Anglophone world today. It is perhaps an exaggeration to assert that contemporary students of philosophy, both undergraduates and graduates, are instructed to approach any given philosophical problem by reading the last decade of journal publications that discuss it, and perhaps a handful of chapters or extracts from current books. But it is not far from the truth, as is exhibited in current philosophical journals, companions to philosophy and philosophical handbooks, Wikipedia, and encyclopedias of the Internet beloved by students of philosophy and philosophical journalists. Are these not the official repositories of human knowledge in the twenty-first century? This popular pedagogic principle of economy of effort is not arbitrary, only parochial, cleaving to passing fashions that will be obsolete within a decade or two. It is based on the natural sciences, the general form of which is progress. No physicist is likely to be told to read Galileo or Copernicus for an essay, and no biologist is instructed to read Galen or Vesalius for a tutorial. Teamwork, led by a powerful professoriate, with incessant bureaucratic demands for immediate research results characterizes contemporary methods of scientific research at universities. Following this example is eroding philosophical excellence in the academy.

The pedagogical emulation of the sciences in philosophical method guarantees:

(i)   the domination of current philosophical doctrines and the reinforcing of current preconceptions and prejudices

(ii) proliferation of -isms and -ists

(iii) the relative neglect of twenty-five centuries of struggle by philosophers of genius with problems many of which differ but little from those with which we currently engage.

(iv) the assimilation into philosophy of methods of research alien to the nature of the subject and inimical to the achievement of its intellectual goals – no matter how satisfactory for university bureaucracies and international measures of quality control in terms of publications and citations.

The domination of current philosophical practices and products is a consequence of two features. The first is the increasing centralization of education both at governmental level and at the level of university administration, and the growth of power of the university professoriate and pedagogical bureaucracies. This corporatism penalizes independent thought by students and junior faculty alike. It ensures that few will have the desire, let alone the courage, to cut across the grain of current prejudices. The student of philosophy, from undergraduate to faculty, is not guided by the problems, but by current thinking on the problems with all its preconceptions.

The second is the belief in philosophical progress on the model of scientific progress. Philosophy is seen as a battleground of doctrines. Only time (and perhaps science), it is thought, will tell which ones will triumph.

It is this, in part, that leads to the proliferation of -isms and -ists. It is they that guarantee blinkered thought. For -isms and -ists are ready-mades designed to save one the trouble of thinking for oneself and to prevent one from reading a text with an open mind. It makes teaching easy, for one need not teach students how to think for themselves and how to confront a question by themselves, but only to opt for a party. The primary question then becomes: what sort of -ist should I be: a functionalist or a reductionist, a realist or an anti-realist, an internalist or an externalist, a representationalist or an idealist … or some other -ist?

Because the mainstream of anglophone philosophy today is mesmerized by science and intoxicated by theory, and because it conceives of philosophy as progressive on the model of the natural sciences, history of philosophy (with the exception of ancient philosophy) is to a large extent relegated to the sidelines. This is the obverse face of the science-emulating assumption that the research of the last decade already incorporates all that is currently known, and therefore this alone is worth studying. But philosophical problems are not akin to problems in the empirical sciences that are to be solved by observation, theory construction and confirmation or infirmation. There is much more to be learnt from studying the great thinkers of the past who tussled with problems similar to, if not identical with, those we engage with than from reading all the articles written on a given problem in the last decade. No one writing in current philosophy journals is as deep a thinker as Plato or Aristotle, Aquinas or Scotus, Descartes or Spinoza, Hobbes or Locke, Hume or Kant. The distinctions they drew, for example between *psuchē* and body, may still be of value to us.

Their lack of some of our distinctions, for example, between the voluntary and the intentional, may illuminate the value of our distinctions. Distinctions they drew that are fundamentally different from ours, for example between form and matter, may free us from the prejudice that our current distinctions are the only correct ones, or are the best ones.

