

Vincent Descombes Paradigms of necessity

I. Philosophy as a grammar of modal verbs

Wenn von Graphologie, Physiognomik und dergleichen die Rede ist, hört man immer wieder den Satz: "... es muß freilich der Charakter sich irgendwie in der Schrift ausdrücken ..." 'Es muß', d.h.: dieses Bild wollen wir unter allen Umständen anwenden. (Es wäre nicht ganz unsinnig zu sagen, die Philosophie sei die Grammatik der Wörter "müssen" und "können"; denn so zeigt sie, was a priori und a posteriori ist.)

("Ursache und Wirkung: Intuitives Erfassen", *Philosophia* 6 (1976): 392-445 Rush Rhees, ed.)

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions*, p. 374.

II. The logicist account of modalities

It would be wrong to suggest that Wittgenstein formed his views on all these topics simply as to fit in with the picture-theory [...] There is, however, one exception to this; his view, expressed at 6.37, that 'there is only *logical* necessity', and at 5.525, that the possibility of a state of affairs is simply expressed by an expression's being a significant proposition, appears to be a pure exigency of the picture theory of the proposition [...] Thus the part of his views which seems to be nothing but a dogmatic consequence of the 'picture theory' is in fact his rejection of modality. Any sense of 'may', 'can', 'possible', other than that of '*logically* possible', would be unamenable to explanation in terms of the picture theory. (E. Anscombe, *Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, London, 1959, p. 80-81)

III. Two Philosophies of action

— The will as the bearer of the ethical

Now that such-and-such members [of my body] are subject to my will is *mere* fact; if I were suddenly so paralysed that nothing happened, the will would remain — I should still have willed; but this will is not merely an impotent thought of the thing's happening, but is of good and evil; and that, apart from the mere vulgar facts of what *happens*, is the interest of the will.

(Anscombe, IWT 81)

— Subtracting the change in the world from what I did

Let us not forget this: when 'I raise my arm', my arm goes up. And the problem arises: what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?

((Are the kinaesthetic sensations my willing?))

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §621

IV. The Occasionalist Argument

— Causation

If bodies had in themselves the force of moving, the stronger would overpower those they encounter as efficient causes. But, as bodies are moved only by something other than themselves, their encounter is but an occasional cause which, because of their impenetrability, obliges the Mover or Creator to distribute His action. And, because God is bound to act in a simple and uniform way, He had to set Himself laws that are general, and the simplest possible, so that, when change was necessary, He changed as little as was possible and yet, by this behavior, He produced an infinity of different effects

(Nicolas Malebranche, *Dialogues on Metaphysics*, VII, XII, tr. Willis Doney, New York, Abaris Books, p. 161)

— Our volitions are powerless

It follows, Aristes, that by yourself you cannot move your arm, change place, situation, posture, do unto others either good or evil, make the least change in the universe. Here you are in the world without any power, as incapable of motion as a rock, dumb as a log, as it were. Your soul can be united to your body as closely as you please and be attached through it to all the bodies surrounding you, yet what advantage will you derive from this imaginary union? What will you do to move merely the end of your finger, to utter merely a one-syllable word? If, alas, God does not come to your aid, you will only make efforts in vain; you will only form desires that are without power. For, on a little reflection, do you really know just what you need do to pronounce the name of your best friend, to bend or straighten the finger you use most? (*Dialogues*, VII, XIII, p. 161-163)

— I am powerless

[...] I don't even know what dispositions of my vocal organs are required to utter what I unhesitatingly say. The working of these organs is beyond me. The variety of words, tones, cadences yields seemingly infinite detail. God knows this detail: He alone ordains the motion at the very instant of my desires. Yes, it is He who exhales the air's which is also makes me breathe [...] In fact, it is not I who breathe; I breathe in spite of myself. It is not I who speak to you: I simply will to speak to you.

