

EVIDENCE AND MEANING

Robert J. Fogelin

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HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

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Studies in Analytic Philosophy

By

ROBERT J. FOGELIN

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For
E.J.L.

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PREFACE

AT various stages I circulated portions of this work to colleagues for their praise and comments. While they were not niggardly in the former respect, they were absolutely unstinting in raising difficulties, with the net result that the manuscript took about three years longer to complete than I had anticipated. For this invaluable help that saved me from any number of serious mistakes I wish to thank most especially W. T. Jones, Morton O. Beckner, E. John Lemmon, and Douglas Greenlee.

The latter portion of this work concerning evaluative discourse has as its ancestor a doctoral dissertation written under Brand Blanshard and Alan Ross Anderson at Yale University. From Brand Blanshard I gained an appreciation of the positions I wished to reject, while Alan Ross Anderson helped me to formulate my criticisms in a clear and forceful manner. It is hard to imagine a more favourable conjunction of advisers.

I owe a special debt to Pomona College on two counts: for the support of a Trustee Fellowship during the summer of 1963, and, more importantly, for its patience with my notable lack of publication while I pursued this project.

Finally, I wish to thank Bernard Williams for the meticulous care with which he examined the text. His comments not only corrected many errors of detail but also forced fundamental revisions in some of the main theses of this work.

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Part One

INTRODUCTION

IN this work I shall examine a class of statements that I call *warrant statements*: statements that indicate something about the evidential backing for some further statement, action, or choice. It is the dual thesis of this work that natural languages abound with such statements and that a misunderstanding of their character by philosophers (and others) is the source of widespread confusion.

I have used the sub-title *Studies in Analytic Philosophy* in order to give the reader a rough idea of the methodology that I shall employ; the idea is rough since the title *analytic philosophy* covers a wide range of activities that bear at best a family resemblance to one another. On one approach an attempt is made to translate statements of the natural language into some preferred vocabulary, e.g. the statements of arithmetic are translated into the language of *Principia Mathematica* or mentalistic statements are translated into a purely behaviouristic language. This procedure, which I shall call reductionism, usually involves the austere rigor of the exact sciences; the techniques of symbolic logic are often used, and generally, the goal is to establish an exact synonymy between the *analysandum* and *analysans*. I shall not borrow trouble by offering technical criticisms of this technical enterprise; instead, I shall simply say that I do not propose to carry on philosophical analysis in this way.

Another approach to analysis is associated with the later Wittgenstein and a varied group of British and American philosophers. These philosophers are sometimes collected under the heading of ordinary language analysts, a heading, by the way, that is more misleading than helpful. While these philosophers

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differ widely in the techniques they employ (and even more widely in the doctrines they espouse), for the most part they share the following traits. In the first place they are rarely interested in establishing a reductionist thesis and thus they avoid the formal paraphernalia of reductionism. Most of them, I think, would not only argue that reductionism is difficult to carry out in detail but also mistaken in principle. Secondly, these philosophers tend to think that the main task of analysis is to resolve perplexities that are grounded in linguistic confusions. Finally, they seem to agree that an examination of the actual use of an expression in common parlance can be of some help in resolving perplexities that arise when the expression is employed in a philosophical context.

Wittgenstein is the leading figure in this movement, and while I shall not attempt a detailed exegesis of his difficult writing, I think a few remarks about his way of doing analysis will help to explain the procedures I shall use. A common mistake, and a mistake that obscures the whole point of his endeavours, is to suppose that Wittgenstein takes ordinary language as legislative for philosophical discourse, and thus considers any departure from ordinary discourse, as such, a mistake. This cannot possibly be his meaning, for on any number of occasions he tells us that we can speak as we please, introduce whatever conventions we like, provided only that we keep clearly in mind *what* we are doing and that *we* are doing it.

