Chapter 1
Fallibility and Reality

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§1.1 Wrong

I can be wrong. But contrary to the arguments of the sceptics, my fallibility shows not only that I may be wrong, but that I can be right. Indeed, it shows more. Not only does my being wrong carry with it the possibility of my being right, but it implies that I often am. I would not jump to false conclusions, and suppose that the stick was bent where it went into the water, or that the distant tower was round, when really it was square, or that the moon was the size of a sixpence, unless jumping to conclusions was generally a sensible strategy to adopt, yielding for the most part reliable results. It is only because I am often led aright that I can occasionally be led astray.

Fallibility is a mark of objectivity. It shows that there is a standard other than myself which determines what is correct and what is not. It is not simply a matter of my say-so. Nor of your say-so. You too can be wrong. Indeed, IF I am right, and you disagree, then you are wrong. And equally for others: if we are right, then they, if they disagree with us, are wrong. It is not just for you and me that our claims hold good, but for everyone. Something cannot be true just for me, or just for you, or just for him. Truth is omnipersonal. We are all answerable to truth, and we all can be wrong.

But, again, though we all can be wrong, we cannot all be always wrong. How things seem to us, though not a conclusive guide to how they really are, is a good guide none the less. We cannot, with Plato,\(^1\) dismiss out of hand how things seem. Appearances

\(^1\) Republic VII, 529. See further, §4.7 and §15.5.
can deceive, but only if they also can be veridical, and usually are. We are led to a modified empiricism, and should follow Aristotle rather than Plato, and in giving an account of the world, try to save appearances, and reject them only for good reason.

But appearances are not our only guide to reality. Reason also can be a source of knowledge. The Logical Positivists were wrong in holding pure reason to be purely tautological, incapable of yielding any non-analytical truth. Our mathematical understanding is not just a simple matter of following specified rules of inference, but can go beyond them and recognise truths not validated by the rules hitherto accepted as canonical. That has important implications for our understanding of mathematics in particular and for any adequate account of the nature of argument in general. I claim that we acquire mathematical knowledge through pure deductive reason without thereby conceding that it is merely analytic, or that mathematics is simply a set of tautologies. Mathematics cannot be reduced to logic: the theorems of mathematics are not just theorems of first-order logic (the logic that computers can be programmed to do). We need to avail ourselves of second-order logic in order to characterize the natural numbers completely, as well as to formulate other definitions and arguments; that is, we are having to quantify over properties and relations, which therefore, according to Quine, must be supposed to exist. We are thus led to a version of Platonism as an account of what there is. There is a pervasive sense of hard rationality about mathematical truth which is deeply persuasive: it is objective, and not just a matter of the way we set up definitions or play pencil-and-paper games, nor just the mental experience mathematicians want to share with one another.

Gödel's theorem supports this view of mathematical truth. It shows that in any formal mathematical system with formal rules of inference there are truths that cannot be formally proved according to the formal rules of inference, but can be informally proved and seen to be true nonetheless. Gödel's theorem is a conclusive refutation of any Formalist view of mathematics. It refutes the widely-held belief that to be reasonable is to be in accordance with a rule. Reason is more than observance of rules: truth outruns provability. Gödel's theorem also shows beyond doubt that mathematical truths are not all empty tautologies, and suggests some sort of realism as regards mathematical truth.\(^2\) The combination of

\(^2\) See further below, §2.3.
epistemological Logicism and ontological Platonism I have already argued for is thus further supported by the account of reasoning that Gödel's theorem establishes.

It is not only in mathematics that rationalist considerations can guide us into truth. Some commitment to the uniformity of nature is implicit in any use of inductive inference, and uniformity can be refined in various fundamental principles of sameness. Many thinkers have had intimations about the nature of reason and of reality. The hard part is not to have such intimations, but to articulate them in a way that takes account of difficulties, and to meet the counter-arguments of those who believe that the function of metaphysics is to cut our view of the world and of ourselves down to minimum size. To this I now turn.

§1.2 Is Metaphysics Possible?

Metaphysics has a bad reputation. It is widely supposed to be meaningless, senseless, pointless, incapable of being true or false; so much so that before I embark on any account of metaphysics, I need to deal with these charges, and attempt to show that, although, admittedly, much nonsense has been talked under the guise of metaphysics, metaphysical statements are not necessarily meaningless, and metaphysical arguments do not have to be fallacious.

