A Study in Ethics and Metaphysics

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THIS article is intended to be terse, suggestive and provocative rather than systematic or comprehensive. It does not represent a considered attempt to report conclusions. Rather, like the proverbial man who has a tiger by the tail, the author claims to have hold of something important, but he does not claim to have it completely under control. This is an attempt to think out loud in public—to follow some insights wherever they lead in order to consider some old problems in new ways, to indicate some alternatives with respect to approach, and to suggest some tentative directions in which solutions may be found. Thus, its terseness is intended to provoke thought rather than to indicate dogmatic certainty.

While this article uses natural law as a point of departure, it has a much broader focus than the criticism of natural law. It will concentrate on two common claims made for natural law theory. First, that it is a realistic and objectivistic type of ethics which provides ethics with a sound ontological "foundation." Second, that it provides a route to ethical knowledge by means of reason alone. But it will develop and discuss these claims in the broadest fashion, focusing primarily upon the first since the author's inaugural address treated the second, and it is being revised for publication.

With regard to the first claim, John Wild argues that there are five characteristic theses of natural law theory which provide its "ontological foundations."[1] The first thesis is that there is a normative world order "embedded" in the "very being" of its "component entities." The second, that concrete entities have intelligible structures which determine their development in regular ways, expressible in terms of "universal law." The third, that these structures include a "tendency" toward "further existence not yet acquired." The fourth, that when concrete tendencies are ordered in accordance with the laws described under 2, the action is "natural" or "right." The fifth, that good is the "realization of tendency," evil the "lack of fulfillment." Wild also suggests that there are three characteristic "derived" moral principles.[2] The first is the universality of natural law. The second that ethical norms are "grounded" on nature. The third, that the good for man is the realization of human nature.

On the assumption that the above is a fair — though brief — representation, the first matter of concern is the relation envisaged between metaphysics and ethics by the use of such metaphors as "founded," "grounded," and "rooted." The concern is not that metaphors are used, but rather their apparent meaning and the functional relationship between metaphysics and ethics which they suggest. At the very least, they indicate the priority of metaphysics and the "derivative" character, in some sense of that term, of ethics. Perhaps the meaning and significance of this claim can be explored best by starting with the common assertion that one is inevitably involved in metaphysics, even if only implicitly, and that it is

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[1] Cf. *Plato's Modern Enemies and the Theory of Natural Law* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 137.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 152f.

better if one's metaphysics is explicit and carefully considered.

Clearly, this common assertion does not mean that metaphysics is either a pre-requisite for, or implied by, a rigorous logic. Nevertheless, the exploration of its relation to logic may indicate that a choice has been made, and clarify what was at stake in the selection of alternatives.

The challenge of logic is made in terms of clarity and precision. Having recognized the distinction between metaphysics and logic, the logician proceeds with sole concern for the exact specification of the meaning of terms and the formal relationships of terms and propositions. However, propositions are defined as statements which are either true or false, and the same sort of precision is sought in the use of the term truth. Hence, the attempts to specify a rigorous verification principle. Thus, terms such as meaning, reason, and empirical are precisely (or narrowly) defined — depending on which attitude one wishes to convey. Others demand broader, more comprehensive (or ambiguous) meanings. Briefly stated, then, the option is between precision and comprehensiveness.

At this juncture, several points about the choice may be made. First, whatever comprehensiveness may mean, it is not a matter of logical consistency. For the logician's fundamental charge against metaphysics is ambiguity—not inconsistency. That is, the problem is not so much that metaphysical systems have been inconsistent, but rather that they fail to fufill even the requisite condition for rigorous logical analysis—namely, an unambiguous use of terms. While it would be desirable to have knowledge that was at once rigorously precise **and** comprehensive, at least at the present stage of our knowledge there is a tension between the two. To decide for comprehensiveness requires some sacrifice of precision and clarity. Furthermore, if one is to speak of the logic of a metaphysical construct, he must acknowledge that he is using the term logic in an "extended," or more comprehensive, sense. And it would seem odd if he insisted on using the term logic, but refused to clarify its meaning. The obvious direction toward a solution would seem to be to consider other relationships besides the formal relationships of propositions, that is, to broaden the context of linguistic analysis. Precisely that direction will be pursued in a moment.

