

ON REFUSING TO PLAY THE SCEPTIC'S GAME*

I

PARADIGM-CASE arguments were set out to meet epistemological scepticism and to refute in a short decisive way, without even the need to examine them in detail, paradoxical metaphysical claims. Stroud, J. J. Thomson and Rorty think they utterly fail to do so.¹ I shall argue that supplemented by a perfectly innocuous verificationist argument, a distinct argument of Moore's, given a limited sphere of application and taken as also involving the argument from a non-vacuous contrast, the argument from the paradigm-case presents a decisive argument against such forms of scepticism. If it is not sound, transcendental arguments will also be undermined but if it is sound, they are unnecessary.

The epistemological sceptic is hardly like a moral sceptic or religious sceptic. His scepticism is much more extensive. He may introduce his sceptical doubts by challenging how it is that we know that the mailbox we see on a Toronto corner is really red. But he, of course, is after bigger game, he wants to know how it is possible to know anything at all about the world around us. He is quite as aware of what our practices are as is the non-sceptic. He knows that if I doubt that the mailbox below my apartment is really red, there are ways, given the assumption of the public

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¹ Richard Rorty, "Verificationism and Transcendental Arguments," *Nous*, Vol. V, (February, 1971), Barry Stroud, "Transcendental Arguments," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LXV, (1968) and Judith Jarvis Thomson, "Private Languages," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. I, (January, 1964). Stroud's essay has been reprinted in T. Penelhum and J.J. MacIntosh (eds.), *The First Critique: Reflections on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* and Thomson's essay has been reprinted in Stuart Hampshire (ed.), *Philosophy of Mind*. Page references given in the text to Stroud and Thomson will be to these two books.

world of material objects, to settle that doubt. But, as Stroud puts it, "that there is such a world of material objects at all is a matter of contingent fact, and the sceptic challenges us to show how we know it. According to him, any justification for our belief will have to come from within experience, and so no adequate justification can ever be given." (p. 55)

In showing how paradigm-case arguments can be deployed to meet such sceptical arguments, it is well to characterize what I take to be a paradigm-case argument and say something about what I take to be its proper scope. Suppose we have a sceptic who professes to doubt whether we can ever see any red things and indeed that there are any material objects to see. The paradigm-case argument starts by asking him to translate into the concrete. If he has such general doubts, then he must have certain particular doubts as well. Given that the sceptic doubts whether we can ever know there are any material objects at all and given that he is using 'mailbox', 'red', 'see' and the like in the ordinary ways in which they are used, then he must also doubt that it can be known that there is a red mailbox below my apartment. But if the phrase 'red mailbox' has any meaning, then what we see, when we are stationed in a certain position below my apartment, have normal eyesight, are generally normal, the lighting conditions are normal and the like, is a red mailbox, if anything is. If such a man in such a condition and in such circumstances has such experiences, we have a clear and indisputable instance of seeing a red mailbox. If these conditions obtain, if he has these experiences, then, if 'red mailbox' is a descriptive phrase, it follows that he must admit that there are red mailboxes. And if I can know that there are such red mailboxes, then I can know that there are material objects and I can know that I can sometimes see red things.

If 'red mailbox' is a descriptive phrase, then it must make a *non-vacuous* contrast; that is to say, we must at least be able to *conceive* of what would have to be done for it to be *possible* to identify a 'red mailbox'; if that cannot be done, then we have no understanding of the putative descriptive phrase in question. But we do have an understanding of that descriptive phrase and we do understand the conditions under which we would use it to make

what we would claim to be a true statement and we do understand under what conditions we would use it to make what we would claim to be a false statement and thus 'red mailbox' does make a non-vacuous contrast. Now if I in fact have what counts as having the experience of being aware of a red mailbox, then there are red mailboxes and thus there are material objects and it is plainly the case that sometimes we see red things. They are paradigms—that is, obvious and indisputable examples—of material objects and seeing such a mailbox is a paradigm of what it is to see a material object. If anything is a material object, such an object is and if knowing that it exists is not a case of knowing that a material object exists or seeing a red thing, then nothing is.