(*Dialogues*, VII, XIV, p. 165)

— Willing to move one's arm

The mind itself does not act as much as is imagined. I know that I will and that I will freely; I have no reason to doubt it that is stronger than the inner sensation I have of myself. Nor do I deny it. But I deny that my will is the true cause of my arm's movement [...] I even see clearly that there can be no relation between the volition I have to move my arm and the agitation of the animal spirits, i.e. of certain tiny bodies whose motion and figure I do not know and which choose certain nerve canals from a million others I do not know in order to cause in me the motion I desire through an infinity of movements I do not desire. (Nicolas Malebranche, *The search after Truth, Elucidation XV, Reply to the fifth proof*, translated by Thomas M. Lennon, Cambridge UP, 1997, p. 669)

— The power to move one's arm

(a) Wrong answer according to Malebranche

If they say that the union of my mind with my body consists in the fact that God has given me the *power* to move my arm, just as He has given to my body the power to make me feel pleasure and pain in order to apply me to this body and interest me in its preservation, then surely they suppose what is at issue and go in a circle. They have no clear idea of this power the soul has over the body [...]

(b) Correct answer

If they say that the union of my mind with my body consists in the fact that God wills that when I will my arm to move, animal spirits disperse in the muscles of which it is composed in order to move it in the way I wish, I clearly understand this explanation and I accept it. But this is to say exactly what I maintain; for since my will determines the practical will of God, it is evident that my arm will be moved not by my will, which in itself is impotent, but by God's, which cannot fail to have its effect. (ibid., p. 670)

Phenomenology of the will

But, they will say, I know through the inner sensation of my action that I truly have this power; therefore, I am not mistaken in believing it. I reply that when they move their arm they have the inner sensation of the actual volition by which they move it; and they are not mistaken in believing that they have this volition. They have also the inner sensation of a certain effort accompanying this volition, and they also believe that they make this effort. Finally, I grant that they have an inner sensation that the arm is moved during this effort; and on this assumption I also agree to what they say, that the movement or sensation of the soul, which is given us to make us understand our weakness, and to give us an obscure and confused sensation of our strength, is by itself able to impart motion to animal spirits, or to determine them. I deny that there is a relation between our thoughts and the motion of matter. (ibid., p. 670)

A footnote on being conscious of the movement of my arm

But, they will say, I know through the inner sensation of my action that I truly have this power; therefore, I am not mistaken in believing it. I reply that when they move their arm they have the inner sensation of the actual volition by which they move it; and they are not mistaken in believing that they have this volition. They have also the inner sensation of a certain effort accompanying this volition, and they also believe that they make this effort. Finally, I grant that they have an inner sensation that the arm is moved during this effort; and on this assumption I also agree to what they say, that the movement or sensation of the soul, which is given us to make us understand our weakness, and to give us an obscure and confused sensation of our strength, is by itself able to impart motion to animal spirits, or to determine them. I deny that there is a relation between our thoughts and the motion of matter. (ibid., p. 670)

IV. Wittgenstein's Occasionalism in the *Notebooks*

— Raising my arm

NB 20.10.16

At any rate, I can imagine carrying out the act of will for raising my arm, but that my arm does not move. (E.g. a sinew is torn.) True, but, it will be said, the sinew surely moves and that just shews that the act of will related to the sinew and not to the arm. But let us go farther and suppose that the sinew did not move and so on. We should then arrive at the position that the act of will does not relate to a body at all, and so that in the ordinary sense there is no such thing as the act of the will.

(*Notebooks 1914-1916*, p. 86)

— “I am powerless”

NB 11.6.16

I cannot bend the happenings of the world to my will: I am completely powerless. (p. 73)

— My will and the world

NB 5.7.16 (= *Tractatus* 6.373-374)

The world is independent of my will.

Even if everything that we want were to happen, this would still only be, so to speak, a grace of fate, for what would guarantee it is not any logical connection between will and world, and we could not in turn will the supposed connection. (p. 73)

NB 8.7.16

That is why we have the feeling of being dependent on an alien will.