Many thinkers claim that metaphysics is impossible:

1. A.J. Ayer said that metaphysical statements are meaningless because they do not satisfy the Verification Principle.

2. G.E. Moore, maintained that metaphysical statements cannot be true because they conflict with ordinary language; we know that stones are solid, and that the will is free and there's an end on't.

3. Wittgenstein, held metaphysical statements are mistaken, because they seek to revise ordinary language, and ordinary language is quite all right as it is.


4. Kant argued that metaphysical statements cannot be established as true, because they rest on bad arguments and go beyond the bounds of possible experience.\footnote{6} None of these contentions succeed in showing that metaphysics is impossible. Ayer’s Verification Principle refutes itself. He says

> The criterion which we use to test the genuineness of apparent statements of fact is the criterion of verifiability. We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express—that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as true, or reject it as being false. If, on the other hand, the putative proposition is of such a character that the assumption of its truth, or falsehood, is consistent with any assumption whatsoever concerning the nature of his future experience, then, as far as he is concerned, it is, if not a tautology, a mere pseudo-proposition.

> The sentence expressing it may be emotionally significant to him: but it is not literally significant.\footnote{7}

But is the italicised sentence factually significant? What sense-experiences are, or could be, adduced in support of the claim made by this sentence? Is it then a tautology? If so, it must be true in virtue of the meaning of the words involved. It would be, if we were to define ‘factually significant’ to mean that the person concerned knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as true, or reject it as being false. But having thus defined ‘factually significant’, what right have we to stigmatize every other sort of sentence as expressing merely a pseudo-proposition? If the Verification Principle is a tautology, it can tell us only how Ayer is going to use words: if it claims to be factually significant, it lacks any empirical support: the only way it can be taken is as making a philosophical claim, and then it is hoist by its own petard, and is, unverifiable, and so, according to Ayer, meaningless.

This argument is of a type that turns up again and again in metaphysics—metaphysical claims are often to be rejected because if they were true, they would themselves be invalidated—Freud, Marx, Relativism, Protagoras’ subjectivism.\footnote{8} It is decisive against

Ayer, but it does not stop the question 'How would you verify your statement?' from being a perfectly pertinent one; nor does it invalidate some distinction being drawn between 'factually significant' and other types of proposition.

Moore's Argument from Common Sense likewise lacks cogency. Common sense once told us that the earth was flat and that the sun rose in the East. The bare fact that metaphysics makes out that reality is very different from how we had thought it was is not conclusive, although it is important to save the phenomena: we have to explain why we think that the sun rises; if Bradley holds that time is unreal, he must explain why it is none the less possible for him to catch trains. Similarly the Argument from Ordinary Language fails. Not all ordinary language is quite all right as it is. Some language games undercut others: astrology occupies many columns in the popular press, but its truth-claims are refuted by astronomy. Walsh compares Wittgenstein to Burke.9 Both make good conservative points: ordinary language and existing societies are going concerns; they need to be understood sensitively before being criticized, and doctrinaire criticisms are likely to be crass. But not all criticisms of existing social arrangements are out of court; even radical criticisms may be cogent; and so, too, radical criticisms of existing linguistic practices or conceptual structures cannot be ruled out of court. More generally, if language games can be played, they can be evaluated. We can ask on occasion which language game we should play. Shall I do astrology or astronomy? And sometimes unequivocal answers will be forthcoming—astronomy, if you interested in discovering the truth.

Hume and Kant give a large number of arguments criticizing various metaphysical contentions. Some are quite good, many very difficult to understand. Quite often Kant demolishes only one version of a particular metaphysical argument—e.g. the Ontological Argument—leaving open the possibility that other versions might be valid. Some of the more wide-sweeping arguments rest on a limited view of logic, or idiosyncratic epistemological doctrines. Hume in his Dialogues on Natural Religion claims that all arguments from natural phenomena to the existence of God are flawed. But so then would be arguments to the existence of atoms. I have never experienced a quark, and cannot imagine what it would be like, but I

9 W.H.Walsh, Metaphysics, pp.16, 122-124.
believe in quarks none the less. Similarly, in spite of Kant's critique, we have continued to reason about science and religion in ways he had pronounced impossible. It is quite possible that the theologians are wrong; it is quite possible that the scientists are wrong; but it requires great reserves of faithlessness to believe that they both must be wrong. Though they deserve to be taken seriously, the criticisms of Hume and Kant are not conclusive; they do not rule out the possibility of metaphysics straight away, and when they make telling points against particular metaphysical arguments or metaphysical doctrines, they leave open the possibility that other arguments or other doctrines may be exempt from the criticisms thus far advanced.