Before doing so, however, a second part of the challenge must be examined. It argues, not that some or all metaphysical systems are untrue, but that they are meaningless. That is, they fail to fulfill the requisite conditions for rigorous empirical testing and falsifiability. Thus, whatever relationships between propositions and non-propositional things one may point to in order to justify more comprehensive categories, concepts, models, and terms, will have to be understood, in turn, through an "extended" meaning of the terms "empirical" and "truth." That is, unless these relationships affect the truth of propositions in some way, one would not be likely to sacrifice rigorous logical precision. But they can only be shown to affect the truth of propositions if one extends the meaning of truth. Their claims cannot be supported in terms of rigorous scientific procedure. Once again there is a tension between precision (in the form of vertifiability and exactitude) and comprehensiveness, and to decide for the latter involves some willingness to sacrifice the former. Also, some measure of clarity is again required for the use of the terms empirical and true. The obvious direction for the former is phenomenology; for the latter it is the specification of other criteria of both objective and attitudinal kinds.

Since it is the last statement that is most likely to be denied, it may be well to take time to explain it. Attitudinal

criteria are specified in many ways, some of which seem to conflict with others. But whether one speaks of reasonableness, openness, sensitivity, or authenticity, he is dealing with such dispositional or attitudinal criteria. Furthermore, whether one speaks of them or not, some of them are used by nearly everyone as warrants for the weight given to a particular belief. Of course, different people use different criteria, or the same person may use different criteria in diverse areas of concern. The classic view was that if a belief seemed reasonable a certain weight was attached to it, and some things were accepted as self-evident. While modern philosophers are right in being more suspicious, the probable difference is that the ancients were more honest. Indeed, there does not seem to be much difference between this and pragmatism except that pragmatists claim to understand more clearly the role of feelings and attitudes in the initiation and termination of inquiry. In like fashion functionalism seems inevitably to use some form of homeostasis as a criterion, and existentialism is perhaps the most obvious case of all.

The relationship between attitude and belief will be taken up later when the claim to knowledge by reason alone is considered. Before returning to the main thread of the argument, however, the fact that we are presently faced with a **decision** between precision and comprehensiveness may be stressed. In the light of what has been said, it should be obvious that the author thinks that metaphysical statements may be meaningfully asserted and that both logical and empirical reasons can be provided in support (in the extended meanings of terms meaningful, logical, and empirical). Nevertheless it is just as important to note that the relation between metaphysical statements and other statements is also like the relation between decision and action. While it is true that the meaning of the term decision may logically entail some operational consequences, that relation is different than the actual making of a decision and the consequent action. Thus, the option may be considered from both the perspective of the speculative philosopher and the active participant. In the latter connection the author cannot avoid presenting the following puzzles for the reader to ponder. Which is more odd: the man who claims to have opted for logical precision and clarity, and proceeds to act as if many metaphorical, symbolic, and other types of language had empirical reference (in the extended sense); or the man who claims to have opted for comprehensiveness and proceeds to act as if no language except that which is rigorously precise and clear is **really** meaningful? Which is more odd: the man who claims to have opted for precision, and proceeds to act as if many propositions besides those which are scientifically verifiable are true; or the man who claims to have opted for comprehensiveness, and proceeds to act as if nothing is **really** true except what is scientifically verifiable?

Returning now to a clearer specification of the alternatives, one may ask about the meaning and function of the demand for rigorous logical precision. To begin with, it would appear that the most ideal and exact form of argument has been chosen as the paradigm—namely, an analytic argument. The question at once arises, can all arguments be assessed by the same procedure and standards? May not the assertion that an argument does not even fulfill the requisite conditions for such rigorous logical analysis amount to the same thing as the recognition that it is not an analytic argument? Is such a position simply another form of idealism? Does it even make sense to use the phrase rigorous logical precision in this manner? For a more realistic point of view, one might agree with Aristotle

that one ought not to seek more precision than the subject matter allows. It is more sensible and practical to develop ways of analysing the diverse kinds of arguments and reasoning processes that are actually used rather than setting up an ideal type and setting aside all arguments that fail to live up to its standards.[3]

In this light the decision for comprehensiveness seems to involve much less of a sacrifice of precision. But if the imperative function of the demand for precision seems less forceful, that does not mean the imperative function of the common assertion about being inevitably involved in the metaphysics becomes proportionately more forceful. For if one once notes the tentativeness and the qualified manner in which metaphysical propositions may logically be asserted, he is hardly likely to consider a metaphysical construction the "foundation" of his thought. It is more like the broadest and most tenuous context. Thus, the forcefulness of the imperative toward comprehensiveness is likewise weakened, and one must call attention to the tendency to "extend" terms like logic, reasons, consistency, and truth to the most tenuous extreme, while continuing to use them imperatively as if they carried the most precise and certain weight. Is a failure to distinguish adequately between the theoretical and practical functions of the concern for comprehensiveness the source of this tendency?

