

Wittgenstein, Anscombe and the Need for Metaphysical Thinking

Abstract

Metaphysicians are in the business of making and defending modal claims – claims about how things must, or could or could not be. Wittgenstein’s opposition to necessity claims, along with his various negative remarks about ‘metaphysical’ uses of language, makes it seem almost a truism that Wittgenstein was opposed to metaphysics. In this paper I want to make a case for rejecting that apparent truism. My thesis is that it is illuminating to characterise what Wittgenstein and Anscombe are doing in their philosophical writing as *metaphysics without manufactured necessities*. Doing so helps to articulate a sharper, more interesting, critique of contemporary metaphysical practices than therapeutic or linguistic framings of Wittgenstein’s method make possible. It also allows us to place Anscombe in the context of a tradition of British metaphysics that emerged in the 1940s in an attempt to reverse the devastating impact on ethics of the new ‘analytical’ philosophy.

0. Introduction¹

[A] Professional philosophy is to a great extent a huge factory for the manufacture of necessities – only necessities give us mental peace. It is no wonder that Wittgenstein arouses a certain hatred among us. He is out to deprive us of our factory jobs. (Anscombe, ‘Wittgenstein’s “Two Cuts”’)

1. The Propositions of Natural Science

[B] The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. the propositions of natural science – i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy – and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give meaning to his signs. (Wittgenstein *TLP* 6.53)

[C] ‘Everyone is unwise’ is a negation of ‘everyone is wise’, but it is not what logicians call *the* negation of it; in logic books; when the sign for ‘not’ is introduced, we are told that ‘not p’ is *the* proposition that is true when p is false and false when p is true’. ‘Everyone is unwise’ is not certainly true if ‘Everyone is wise’ is false; hence it is not *the* negation of ‘Everyone is wise’. (Anscombe, *Introduction to Wittgenstein’s TLP*)

Fig. 1

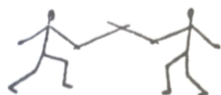


Fig. 2



Fig. 3



2. The status of ‘metaphysical’ propositions

[D] Reading some of a commentary by Proclus on Plato’s *Parmenides*, I found Proclus saying that a name was a logical picture of its object. I mentioned this to Wittgenstein, who surprised me by saying ‘I have so often had that thought.’ (Anscombe, ‘Grammar, Structure, Essence’)

¹ This paper is formed and informed through many years of conversation and collaboration with Clare Mac Cumhaill. Many of the ideas in it have emerged out of our conversations and are as much hers as mine. Thanks to the Welsh Wittgenstein Philosophical Society for a stimulating discussion of a very early draft of this paper, and to David Cockburn for comments on a later draft.

3. Anscombean & Wittgensteinian Metaphysics

[E] It is psychologically impossible that we should just begin where we left off six years ago. And even if we could, I do not think we should wish to. For it is felt by quite a number of people, rightly or wrongly, that during the twenty years between the two wars Philosophy had somehow taken the wrong turning. It is even said sometimes that the wrong turning which it took was one of the main causes of the disasters which have befallen civilisation. (Price, 'Clarity is not Enough')

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