There are two godheads : the world and my independent I. (p. 74)

— Are there things that I do?

NB 4.11.16

The consideration of willing makes it look as if one part of the world were closer to me than another (which would be intolerable). But, of course, it is undeniable that in the popular sense there are things that I do and other things not done by me. In this way, then, the will would not confront the world as its equivalent, which must be impossible. (p. 88)

— From the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations*

As Wittgenstein asks in *Philosophical Investigations* (§644) : “Did not your intention [of what you are ashamed] reside also in what you *did*?”. ‘What happens’ include ‘actions’, in the sense of the word in which ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are predicated of actions. But the philosophy of the *Tractatus* could not allow this to be so; hence the chimerical ‘will’ which effects nothing in the world, but only alters the ‘limits’ of the world. (Anscombe, IWT 172)

VI. The logical “must”

Again, when you say, "I grant you that you can't know when A has pain, you can only conjecture it", you don't see the difficulty which lies in the different uses of the words "conjecturing" and "knowing". What sort of impossibility were you referring to when you said you couldn't know? Weren't you thinking of a case analogous to that when one couldn't know whether the other man had a gold tooth in his mouth because he had his mouth shut? Here what you didn't know you could nevertheless imagine knowing; it made sense to say that you saw that tooth although you didn't see it; or rather, it makes sense to say that you

don't see his tooth and therefore it also makes sense to say that you do. When on the other hand, you granted me that a man can't know whether the other person has pain, you do not wish to say that as a matter of fact people didn't know, but that it made no sense to say they knew (and therefore no sense to say they don't know). If therefore in this case you use the term "conjecture" or "believe", you don't use it as opposed to "know". That is, you did not state that knowing was a goal which you could not reach, and that you have to be contented with conjecturing; rather, there is no goal in this game. Just as when one says "You can't count through the whole series of cardinal numbers", one doesn't state a fact about human frailty but about a convention which we have made. Our statement is not comparable, though always falsely compared, with such a one as "it is impossible for a human being to swim across the Atlantic"; but it is analogous to a statement like "there is no goal in an endurance race". And this is one of the things which the person feels dimly who is not satisfied with the explanation that though you can't know ... you can conjecture ...

(*The Blue Book*, p. 53)

VII. "Aristotelian Necessities"

Après avoir tâché d'éclaircir ce que c'est que le vraisemblable, il est temps que je hasarde une définition du nécessaire dont Aristote parle tant, et qui seul peut nous autoriser à changer l'histoire et à nous écarter de la vraisemblance. Je dis donc que le nécessaire, en ce qui regarde la poésie, n'est autre chose que *le besoin du poète pour arriver à son but ou pour y faire arriver ses acteurs*. Cette définition a son fondement sur les diverses acceptions du mot grec *anagkaion* qui ne signifie pas toujours ce qui est absolument nécessaire, mais aussi quelquefois ce qui est seulement utile à parvenir à quelque chose. (*Discours de la tragédie et des moyens de la traiter selon le vraisemblable et le nécessaire*, Seuil, L'intégrale, p. 840).

(Pierre Corneille, *Discours de la tragédie et des moyens de la traiter selon le vraisemblable et le nécessaire*, Seuil, L'intégrale, p. 840).

VIII. The three paradigms

Now we have various paradigms in this case. One is *regularity*. Another : we say, "It's necessary that he'll come here" — we cannot get on without him; or something nasty will happen if he doesn't. So here if we say a thing is necessary, there must be something that goes wrong if it doesn't happen. — Or we might have a game in which some moves are necessary and not others.

"Here the rule say you must turn; here you may go whichever way you like."

What is necessary is determined by the rules. — We might then ask, "Was it necessary or arbitrary to give these rules?". And here we might say that a rule was arbitrary if we made it just for fun and necessary if having this particular rule were a matter of life and death.