One of Wittgenstein's theses is that the philosopher often introduces new conventions for the use of ordinary expressions without realizing that he is doing so, and furthermore, without at the same time relinquishing the old conventions. When the old and new conventions are incompatible—as they sometimes are—this produces a particular sort of perplexity, a perplexity that is distinctively philosophical. This interference between the old conventions and the new convention is analogous to the interference between a mother tongue and a newly acquired language. Like the foreigner, the philosopher speaks with an accent, an accent that Wittgenstein could detect, and in his writings he tried to teach others to detect it as well.

Another feature of Wittgenstein's approach concerns the therapeutic character of his method. This medical analogy is often misunderstood, and the misunderstanding forms the basis of a common criticism. Wittgenstein is not interested in removing

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philosophical anxieties as such; he is not like the psychiatrist who would administer a drug that would cure a mental disorder even if the mechanism of the cure were totally obscure. He attempts to resolve a philosophical perplexity by showing us, or better, by exhibiting to us, the mistake that is the ground of our perplexity. When the therapy is successful, we are not only freed from a perplexity, we also understand why we were perplexed in the first place.

A pattern of analysis is complete, then, only if it resolves a philosophical perplexity through exhibiting the grounds that gave rise to the confusion. The claim that a traditional problem of philosophy is a pseudo-problem is, on the face of it, suspect; the mere fact that intelligent persons have taken the problem seriously gives *prima facie* reason to suppose that the problem is genuine. Thus if the analyst does nothing more than find a way of restating the issue so that the problematic character disappears, this can be taken as grounds for saying that the issue has been side-stepped, not solved. The goal of philosophical analysis is to exhibit the grounds of philosophical confusions and not to find ways of depleting the language so that the confusion can no longer arise.

The reader who has glanced at the contents of this work may find this declared preference for informal modes of analysis a bit surprising. The scattering of symbolic notation and the occurrence of paired sentences (one in plain language, the other in a contrived and artificial phraseology) suggests that I am doing analysis along reductionist lines. But to repeat, I am not interested in establishing a reductionist thesis. I use schemata (what other philosophers sometimes call models) in order to exhibit certain logical characteristics that have been the source of confusion. No grave issues depend upon the exact wording of these schemata, and thus I shall have no qualms about altering phrasing to cope with changing problems.

A persistent problem throughout this work concerns the amount of detail to be included within a proposed pattern of analysis (a phrase that I shall use interchangeably with 'schema'). The more details that can be successfully included within the suggested schema, the more convincing it will appear; but attempting to cope with details greatly increases the chances of error, and even an incidental error tends to cast doubt upon an entire enterprise. I have not found any systematic way of coping

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with this problem. When I have felt confident, I have developed analytic schemata in sufficient detail to account for subtle differences between closely related sentences in the natural language. At other times, I have frankly admitted that the analytic schemata cannot account for some striking distinctions in the natural language. When I have been forced to take the second course, I have offered the excuse that my primary intention is to show that certain statements are warrant statements, and this can often be done without at the same time exhibiting distinctions between closely related warrant statements.

Thus this work is exploratory and programmatic. In no single case have I carried through a pattern of warrant statement analysis to anything like completion. In each case I have stopped when the main lines of procedure have been laid down and what I take to be a reasonable presumption has been created in its favour. I most certainly have not presented a detailed documentation of the claim that philosophers have generally misunderstood the character of warrant statements and thus been led into confusions. Except in Part Two, where I do examine texts concerned with the status of value judgments, I have contented myself with presenting ideal case studies of philosophical confusion, relying upon the reader to associate the confusion with the writings of specific philosophers. In many cases I think it will be all too obvious who it is that has made the mistake in question, but claims about how philosophers have argued are, after all, empirical claims, and since I have chosen not to weigh down the text with historical documentation, I have also largely avoided making historical claims.

The reader may find some of the specimen arguments here graced with the title 'ideal case studies of philosophical confusion' little more than straw men who are beheaded in a series of empty victories. *Who*, it will be asked, has ever argued in *that* fashion? And the answer sometimes will be, no one—or at least no one of importance. Then why make a fuss about these arguments? To this I have two replies; the first, I suppose, is tendentious, but perhaps the second is a little less so.

