
PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION: The Nature of Problems and a Way of Structuring Essays — I

A Short Explanation of a Way of Looking
at Problems, and How to Then Structure
Essays Using That Approach

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Contents

| | | |
|----------|---|----------|
| 1 | Introduction | 1 |
| 2 | The Nature of Problems | 2 |
| 3 | Determining the Nature of a Relationship | 7 |

1 Introduction

If you know me, you may know that for the November this year (2023 at the time of Writing), I travelled in Japan as a holiday. When I was on holiday, I wondered how I might be able to write essays in a better way, especially for topics which are considered controversial. The way of writing essays, which comes from my consideration on the nature of problems in general, is what I explain in this entry here.

2 The Nature of Problems

My first step in trying to find out a good way of writing/structuring essays is to first think about what essays are actually for. The conclusion I reached on this front is that essays simply try to solve problems, most commonly of a more abstract nature. Maybe reports can be considered as essays too, but the kind that tackles problems of a quantitative nature.

But anyhow, now that I realised (the scarcely groundbreaking idea) that essays essentially just try to solve problems, the next step was the main one. If essays try to solve problems, then the best way to structure any essay must be a way that can directly break down/tackle the structure of problems in general.

And so, what is the structure/nature of problems in general? I'll skip any middle steps that I made, and I'm not even too sure I made any to be honest - I think I just jumped to my conclusion, but I think it fits so I won't try to fix what isn't broken. My answer is that any problem is essentially an unknown or inconsistent relationship.

Now this might sound airy-fairy, but there are things we can gain from this way of looking at problems. To be precise, what we gain are more specific questions. After all, if we have more specific questions, we can get more specific answers. So, first off, if a problem is a relationship, how many things must be involved? Just as with any relationship, we must have at a minimum two things. However, even if there are more things involved, they can usually be broken down into the sum of basic relationships comprising of only two things.

For example, a line between two dots shall represent one relationship, and the two dots are our generic "things". Now, what about three dots? Then, all the possible relationships make a triangle. But that, in my mind, shows that the relationship between the three dots can be seen simply as the (not the arithmetic/mathematical, but the vague and general) sum of the three separate relationships between each unique pair of dots.

And so, if a problem is a relationship, there must be only two things involved. And if there are more things involved, then really there are more relationships and more problems involved.

Another question that arises is what makes a relationship

unknown or inconsistent? It's quite easy to see what makes a relationship unknown - you just don't know the nature of that relationship. However, what makes a relationship inconsistent? This is where I think other relationships come into play. If a relationship is inconsistent, it means that there are other relationships that our main one is not consistent with in terms of their collective nature.

So, let's bring in another example. Let's say that our problematic relationship was the relationship between drinking and driving. And to be more precise, the relationship between the amount one drinks, and the safety of one's driving. Now, if we were to say that "the more one drinks, the safer their driving", then that would be an example of an inconsistent relationship. But why? One example of inconsistency is if we bring awareness into the relationship. But that, what I specifically mean is that we create a triangle as I mentioned before. And so, what we have is not only a relationship between safety of driving and amount of drink, but also two extra relationships. The first extra relationship is that between amount of drink and awareness, and the second relationship is that of safety of driving and awareness.

So, let's just think of that first extra relationship. It doesn't take too much thought to uncover that the more one drinks, the less awareness is had. That is the nature of the first extra relationship. Furthermore, it doesn't take too much thought to uncover also that the more aware a driver is, the better the safety of their driving. That is the nature of the second extra relationship.

And so, to wrap up what we have found, we have two extra relationships which we know the nature of, and we have our main relationship whose nature we are unsure of (the relationship between the safety of driving and the amount one drinks). The point is that if we were to stick to holding "the more one drinks, the safer their driving" as being the nature of the relationship between the safety of driving and the amount one drinks, then we would realise that this kind of relationship is inconsistent with the extra relationships we drew by linking in awareness.

This whole concept we just looked at was used in our example to show that a suggested relationship was inconsistent. But it could equally be used to suggest the possible nature of an unknown relationship by ruling out all the inconsistent relationships found, in order to imply a consistent nature.

Also, whilst we can link together a single extra aspect (aware-

ness) to our original two concepts which we wanted to know the relationship of (safety of driving and amount of drink), what would happen if we added a further aspect? There are, after all, many aspects to the safety of driving, and the results of drinking alcohol. We would essentially have two further relationships with our respective original concepts, but how would our two new relationships relate to those which arise from adding the aspect of awareness? To answer this question, let us add another aspect.