However, it is just here where I seem at least to fall into Stroud's trap. He remarks that "the truth of such conditionals does not threaten the sceptic; it is precisely because they are true that he is able to challenge all by considering only one or two examples. In addition to establishing conditionals of this sort, then, one would also have to show that it is false that there is no knowledge of the external world. But any attempt to show that by an appeal to other empirical facts would lead back onto the sceptic's treadmill." (p. 57)

Where the key term involved in a paradigm-case argument is plainly a purely descriptive term and not at all normative or theoretical or indeed even theory-laden, the argument that Stroud gives here does not go through, for if one accepts, as Stroud does, that there are paradigm-cases where we have the best *possible* case of a claiming to know that there is a red mailbox, we have *eo ipso* the best *possible* case of a claiming to know that there is at least one material object.² But then if that doesn't

² It could be replied, concerning my limitation of the paradigm-case argument to purely descriptive terms, that there are no such terms. They are all in part theory-laden and/or normative as well. And since this is so, there is the ever present danger that there will be a conflict between what, given the paradigm exemplar, would be said to be an X and what, given the criteria for X and a descriptive definition, would be said to be an X. Where there is actually such a conflict, paradigm-case arguments, as Passmore has argued, are without force. But the point is—the criticism would continue—this is always or nearly always the case. I have examined such arguments at some length in my *Reason and Practice*, pp. 457-461. Not all terms, I argue, are so theory-laden or

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count as knowing that there is at least one material object, not only nothing does but nothing *could*, logically could, count as a knowing that there is at least one material object. But then the very phrase 'material object' makes no non-vacuous contrast and thus it makes no sense to assert, deny or even doubt that there are material objects. And if this is so, 'red mailbox' also makes no non-vacuous contrast and thus it makes no sense to assert, deny or even doubt that there are red mailboxes.

Stroud believes that the sceptic could make all the empirical distinctions and discriminations that the non-sceptic does and indeed even conceivably could make while still intelligibly denying that if he were to experience thus and so, he would know that there are red mailboxes and thus material objects. He could, Stroud wants to say, just know what looked like or appeared to be red mailboxes and still not know or even *be able* to know if they really were red mailboxes. But if 'looks like' makes a non-vacuous contrast with 'really is' or 'appearance' with 'reality', then it must in turn be possible to describe situations—things we could at least conceivably experience—such that, if they were to obtain, they would constitute an indisputable instance of something looking like a red mailbox but not really being one and we must also be able to describe situations such that, if they were to obtain, they would constitute an indisputable instance of something looking like a red mailbox and indeed really being one.

My argument here might be thought to be indecisive and indeed even question begging, for, as it stands, I do not assert that there are paradigmatic instances of what 'red mailbox' refers to but only that we must at least be able to conceive what we would have to become acquainted with or in some other way experience in order for there to be such instances. However, it is natural to object that this does not take me to the promised land. For, in trying to refute scepticism, I must in addition go on to assert that there are actually such instances. But in doing this I beg the question, for I have simply denied, without giving any grounds

normative and, where they are not, there is not this conflict between criteria and paradigm exemplars and paradigm-case arguments are appropriate for such terms.

for my denial, what the sceptic doubts. The difficulty is, a critic could claim, that I have at best only shown that *if it is possible* to know that there are red mailboxes, then to have such and such experiences in such and such a context would be a case of knowing that there are red mailboxes and hence of knowing that there are material objects. But my argument has not in the least established, it is natural to object, that I can be certain that there are red mailboxes and hence we are back to square one.

We are not. Recall that in characterizing the paradigm-case argument, I said initially that it should be limited to plain descriptive terms and that it needs to be supplemented by an innocuous verification principle and a distinct argument of Moore's. The paradigm-case argument was actually such a cluster of arguments when it was functioning unselfconsciously—and indeed without the label—in the work of Malcolm and Ambrose, for example, during the period of the Schilpp volume on Moore.³ And this in effect is how Flew employs it in his latest extended defence of the paradigm-case argument.⁴ It is this *cluster* of arguments that is in my judgment an effective refutation of epistemological scepticism and indeed a more effective argument against epistemological scepticism than the various transcendental arguments.

But to make its force apparent, I must now show how Moore's distinct argument should enter in here. Moore claims that while the sceptic can state his arguments in such a way that they are not invalid, the non-sceptic can also put his argument in a non-fallacious way, e.g.: if there are red mailboxes, then there are material objects. There are red mailboxes. Thus there are material objects. The point Moore calls our attention to is that, assuming the intelligibility of the premisses on both sides, both the sceptic and the non-sceptic can erect valid arguments for their respective claims. But then the issue, Moore points out, revolves around who has the more *certain premisses*. But surely if this is where it is at,

³ See for example the essays by Malcolm, Lazerowitz and Ambrose in P.A. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore*, and the essay by Ambrose reprinted in Richard Rorty (ed.), *The Linguistic Turn*.