Studying the way past geniuses engaged with problems similar to ours helps to give us a measured distance from the way we currently handle the problems, and so a sharpened awareness of our own parochialism. The distance of centuries between their works and ours makes it easier to pin down their fundamental presuppositions and to question them. That in turn makes it easier for us to lay bare our own presuppositions and to challenge them. If it is sometimes relatively easy for us to apprehend what is awry with widely accepted ideas among philosophers of the past, that should not encourage us to pass them by with a sense of superiority. On the contrary, it should drive us to investigate, for example, how great thinkers such as Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, or Hume could have been so taken with their New Way of Ideas that the philosophical vision of their culture was, as it were, mesmerized for one hundred and fifty years. Only by discovering this can we learn anything from their great mistakes. We can rest assured that had we, *per impossibile*, been philosophers during their times, we too would have walked blindly along the Way of Ideas without any awareness of its irremediable defects. This investigation into the deep roots of their errors may in turn make it easier for us to search for similarly unquestioned philosophical presuppositions of our times.

Philosophers should greet each other, Wittgenstein suggested, with the exclamation, 'Take your time!' Faced with a philosophical problem, we are prone to rush to answer it. And if we are blinkered by current -isms and -ists, we shall expend much effort elaborating how a realist would answer the question and how an anti-realist would do so, how an absolutist would handle it and how a relativist would, how an internalist would cope with it and how an externalist. But that is futile. One must rather take things slowly. First, investigate the question: how does the problem arise in the first place? What needs would an answer serve? What is the point and purpose of asking the question? What are its presuppositions? Is it a good question at all? In short, challenge the question, rather than rushing to answer it.

Some fundamental philosophical controversies persist for many centuries. A wise methodological principle is that when faced by a

perennial debate between two different schools of philosophy with respect to some great matter, one should not examine the arguments on both sides and plumb for the strongest. If that could have solved matters, they would have been solved many a century ago. Rather, *one should investigate what is agreed upon by all participants in the debate, and challenge that*. It is the agreed presuppositions, very often the unmentioned agreed presuppositions, that may hold the key to the solution.

Many striking and unexpected conclusions result from the use of the manifold methods and techniques of connective, contrastive, and contextual logico-linguistic analysis. These conclusions stand in diametric opposition to many contemporary views, doctrines, and theories. I hope that they will be sufficiently convincing and appealing to encourage readers to eschew the colourful banners waving in the marketplace of ideas and to fend for themselves. Equipped with the methods, they will be able to follow Kant's advice, *Sapere aude*, and have the courage to think for themselves.

Acknowledgements

PART I

Philosophical Psychology

1

The Nature of the Mind

"The genuine philosophy of the human mind, is in so low a state, and has so many enemies, that, I apprehend those who would make any improvement in it must, for a time, build with one hand and hold a weapon with the other."

Thomas Reid, *Correspondence*, letter to
James Gregory, 6 August 1783

1.   That human beings have a mind is news from nowhere, but what it is that one has when one has a mind is perplexing. Am I identical with my mind or is the mind a part of me – the thinking part, perhaps? When I speak of my mind, am I speaking of myself or of my *self*? The mind is something I have and so, it seems, is the self, for am I not required to be true to mine own self? Is the mind identical to the self or distinct from it? Where does the soul stand? Do human beings have a soul, or is that an obsolete theological notion? If not, is the soul identical to the mind or distinct from it? And how is the soul related to the self? Of course, I also have a brain. If I have a mind, a soul, a self, and a brain, what is this 'I' that has these things?

Some of these items, things or entities can be readily disposed of. Their entitative claims are altogether bogus. Incidentally, beware of the pretentious term 'entity' – it sounds impressive, but it is merely an Anglicized cognate of the Latin *ens*, which means no more than the humble Anglo-Saxon 'thing'. So, what sort of thing is a self? Indeed, is