The case of comprehensiveness may now be considered from two perspectives. First, from the theoretical and speculative perspective. Consider the following exchange:

A. I am concerned with comprehensiveness, for consideration of the relationships of terms and propositions, but to experience, which is non-verbal and non-propositional in form. It is a necessary part of the attempt to order or integrate experience rather than be overwhelmed by the confusion of an over-abundance of facts.

B. Is it not a better procedure to assume some order and proceed to fit the pieces together in a manner analogous to working out picture puzzles—except that in this case there is no box with the picture on the front. It is better to give careful attention to details, such as the outline and color of pieces, and then fit them together one by one by a process of trial and error.

A. Now you may see what I meant when I said earlier that one is inevitably involved in metaphysics, either explicitly or implicitly. For, not only is order assumed, but there is a selectivity involved in the kind of order looked for....

B. Wait just a moment, please. Of course one looks for a specific kind of order, not always for the same kind. It is reasonable to expect the same kind of order in working picture puzzles as that which has proved functional in the past. But that does not mean it is reasonable to approach everything with models, concepts and principles that were primarily developed and "extended" from the working of picture puzzles.

A. But isn't the latter precisely what our logician friends have done with their dedication to the rules of formal logic, and the scientific method, and what you seem to have done with the problem-solving technique?

This brief dialogue may serve as a reminder of several points. First, that any comprehensive metaphysical construction which seeks to be adequate to such diverse areas of interest as physics and psychology, must make some sacrifice with respect to specificity and precision. This fact is nicely illustrated by Max Black's distinction

[3] Stephen Toulmin has provided a persuasive rationale and schemetism for the former type of analysis in his *Uses of Argument,* Cambridge University Press, 1958. Toulmin conceives logic as an explanatory science of actual reasoning, raises questions about its practical application, and rejects the implicit model of mathematics as a "confused conception" (Preface).

between "analogue models," which reveal isomorphic similarity, and "scale models," which are attempts to provide replicas on a different scale.[4] The lack of specificity and precision is the beauty (the word is used advisedly) of such models. The functionality of the model is directly related to it. The same flexibility and ambiguity is exactly what is required of philosophical categories. They dare not be too precise or they lose their comprehensiveness. Furthermore, it is not only philosophers, but also common men and scientists, who find such models and categories functional.

Second, there are grave dangers in taking "hints"[5] from one area of experience (whether machines, or organisms, or electromagnetic fields) and applying them over much broader ranges of experience. The dangers are comparable to those in all processes of induction. The major problems appear to be the lack of an exact test, and the flexibility of the models. Thus, slight adjustments may be made without the change of models which others may consider necessary. The attempts to make adjustments in substance philosophy in order to make it fit modern knowledge, the ability to assert things which seem clearly inconsistent with it, and the apparent selectivity which results are all cases in point.

But it is also true, as Ian Ramsey argues in his treatment of "disclosure models," that such hints may disclose new insight.[6] They also liberate one from restrictive perspectives which have seemed self-evident before. Nevertheless, another tension arises at this point—that between adequacy to a given area of experience and comprehensiveness. Here a clear option for adequacy may be in order if one opts for an inductive procedure based on phenomenological experience. This approach is as concerned to use comprehensiveness as a test of models, with a careful notation of their weaknesses, as to take up the constructive task of universal application when that appears fruitful.

Third, while pluralism may be a form of metaphysics, it may also be conscious decision for adequacy within the context of an honest judgment that the time is not ripe for the constructive task . Finally, from the viewpoint of the speculative philosopher, the major function of metaphysics may be to serve as a critical, liberating discipline. For if it is true that an implicit metaphyscs leads to an unrecognzed selectivity, as the common assertion we are considering seems to suggest, then the answer may not be simply to recognize our selectivity by making it explicit. Rather, if metaphysics is truly speculative, its major function may be to educate and broaden one's imagination so that he may be open to possibilities he would otherwise fail to see. That would especially be true if one found one construction strong where another was weak, and vice versa. Used in this way, metaphysical models may serve to call attention to isomorphic similarities or disclose new insight in some instances without being applied universally. Indeed, several models may be applied in a single instance in order to reveal insights that no single model may be adequate to allow. Since there is no "forced" option within the liberty of the speculative experimental laboratory, one may postpone choice and allow both the tests of adequacy and comprehensiveness to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the alternatives. Of course, if one is convinced that one model or construct provides the best approach at all points, that is another matter. But history provides

[4] Cf. Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1962).