⁴ Antony Flew, "Again the Paradigm," in Paul K. Feyerabend and Grover Maxwell (eds.), *Mind, Matter and Method: Essays in Philosophy and Science in Honor of Herbert Feigl*.

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it is much more plausible and reasonable to side with the non-sceptic and accept his premisses, which are plain empirical truisms, than to accept the esoteric and indeed, in terms of their very meaning, often very problematical premisses of the sceptic. Moreover, given our opposing valid arguments and the opposing premisses, are we not obviously more certain that such empirical truisms are true than we are of the correctness of any such esoteric philosophical contention? Moore thought, and rightly, that we are plainly far more certain that the truisms are true. And indeed can we not extend this further, namely would we not clearly be justified in asserting, under certain routinely specifiable circumstances, that we are more certain of the truth of the proposition that there are red mailboxes than we would be of the soundness of *any* sceptical philosophical argument, no matter how compellingly articulated and reasoned? It would *always* be more reasonable to believe that somewhere we had made a slip in our reasoning than to doubt, in the face of massive human experience, the truth of the proposition, say, that there are now some red mailboxes in Canada.

The paradigm-case argument forces the sceptic down to earth by making him translate into the concrete; it also makes him try to get clear about what could count, for his putative claim, as a case of its being true or of its being false, and, where the terms in question are plain descriptive terms and hence, as far as their meaning goes, conceptually unproblematic (for example, contrast 'red' and 'miracle'), the paradigm-case argument forces him to deny the truth of plain empirical truisms or, by stipulative redefinition, change the subject. If he does the latter, his claims are plainly arbitrary, but if he does the former, he has to deny the truth of some specific things we are quite certain of, e.g. that people presently living in urban areas of Canada are quite certain there are red mailboxes and hence, the paradigm-case argument also shows, they are quite certain that there are material objects. But then Moore's distinct argument leads us to recognize that it is also the case that we are more certain of the truth of such empirical truisms than we are of any sceptical argument and thus we are fully justified in rejecting such sceptical claims.

The sceptic might reply that if I avail myself of this Moorean

argument, I really do not refute scepticism, for then I am merely justified in asserting that my argument was more certain than the sceptic's, but not that I have decisively refuted him or proved him wrong or, as Rorty puts it, produced a 'knock-down' argument against scepticism. For while my argument is more reliable than the sceptic's—it is more reasonable to believe the things I believe than to think that we really do not know what the sceptic doubts we know—still I have not *proved* the sceptic mistaken. In this important sense it is trivially true that no matter of fact claim can be demonstrated. To claim this is to do little more than to give to understand that a matter of fact is not a logical truth, but this does not mean that matters of fact cannot be known. And indeed there are decisive reasons for thinking that it is at least sometimes known to be true that there are red mailboxes in Canada.

II

In defending a distinctive utilization of the paradigm-case argument, I have not argued "from the meaningfulness of a concept to the existence of actual instances of it"; I have not argued or assumed that if any word or even any descriptive term is meaningful, then there must be actual cases of what the term refers to; and I have not assumed, claimed or given to understand, that if it is logically possible for a word to be taught by reference to paradigmatic exemplars, then these paradigmatic exemplars must exist. There is no such short way from words or concepts to the world. If this is the purported utilization of the paradigm-case argument, it is a mistaken argument.⁵ But this is not how I am employing it and indeed, as I have shown in section I, it has been employed without making such mistaken claims. But my employment of the paradigm-case argument does involve an appeal to verificationism and—it is widely believed—such verificationist arguments are mistaken.

That such an employment of the paradigm-case argument

⁵ These points are well argued by Tziporah Kasachkoff in her "Ontological Implications of the Paradigm-Case Argument," *Philosophical Studies*, (Maynooth, Ireland), Vol. XVIII (1968).

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involves a verificationist argument can be seen from the following considerations. For any putative descriptive term 'X' to be a genuinely descriptive term, it must be at least *possible* that there be paradigmatic exemplars or at least instances of what 'X' purportedly stands for or represents. But since that is so, there must be some criteria for identifying X's for without this, we cannot recognize instances or paradigmatic exemplars of X.