We must distinguish between a necessity in the system and a necessity of the whole system.

L. Wittgenstein, *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics, Cambridge 1939*, from the notes of R.G. Bosanquet, Norman Malcolm, Rush Rhees, and Yorick Smythies, edited by Cora Diamond, The University of Chicago Press, 1975, p. 241.

IX. Natural necessity

We have an idea of compulsion. If a policeman grabs me and shoves me through the door, we say I am compelled. But if I walk up and down, we say I move freely. But it is objected: "If you knew all the laws of nature, and could observe all the particles etc., you would no longer say you were moving freely, you would see that a man cannot do anything else." — But in the first place, this is not how we use the expression "he can't do anything else". Although it is *conceivable* that if we had a mechanism which would show all this, we would change our terminology — and say, "He's as much compelled as if a policeman shoved him." We'd give up the distinction then; and if we did, I would be very sorry. (LFM 242)

X. Practical necessity

— Either you do this ... or something unpleasant will happen

Tractatus 6.422

Der erste Gedanke bei der Aufstellung eines ethischen Gesetzes von der Form "Du sollst ..." ist: Und was dann, wenn ich es nicht tue? Es ist klar, daß die Ethik nichts mit Strafe und Lohn im gewöhnlichen Sinne zu tun hat. Also muß diese Frage nach den Folgen einer Handlung belanglos sein. - Zum Mindesten dürfen diese Folgen nicht Ereignisse sein. Denn etwas muß doch an jener Fragestellung richtig sein. Es muß zwar eine Art von ethischem Lohn und ethischer Strafe geben, aber diese müssen in der Handlung selbst liegen (Und das ist auch klar, daß der Lohn etwas Angenehmes, die Strafe etwas Unangenehmes sein muß.)

— The moral "ought"

Was heißt das Wort "soll"? ein Kind soll das tun, heißt: wenn es das nicht tun, dann wird das und das Unangenehme eintreten. Lohn und Strafe. Das Wesentliche daran ist: der andere wird bezogen, etwas zu tun. Ein Soll hat also nur Sinn, wenn hinter dem Soll etwas steht, das ihm Nachdruck gibt — eine Macht, die straft und belohnt. Ein Soll an sich ist unsinnig.

L. Wittgenstein, *Werkausgabe*, t. III : *Wittgenstein und der Wiener Kreis*, Francfort, Suhrkamp, 1984, p. 118

— Why be Moral?

Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water and if I were to pour out a gallon over it. I said that so far as facts and propositions are concerned there is only relative value and relative good, right, etc. And let me, before I go on, illustrate this by a rather obvious example. The right road is the road which leads to an arbitrarily predetermined end and it is quite clear to us all that there is no sense in talking about the right road apart

from such a predetermined goal. Now let us see what we could possibly mean by the expression, "the absolutely right road." I think it would be the road which everybody on seeing it would, with logical necessity, have to go, or be ashamed for not going. And similarly the absolute good, if it is a describable state of affairs, would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would necessarily bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about. And I want to say that such a state of affairs is a chimera. No state of affairs has, in itself, what I would like to call the coercive power of an absolute judge. (*A Lecture on Ethics, Philosophical Review* 74,1965 3-12).

XI. Conventional necessity

— A reality corresponds to the word "perhaps"

It is unclear what reality we should say corresponds here. I don't mean we do not give them a meaning. And I *might* do something like this : I say "It's very uncertain whether Smith will come"; I draw a picture of his entering; then I point and say "This is 'perhaps'". (LFM 248)

— A reality corresponds to the proposition " $2+2 = 4$ "

To say : "A reality corresponds to ' $2+2=4$ ' is like saying "A reality corresponds to 'two'. It is like saying a reality corresponds to a rule, which would come to saying : "It is a useful rule, *most* useful — we could not do without it for a thousand reasons, not just *one*". (LFM 249)