

(12)

PHILOSOPHER'S CORNER

"Philosopher's Corner" first appeared as a newsletter feature in RSN, No. 75 with an article by Dennis J. Darland. Here is Dennis's second article followed by another on a different subject by Tim St. Vincent. We welcome submissions on any philosophical subject. Thanks to Dennis and Tim for their thoughtful writings.

By Dennis J. Darland

In the last Philosopher's Corner, I said it was impossible to arrive at the results of science from logic and immediate experience. Why is this so? Russell in Human Knowledge admitted the irrefutability of sceptical solipsism. "From a group of propositions of the form 'A occurs', it is impossible to infer by deductive logic any other proposition asserting the existence of something." Thus the solipsist is sceptical of anything beyond his immediate experience.

This is sufficient to support my conclusion as stated, but I wish to show more. Suppose that it is true that the group G of propositions of the form 'A occurs' are true. Then what is G? According to the solipsist G must be present to immediate experience as well! It would have to be possible to find a necessary relation of meaning between the constituents of G and the constituents of the facts to which they correspond. But then it must be possible to infer the existence of these relations from the truth of G. But this contradicts the solipsist's contention. (Russell's analysis of the meaning relation varied. At some points it might have been identity, but even then some further fact must exist when G is believed, such as acquaintance.) I as well have been unable to detect such relations in immediate experience. If the solipsist's position were tenable there would have to be a self evident phenomenology of the meaning relation. Some of Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations could be taken as criticisms of such potential phenomenological relations. This does not prove that the solipsist's position is false, but only that he cannot consistently assert his position.

Wittgenstein in the Philosophical Investigations (38): "Naming appears as a queer connexion of a word with an object.--And you really get such a queer connexion when the philosopher tries to bring out the relation between name and thing by staring at the object in front of him and repeating a name or even the word 'this' innumerable times."

I cannot help but repeat here the story of Russell's in Human Knowledge. He tells of receiving "a letter from an eminent logician, Mrs. Christine Ladd Franklin, saying she was a solipsist, and was surprised that there were no others." Her surprise surprised Russell.

Wittgenstein's concern with the relation of a word to its meaning goes back to the Tractatus where the relation is taken to be one of picturing. The picturing relation is maintained to be an internal relation as opposed to Russell's external relation. (Philosophical Remarks [21]). However even by the Philosophical Remarks, Wittgenstein sees that picturing alone is insufficient. "How is a picture meant? The intention never resides in the picture itself, since, no matter how the picture is formed, it can be meant in different ways." (24) Wittgenstein considers various things which could constitute this internal relation (PI [39-201]). He ends up taking (in most cases), the meaning of a word to be its use. "For a large class of cases -- though not for all -- in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language." (PI [43]). Unfortunately there is not an internal relation between a word I am aware of and its use. Thus Wittgenstein's criticisms of other potential relations between a word and its meaning apply to his own as well. It may help to consider the use of a word when clarifying the meaning of a word in philosophy, but this use cannot be used to establish or justify one's relation of meaning between word and object.

It is my belief that Russell's analysis of meaning as a causal relation is closer to the truth when one is considering epistemological questions. Although it is not an internal relation as demanded by Wittgenstein, Wittgenstein himself is unable to provide such an internal relation.

Two Dimensional Utilitarianism

By Tim St. Vincent

Bertrand Russell thought of Utilitarianism as the moral philosophy that is inspired by feelings of compassion. However it conflicts with another compassion inspired principle, which Russell expressed in "The Fate of the Jews" by writing "That millions should have to put up with minor political disabilities is not so grave an evil as that hundreds should suffer the extreme of torture and agony." I will call this idea the "Principle of Personal Tragedy" (PPT). Two Dimensional Utilitarianism (TDU) reconciles this idea with the idea that one should minimize foreseeable harm.

Imagine that an ultra-reactionary politician proposes a bill outlawing artificial voice boxes. In defense of his bill, he argues that leaving a few people (artificial voice box candidates) unable to speak is better than subjecting millions of people to the unpleasant experience of hearing people speak through artificial voice boxes. This bill could be justified on utilitarian grounds, but it is mean-spirited because it violates the Principle of Personal Tragedy.

PPT states that, when all else is equal, having one person suffer a tragedy is worse than having any number of people suffer nuisances. Of course, the concept of personal tragedy should be analyzed. A tragedy is,