However, it is just this verificationism, upon which paradigm-case arguments ultimately depend, which looks so suspicious. It has been argued that apparent X's are as good as real X's for fixing the use of 'X' in a language. 'X', it is claimed, can be meaningful and be identified, not by real X's but solely by apparent X's. Appearance is as good as reality for testing whether 'X' has a descriptive use. We could teach the meaning of 'is red' by using objects which merely appear to be red, if we did not give ourselves away to those we were teaching. If, for example, we used bright orange objects instead of red objects we could do this; but, it should be countered, it would still remain the case that those who came to understand 'red' only from being shown those examples and from knowing that 'red' was a colour-word, would still not have got the understanding of 'red' quite right. They would not get it quite right until they could distinguish between really red objects and bright orange objects and realize that the former were the genuine examples of red objects. Furthermore, if *everything we could conceivably (possibly) experience* would remain 'mere appearance', then there would be no non-vacuous contrast between 'appearance' and 'reality' and hence 'appearance' and 'reality' could do no descriptive or discriminatory work. For something to appear to be so, it must be possible for it really to be so; and, for us to understand what we are asserting when we say 'X appears to be Y', we must understand what we are asserting when we say 'X really is Y'. But without criteria for identity, such that 'X appears to be Y' can be discriminated from 'X really is Y', they make no non-vacuous contrast and if they make no non-vacuous contrast they fail to discriminate anything which could even count as a difference between appearance and reality and the words 'appearance' and 'reality' then would do no work. But this takes us back to verificationism, for to distinguish between

appearance and reality in such contexts we need it. But then it is not even intelligible, let alone true, to claim (try to claim) as both Stroud and Rorty do that appearance in such contexts is as good as reality.

However, the point still remains, it will be objected, that paradigm-case arguments rest on verificationism and verificationism is mistaken. Verificationists believe that there is no such thing as a man's *thinking* something to be so and its not being so, unless it is at least logically possible that it could be found out that it is not so. But to believe this is so—it is sometimes asserted—is simply to believe in a bit of empiricist mythology. But is it an empiricist myth or dogma, if we construe this verificationist claim, as both Rorty and I do, as only requiring a 'weak finding out', i.e. a confirming or infirming?

What centrally is involved in a verificationist argument is this: If a man maintains he has seen, has experienced, has encountered or knows of something he calls an 'erglig' and the *only* thing he can say concerning it is that he has had this erglig-experience or encounter or something of that order, then nothing is known about erglig and indeed 'erglig' is not even a meaningful word in a language. 'I have seen an erglig' only makes sense if it stands in some non-trivial inferential relations with other sentences—sentences which could be used to make statements which would confirm or infirm 'I have seen an erglig'. The person who tries to claim there are ergligs must use 'erglig' in such a manner that it makes a non-vacuous contrast. Otherwise 'erglig' does not describe anything that could even conceivably exist. That is, it doesn't even describe a conceivable thing, e.g. a unicorn. From this it follows that for the person in question to understand 'erglig', there must be something which he would take as either directly or indirectly confirming or infirming the claim that he had met with or seen ergligs or that there are ergligs. But to do this gives us something public and empirically checkable.

I am not confident that the verification principle we need is just the principle Rorty defends. At the very end of "Verificationism and Transcendental Arguments" he remarks "... the insight which lay behind the original (Peircian) verificationist notion that 'You don't know what "this is an X" means unless

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you know how to confirm it' may be explicated as the claim that to know meaning is to know inferential relationships. This insight has nothing to do with empiricism nor with phenomenism. It needed, however, to be combined with the notion that knowledge is always conceptual . . . and the notion that to have a concept is to have the use of a word, before its anti-Cartesian force could be seen. When brought together with these latter notions it gave rise to the notion that you couldn't know anything about anything unless you could talk about quite a lot of different things."⁶ And earlier Rorty gives us to understand that the core insight in the kind of verificationism he would accept is basically the "familiar Wittgensteinian claim that it does not make sense to suppose that a man might know the meaning of only one word."⁷ But I think to so circumscribe verificationism is to throw the empiricist baby out with the bathwater. Peirce, who as much as Wittgenstein, realized that knowledge is always conceptual and that it is integrally involved with the use of words, also stressed "how impossible it is that we should have an idea in our minds which relates to anything but conceived sensible effects of things. Our idea of anything is our idea of its sensible effects."⁸ It is, I should think, hyperbolic to say that our idea of anything is just our idea of its sensible effects, but it is not hyperbolic to say that to have an idea of something's being a matter of fact is impossible unless we at least have some idea of the distinctive conceived sensible effects of what we take to be a matter of fact. We cannot understand in an adequate way the meaning of a term with a purely descriptive use until we understand what it stands for or what it is being used to represent. If we had no sense experience or at least no experience at all, we would not understand any matter-of-fact propositions. And indeed we can and should make a stronger claim than this. To understand a putatively factual claim, we must understand