it *a thing* at all? How should we investigate the matter? Certainly not by surveying all the pronouncements of philosophers on the self nor by scrutinizing all their philosophical theories. Philosophers have the difficult task of exploring the bounds of sense, of clarifying the manifold distinctions between sense and nonsense, of showing the multiple forms of nonsense – and by 'nonsense' I do not mean rubbish, I mean forms of words and utterance that for one reason or another do not make sense, that transgress the bounds of sense even though they do not seem to do so. Since philosophers, or at any rate analytic philosophers, spend much of their time crawling, with a magnifying glass, along the boundaries that separate sense from nonsense, it is not surprising that they often find themselves, the descriptions they offer, and the theories they advance, on the wrong side of the boundary. When faced with a problematic notion, such as the self, the I, the soul, the mind, we should not begin our investigations with a survey of the prevalent philosophical theories and their argumentative support and then endeavour to choose the most plausible one or, perhaps, more radically, come to repudiate the very idea of *theory* in philosophy as a deep misconception. That can come much later, when we have found our own way. Only then may we be in a position critically to evaluate the doctrines and theories of past and present philosophers. We should start by wiping the board clean and examining the raw data.

What are the raw data for a philosophical problem or puzzle if not the past theories? Philosophical problems and puzzles, as we shall show again and again in the course of these essays, are conceptual problems and puzzles. They are rooted in our conceptual scheme, in the ways in which we conceive of things and features of things in the world we inhabit, in our experiences of them and in our thoughts about them. Our conceptual scheme is expressed by the language we employ in our discourse and articulate reflections. Indeed, our language is inextricably implicated in the creation and moulding of our concepts. So the raw data for critical reflection are the uses of words, and they are tabulated in our dictionaries. So our first stop of call is the complete *Oxford English Dictionary*, with its itemization of usage and plethora of examples of each use, as well as lexicographical history and etymology. This will not give us any answers to our conceptual questions, but it will provide us with the raw data upon which to work.

2.   If we look to the *Oxford English Dictionary* for elaboration of meanings, we find that the noun 'mind' is said to signify the faculty of consciousness and thought which enables human beings to be aware

of the world and of their experiences. This connection between the mind and consciousness was Cartesian. The concept of consciousness was of seventeenth-century origin and defining the mind in terms of being conscious *of* something (transitive consciousness) was a radical innovation that, as is patent from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is with us to this day. But the concept of mind is very much older than the seventeenth century and had previously been conceived in terms of the capacity for rationality. Only philosophical investigation can disclose which is the more coherent and illuminating conception of the mind and of human nature.

A first step towards elucidation is to examine English usage, perspicuously laid out in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to see what light it sheds on our concept of mind. What is most striking is the multitude of English idioms that make use of the word 'mind', for example, to have a keen mind, an open mind, to close one's mind to, to clear one's mind, to call to mind, for something to slip out of one's mind, to have a mind to do something, to be in half a mind to do something, to be in two minds whether to do something, to make up one's mind, to change one's mind, to have something in mind, and many more. Rather than dismissing this as language-local idiom, which it is, and dismissing it as of no philosophical importance, which it isn't, we should seek for patterns in usage that illuminate our concept of mind and provide grounds for connective and contrastive analysis.

3. The manifold idioms are evident in daily discourse. To get an overall picture of their point and purpose will be illuminating for elucidating the concept of mind. For it is easy to arrange the various idioms in six clusters or focal points, although they are not neat, non-overlapping clusters and they are not exhaustive either. It is also easy to paraphrase each 'mind'-incorporating idiom into an equivalent phrase in which the word 'mind' does not occur. One cluster is focused on memory and remembering. To hold or keep something in mind is to ensure that one won't overlook it; to bear something in mind is to remember it so that one will be able to take it into account. To call or bring something to mind is to recollect it. For something to be, go, pass out of, or slip out of mind is for it to be forgotten. To cast one's mind back is to try to remember, and to be absent-minded is to be forgetful or inattentive.

A second focal point is thought and thinking. To have a thought cross one's mind or for an idea to come to mind is for something to occur to one. For something to lurk at the back of one's mind is to be

trying without success to think of something. To turn one's mind to something is to start thinking about it. To have something on one's mind is to be preoccupied with it. To have a load taken off one's mind is to be relieved of anxiously thinking about it. One's mind is in a turmoil when one doesn't know what to do or to think. One's mind wanders when one cannot concentrate or attend. One's mind goes blank when one does not know what to say and is at a loss. One has an original cast of mind when one displays originality in thought, discourse, and action.