Let's add the aspect of emotional management in our example alongside the aspect of awareness. The nature of the relationship between emotional management and the amount one drinks, is typically that the more one drinks, the less that one is able to manage their emotions. Secondly, the nature of the relationship between emotional management and the safety of one's driving, is that the more emotionally unstable someone is, the less safe their driving is. Now question I might ask is, why? To answer that, I would like to draw an additional relationship between the two aspects which we have, that is, a relationship between awareness and emotional management. Without going into too much detail, we can arrive at the conclusion that the nature of the relationship between awareness and emotional management, is that the less managed or stable our emotions become, the less aware you can become of our immediate surroundings.

Interestingly enough, what we have been able to do there is translate the aspect of emotional management into the aspect of awareness when it comes to the relationships between/with our two original concepts. Indeed, this way of looking at relationships between concepts and aspects is very much like functions and objects within category theory, and so this translation between two aspect could be akin to a mapping function within category theory. But anyway, I'm probably being excessively liberal by including category theory like this, and all similarity probably ends there.

I have included a diagram of these relationships for our example in Figure 2.1. Such a map of relationships is probably a key benefit of using this way of looking at problems. Individual relationships can be isolated, and the nature of relationships with different aspects can be dealt with in a structured way.

In Figure 2.1, you can see each individual relationship which we have talked about. All the dashed lines are the relationships which we can figure out the nature of directly, and the main problematic relationship's nature we seek to find in a

more indirect way, by gathering together all the relationships between the aspects. Note also that for our example, and for the future when I use this method, many more aspects can be involved.

By doing this, we can point out any issues in a discourse more precisely too. If a reader/listener has an issue with a part of any argument, the exact relationship can be isolated with which there is a problem. This hopefully means these issues can be explored and resolved far quicker.

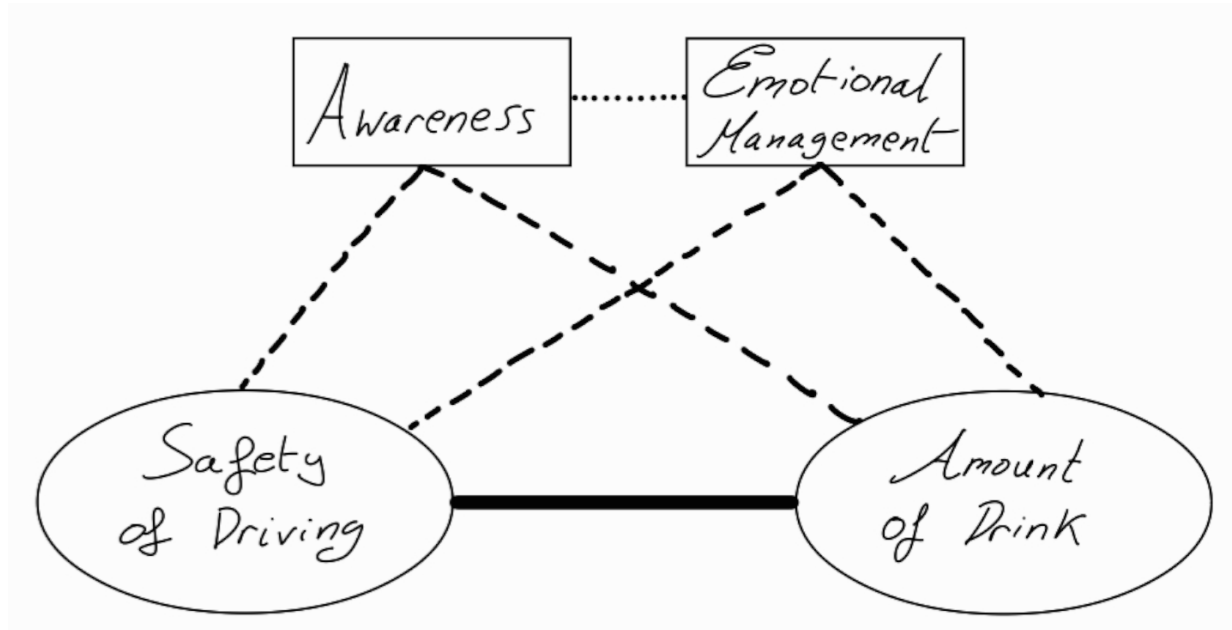


Figure 2.1: A map of the example problem of the relationship between the safety of driving and the amount of drink one has, including the two aspects of interest