[5] Cf. William Christian, "Some Uses of Reason" in Leelerc, Ivor, *The Relevance of Whitehead* (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1961).

[6] Cf. *Models and Mystery* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1964).

ample evidence that premature commitment has been restrictive.

From the perspective of the participant, the case for comprehensiveness is somewhat different. Here one's concerns are practical and his options are forced, for actions must be taken and to delay action is itself a form of action. Perhaps the desire for unity, which lies near the heart of the metaphysical impulse, is as nearly related to an ethical concern for integrity, an esthetic interest in harmony, and a religious search for wholeness and reconciliation brings one into very close proximity to as to logic and science. This, of course, the second claim to knowledge by reason alone. For in the practical sphere action must be taken and choices made. In that process it is nearly impossible to sustain the detachment of the speculative arena. Emotional attachments are formed and one gets an investment in those models and concepts and concerns that have been functional in the process.

The maintenance of coherence (in the senses of integrity, harmony and wholeness) is in t e n s i o n with adequacy (in the senses of responsiveness, sensitivity and openness). Comprehensiveness is also in tension with precision and specificity. Thus are arguments in ethics between "principles" ethics and "situational" and "response" types of ethics. It is in this light that one may note the normative and prescriptive tone of the common assertion about metaphysics. It has the same general warrant as the general assertion that action is always concrete and situational so one had better be conscious of the fact and careful in its consideration. Or, that action is always response and so on. Of course, general decisions about over-all approach and style are essential, and so are specific decisions which are situational and responsive. Therefore, the imperative of the common assertion has the same warrant as the other imperatives in the practical sphere. One must make his decision and make some sacrifices. However, it is somewhat troubling for the assertion to take on too much force in the speculative sphere and one might wish that philosophers would take more advantage of their freedom from the necessity of decision.

For reasons which have already been stated, the claim to reason by knowledge alone will only be treated in passing. A few key points will be made. The first is to indicate the tension between comprehensiveness and the claim for knowledge by reason alone. In the name of comprehensiveness one must ask about the relation of belief and attitude. It is surely somewhat ironical that positions whose catchword is action in accordance with nature, or whose basic model is one of adjustment, should have to be told that while one may not have wished or made it so, one must learn to live intelligently with the facts about the relation of belief and attitude—or else these dynamic tendencies have a way of working out their own catastrophic sanctions. Can one really relate to modern psychology and fail to see its import for such claims? It is perhaps possible to do so with a faculty psychology, or a substantive conception of reason within the framework of substance metaphysics. But if one should attempt to maintain it within a process philosophy and the basic conceptual model of field relativity it would seem to be as near a case to outright contradiction as one could hope to find in a metaphysical system. Charles Stevenson's work is especially helpful at this point.[7] When the role of attitudinal and dispositional forces is clarified they seem to be as significant in the search for, and need of, a sense of coherence as they are in the "leap of faith." It occurred to the author recently that with the aid of P. H. Nowell-Smith's concept of "con-

[7] Cf. *Ethics and Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943).

textual implication" one could make out a good case for the fact that many metaphysical arguments are clearly centered around dispositional agreement.

Second, when the practical sphere is entered, it is interesting to note how many of those who opted for comprehension over precision in the speculative sphere become proponents of precision when it is a matter of using symbols and metaphors. In other words, the tension between precision and adequacy is focused in a new way.

Finally, the normative and prescriptive function of the claim to knowledge by reason alone may be noted. Its results are that metaphysics is given a priority over theology and ethics, integrity gets priority over responsiveness, and a kerygmatic procedure is given priority over an apologetic one. Only the last statement will be developed. It concerns the tendency to so objectivize truth as to claim to state it without reference to one's own—or to others'—attitudes. As a consequence, little responsibility is taken for knowing one's audience in order to concern oneself with what will be heard, and not only with what is said. Of course, if the position taken here is correct, such responsiveness will depend more on psychology than upon one's logic or philosophical position. But getting such matters out into the light of day is probably a good portion of what has been meant by making one's metaphysics explicit.

Perhaps this article may indicate in some fashion how ethics may provide some feedback for metaphysics. For within the construct of field relativity one would hope for communication along a two-way street.