The first reply involves the assumption (or prejudice) that the argumentative structure of most philosophical systems, like the narrative element of most poems, is relatively simple. To put this in a way that is only initially paradoxical, philosophical systems

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are complex just because the philosopher tries to comprehend a wide range of material within a relatively few patterns of thought. Complexity arises, not in laying down the main lines of a position but in protecting the basic structure from the myriad of detailed criticisms. To oversimplify, it is not 'the bit where he says it' but 'the bit where he takes it back' that introduces complications. Now on this basis it should be possible to characterize (and not merely caricature) an important aspect of a philosophical position by means of a pattern of reasoning that has never been maintained in so simple a form. I think that many of the arguments presented in this work have, in this way, a counterpart in the philosophical tradition, but with the exception of Chapter VI, where I examine literature concerning evaluative discourse, I have not tried to document this claim. This documentation I accept as an outstanding debt.

The second justification for examining these arguments should be less controversial. Philosophers have often become exercised over questions that the non-philosopher (or the philosopher of some other persuasion) will consider trivial. 'How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?' This question has been subject to tiresome ridicule because it doesn't seem to matter how it is answered; the relationship between angels and pinheads is of no importance, not even to angels. Of course, those who discussed this question had more in mind (they were concerned about the principle of individuation for non-corporeal substances) and talked about angels and pinheads only by way of an apt example. 'Are there minds other than my own?' This question seems trivial in rather a different way; it does make a difference how it is answered—a great deal of difference—but the answer seems obvious. Certainly there are other minds; Alfred Tarski has a mind and I'm not Alfred Tarski. When a philosopher considers a question of this kind (one where the answer seems obvious) it is usually because there is some special difficulty in exhibiting the basis for what we take to be obvious. There are, then, at least two reasons for examining trivial problems. (1) They can serve as apt examples in the consideration of a serious philosophical issue, and (2) under analysis they can lead us to a serious philosophical issue. I would not admit that all of the problems examined in this work are trivial; going back to the first remark, I think that some of these patterns of argument, though simple, characterize the

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argumentative structure of historically important philosophical positions. But for some this excuse would be too pretentious, and for them I invoke the reasons enumerated in this paragraph.

From the very outset I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to J. L. Austin, whose classic 'Other Minds' is the ancestor of this work. Stephen Toulmin and J. O. Urmson have exploited some of Austin's insights, and I, in turn, have relied heavily on their writings. For rather different reasons, that will emerge in the text, I am also indebted to R. M. Hare and P. H. Nowell-Smith. Throughout I have assumed that the reader is familiar with recent British philosophy, and on this ground I have omitted most of the more obvious scholarly references. Furthermore, I have offered detailed criticism of the works of others only when this helps in explaining a difficult doctrine. In this way, I have preserved the one sure merit of this work, its brevity.

I

WARRANT STATEMENTS

I. THE IDEA OF A WARRANT STATEMENT

*A WARRANT statement is any statement that indicates something about the evidential backing available for some further statement.*¹ As an example, the following remark wears its warranting character on its grammatical sleeve:

There is strong evidence available on behalf of the claim:
‘There is life on Mars.’

Schematically, this expression has the form ‘ ϕ “ p ”’, where ‘ ϕ ’ is an expression referring to evidential backing, and ‘ p ’ names the assertion whose evidential backing is being assessed.

Now every warrant statement will have these two components, an expression that indicates something about evidential backing and an expression that refers to the proposition whose evidential backing is being assessed, but these two components are rarely marked off in the grammatically perspicuous fashion of the example given above. To begin with, we rarely refer to a statement by explicitly quoting the sentence that formulates it. Instead, we usually employ a dependent clause, for example:

There is strong evidence available *that* there is life on Mars.

¹ In Part Two this definition will be liberalized so that we can consider the evidential backing for things other than statements.