Finally, I would like to reiterate why all problems are fundamentally problematic relationships (which are unknown or inconsistent). For example, we can take an issue that is well known to be controversial such as abortion. Why is it so controversial? In other words, what is the problem that causes so many to see it differently? Abortion as an action, although some may see it slightly differently, has pretty much a set definition as a single unique action. Everyone talks about the same thing when they say "abortion", as I said, with only some slight variation. So then, where do all the varying views on abortion come from? This is where we must view a problem as being a relationship in it's most fundamental nature. I think that it becomes quite clear as to where the varying views on abortion come from, if we relate the concept of abortion with the concept of morality, or moral quality. The varying views of abortion in other words

don't come from seeing abortion in isolation, they come from variation elsewhere. More specifically, the varying views on abortion actually come from the varying views on morality/morals/moral quality. This is because fundamentally the whole issue of abortion is in fact (as people see it) the unknown/inconsistent relationship between the action of abortion and morality.

People who have a problem with the issue of abortion either have that problem because they don't know the relationship between abortion and morality themselves (and try to formulate an answer), or they have a problem with how others view the relationship between abortion and morality (seeing those other views as inconsistent relationships). This is all by looking at problems through a lens of relationships, and in either case just previously mentioned, the problem boils down to unreconciled relationships.

With the example of abortion, I think the reason that religion and world view very much plays a big part in debates is because these things determine one's view on the nature of morality. And if that is the case, then naturally it determines how you view the relationship between abortion and morality. Hence, when I hear people say for topics like abortion, that religion ought to be left out of picture, I think that makes the problem worse since we don't actually tackle the source of the varying views of religion or world view - even though this line of thought may seem off-topic.

The fact is that for any topic that has an issue in relation to morality, religion/world view naturally plays a role in determining the nature of that relationship. All this that I've said really is just a few observations I've made, but it all comes about from looking at problems/issues as a set of relationships. I hope you might be able to see how useful it might be.

3 Determining the Nature of a Relationship

If we go back to our initial example of driving safety and drinking, it was the case that we first looked at the relationship between each of those things and the aspect of awareness. Now, I probably didn't go into a lot of detail in how we got the relationship between awareness and amount of drink, but that is what I shall do here.

We said earlier that the more one drinks, the less awareness one has. The fact is that common sense more or less dictates this statement, but here I shall suggest a way to determine this relationship without seemingly jumping to conclusions as much as possible.

This process is simply asking meaningful questions, and supplying those questions we've all sorts of answers, so that the most consistent answer can be found and those answers which are inconsistent can be ruled out. Furthermore, this process can also show with possibly maximum clarity, why even the readers views might possibly be inconsistent. This is because I will go through all the possible answers to these questions.

So, let us go back to the example that I outlined earlier. The first question we might ask in order to ascertain the nature of the relationship between safety of driving and amount of drink, is just what the effects of drinking alcohol are on the body. From this question, we can reach the conclusion that not only awareness is diminished through drinking alcohol, but also all of its other effects. Another possible answer is that alcohol does absolutely nothing to the body when drunk. But this answer we can rule out since any observation of someone who is drunk clearly shows that alcohol affects their body, and at the very least numbs their use of it.

Furthermore, let us ask the question, what is necessary for someone to be driving safely? An answer to this might be that a driver needs to be aware of their surroundings, needs to have good eyesight and sense of hearing, and needs to have good knowledge of the highway code. From that, we can clearly see that if drinking alcohol reduces awareness, then it compromises the safety of driving.

Now, all of this may seem quite obvious, but this line of questioning and the filtering of those respective questions' answers gives us the way in which we can ascertain the na-

ture of the relationships we're interested in. Therefore, the principle I will keep alongside the idea of problems as relationships, is that questions and answers will be solely used to obtain the nature of those relationships.

I do think questions offer the most practical method for delving into the nature of these relationships for many reasons. Questions are more engaging than a monologue, and answering those questions in a variety of ways can also encapsulate most if not all possible views to be had. This further gives me the ability to not just explore why I think what I think, but also to explore why other possible answers might not be compatible or consistent.

I'm certainly not the first to use questions and answers like this. St Thomas Aquinas also wrote in the style of questions and answers, and so what I've explained here may very well not be original at all, although I hope it is with the addition of treating problems as a map of relationships. But even then, many have possibly implicitly done what I proposed to do anyway.

I think that this is all I have to say on the subject, but I hope it has been somewhat useful to read this entry. If you are not clear on what I have meant in this entry, I hope things might make a lot more sense when I use this method in the future essays that I write.

Thank you for reading.

END