A third cluster concerns opinion and opining. To know one's mind is to have formed one's opinion, and to tell or speak one's mind is to express it. To be of one mind with another is to agree in opinion or judgement. To give someone a piece of one's mind is to tell him harshly one's opinion of him.

A fourth focal point is intention and intending. To be minded or to have it in mind to do something is to be inclined or to intend to do it. To have half a mind to do something is to be tempted to do it and to be in two minds whether to do something is to be undecided. To make up one's mind is to decide and to change one's mind is to reverse one's decision. To have a mind of one's own is to be independent in judgement and decision.

A further focal point is the characterization of a person's intellect: one may have a powerful, agile, subtle, or devious mind if one is skilful, quick, and ingenious at problem solving or if one's solutions, plans, and projects display subtlety and cunning. Other characterizations are linked to intellectual virtues and faults. One may have a tenacious, idle, judicious, indecisive mind according to the manner in which one grapples with problems.

Another cluster concerns rationality: one is of sound mind if one retains one's rational faculties and one is out of one's mind if one thinks, proposes, and acts irrationally. One is not in one's right mind if one is distraught and one has lost one's mind if one is bereft of one's rational faculties. One may be small or petty minded if one makes a fuss over trivialities of behaviour of others, one is broad or narrow minded according to one's receptivity to unconventional ideas and behaviour. One may have a mind like a razor or a dirty mind; one may possess peace of mind and have presence of mind.

4. Here then we can see the concept of mind at work. From this ordering of raw data one may draw important conclusions about the use of the expression 'the mind' in English. Of course, other

languages may not have a word that corresponds exactly with 'the mind': German and French have to make do with a pair of expressions, namely 'Geist' and 'Seele' and 'l'âme' and l'esprit' where English has the triplet 'mind', 'soul', and 'spirit'. So their concepts are somewhat different from ours. Few languages have as wide a range of mind-associated prepositional idioms, which may mean that English is fortunate in being able to draw distinctions absent in other languages. There is much that a philosopher can learn from the wealth of 'mind'-associated idioms.

First, each idiom is paraphrasable into a different equivalent expression in which the word 'mind' does not occur. What does this imply? It does not mean that all our talk of the mind is peculiar 'as if' talk of a 'pretend entity' or 'pretend agent'. Our use of 'the mind' is not at all like our use of 'Father Christmas' or even 'unicorn' and 'dragon'. This does not mean that our use of 'mind'-incorporating expressions is but a *façon de parler*. That would suggest that it is just a manner of speaking, akin to signing one's letters 'yours truly', 'yours faithfully', or 'yours sincerely', and that would imply that in fact people don't have minds. But, to be sure, decisive people have minds of their own, stupid people are mindless, and people who have lost their mind have lost their rational faculties. So what should we conclude? Surely this: that our idiomatic talk of human minds is *a form of representation* – a way of presenting human intellectual powers and their exercise in thought, volition, and action. We present possession of a wide range of intellectual powers and their exercise in the *form* of possession of an object, namely: the mind.

From this we can draw further conclusions. The mind is not an object, not a kind of thing or, more pretentiously, not an *entity* of any kind. The mind, we might say, is not a something, but it is not a nothing either. So taking the mind to be a kind of substance, as Descartes (1596–1650) did, is a mistake. The mind is neither a material substance nor an immaterial substance because it is not a substance at all. To say (correctly) that *human beings have minds* is a conceptual truth that characterizes human nature. It is, in effect, the expression of a rule for the use of 'mind' and 'human being' that signifies that it *makes sense* to ask with respect to any human being what sort of mind he has, whether he has anything on his mind, or whether he has made up his mind, and so forth. A further consequence that flows from the possibility of paraphrastic de-reification is that when we say that that NN has a dirty mind, that he has turned his mind to such-and-such, and that he has changed his mind, we are not talking of one