⁶ Richard Rorty, "Verificationism and Transcendental Arguments," *Nous*, Vol. V, (February, 1971), p. 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁸ In his "How To Make Our Ideas Clear," reprinted in Charles S. Peirce, *Values in a Universe of Chance: Selected Writings of Charles S. Peirce*, Philip P. Wiener, (ed.), p. 124.

what sort of sensible effects would confirm it and what would infirm it. If we cannot so relate it to any even conceived sensible effects, we simply do not understand it and indeed until we can do this, we cannot understand it. Such an empiricism need not be, has not always been and indeed should not be, tied to phenomenalism. But if verificationism comes to anything at all, it must be committed to such a modest empiricism and it should acknowledge what indeed is so, namely that we cannot know anything unless we could talk a lot about quite a lot of different things. But, as Peirce and C. I. Lewis have powerfully argued, understanding the meaning of matter of fact claims can never be the mere knowing of inferential relationships.

Thomson and Stroud are right in seeing verificationism underlying the employment of transcendental arguments against scepticism, but wrong in thinking this a mistaken move in philosophy. Rorty is right in seeing that a quite acceptable form of verificationism underlies the key transcendental argument against scepticism, but is wrong in thinking that it could be correctly stated independently of the modest empiricist commitments I have just characterized. The empiricism coming out of the tradition of logical positivism was surely mistaken in lumping together, as cognitively meaningless, everything that fails the test of the verificationist principle. There are many kinds of utterances which do not even purport to be such that they are used to assert matters of fact and yet they are perfectly in order. But to believe is to believe something and to be able to believe *that* something, one must have some idea of what the difference would be between one's belief being true and its being false. One must, as Rorty puts it, accept something as confirming or disconfirming what one believes. If one has no idea at all of what one would take as confirming or infirming what it is one purportedly believes, then one does not even have a factual belief.

The matter can be put in another way. Even if understanding a word does involve the ability to use the word in accordance with certain linguistic rules, it still remains the case, for words which function descriptively, that there must be semantic rules for them, namely rules which relate the use of these terms to certain states of affairs in the world. We could not have a form of language

which describes the world—a form of language whose sentences could be understood as expressing statements of fact—whose rules were purely syntactical rules governing the formation and transformation of sentences in that form of language. It makes no sense to speak of a form of language as descriptive and at the same time say that it is without semantic rules. Since this is so, it is incoherent to claim that there are sentences used to make statements about the world, though these statements are not confirmable or infirmable in any sense at all. For a sentence to function descriptively, it must be the case that these sentences are governed by semantical rules. But these rules cannot be understood unless the states of affairs which these rules are supposed to circumscribe are in some way experienceable. In fine, a sentence cannot be understood as expressing a factual statement unless the descriptive expressions in it are governed by semantic rules; these rules, in turn, can only be understood if it is possible for the users of such a form of language to have some kind of experience of the states of affairs to which the descriptive expressions in the sentences are related.⁹

It is in divorcing verificationism from such a modest empiricism and in setting such an empiricism aside that Rorty goes wrong. Without it the transcendental arguments come to nothing and with it they are perhaps superfluous.

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⁹ I have developed these points and considered counter-arguments in Chapters 32 and 33 of my *Reason and Practice*. Also see R.W. Ashby both in his "Verifiability Principle," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards (ed.), Vol. 8 and in his "Logical Positivism," in D.J. O'Connor (ed.), *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*, and Wesley C. Salmon, "Verifiability and Logic," in Paul K. Feyerabend and Grover Maxwell (eds.), *Mind, Matter and Method: Essays in Philosophy and Science in Honor of Herbert Feigl*.