Underlying many assertions about the impossibility of metaphysics is an unduly narrow view of the range of meaning and the bounds of reason. Metaphysicians make statements of great generality about the universe, but the words they use get their meaning from necessarily limited uses. The Ionian philosophers were wont to say that Everything is Fire, or that Everything is Earth, or that Everything is Water, but we only understand the words 'fire', 'earth', and 'water', by virtue of the facts not everything is fire, that not everything is earth, and not everything is water. We know what the word 'fire' means because we can get away from the fire into a cold out-house, and use the word 'fire' to distinguish the one from the other. Similarly with 'earth' and 'water': the former cannot be applied to the sea, the latter cannot be applied to dry land. Hence, it is argued, we cannot meaningfully assert that Everything is Fire, or that Everything is Earth, or that Everything is Water, because in each case the claim is belied by the conditions for the meaningful use of the words concerned.

The argument is plausible, but must be wrong. At the beginning of the twentieth century materialists were claiming that Everything is Matter—some earth-like passive substance—and were understood. After Einstein, Matter was seen as a form of Energy—that which fires characteristically emit—and people were again able to have some idea of what was being said. Then cosmologists began


to speculate about the origin of the universe, either as continuous creationists or as advocates of the Big Bang, and maintained that hydrogen—that is, etymologically speaking, the water-generating element—was the stuff of creation; and again they were understood.

The error lies in a too simple theory of meaning. It is true only up to a point that words obtain their meaning from the paradigm case of its correct application. Although I may learn the meaning of the word ‘elephant’ by being shown an elephant, and told that the word ‘elephant’ is the correct name for it, the meanings of words are connected in many ways, and may well be used meaningfully in the absence of any paradigm example. Most obviously, we may learn the meaning of some comparative term, such as ‘better’, and then extrapolate to a superlative, and talk about the supreme good, without ever having come across an example of supreme goodness. So too we can attach enough meaning to the words ‘matter’, ‘energy’ and ‘hydrogen’, on the basis of our ordinary experience, to be able to use them coherently in talking about issues that transcend ordinary experience. The critic may fairly point out that the Ionian philosophers were using the words ‘Earth’, ‘Fire’ and ‘Water’ in an unusual sense—hence the capital letters—and he may properly warn us of the danger of being misled by metaphors not carefully scrutinised. But metaphors are, sometimes, understood, and a theory of meaning which denies this, and denies that much of the thought of the twentieth century was capable of being understood, is a theory of meaning that deserves scant respect.

Sceptics often also circumscribe the bounds of reason unduly. They assume that nobody can responsibly claim knowledge, or even meaningfully make a statement, which goes beyond the evidence at his disposal. But that is what we habitually do, and must do if communication is to be possible. I predict rain tomorrow, but all my evidence for this future statement is information about the weather now and in the recent past. I tell you that there is a fox in yonder hedge, but all I have to go on is my sense-experience, which is necessarily different from yours. In each case I have good evidence. But what I say goes beyond the actual evidence. The evidence is evidence for what I say, but what I say is not just the evidence on which it is based. If I am to be believed, and more generally if we are to understand one another, I must not make, and we must not make, assertions which are not warranted. But the warrant for our assertions is less than what our assertions actually assert. In making them we are sticking our necks out,
and on occasion we may find that what we said, though reasonable and responsibly uttered at the time, turns out to be mistaken in the event. The clouds cleared and there was no rain; there was a brown dog in the hedge, but no fox. And similarly, I shall argue, we may be able to make reasonable metaphysical assertions about the nature of reality which go beyond the appearances accessible to all of us.\footnote{See further below, §3.5, §6.11, §8.6, §8.7 and §14.2. S.E.Toulmin, The Uses of Argument, Cambridge, 1958, first made me aware of the distinction between the grounds for an assertion and its content.}

A final argument for the possibility of metaphysics is provided by contemporary disputes about materialism. Many people today have a world-view of scientific materialism; many other people feel that such a world-view must be wrong because it does not account adequately for consciousness, rationality or moral responsibility. Rather good arguments would be required before we could conclude that they were all mistaken, that there was no point of contention between them, and that all the arguments they adduced were necessarily invalid.

It seems reasonable, then, to conclude that metaphysics is possible. I have not proved that it is. Kant’s arguments might turn out to be better than I have made out. Further arguments may emerge which bolster an unremitting scepticism about our ever being able to get genuine knowledge of reality. But they have not emerged yet, and the sweeping arguments which claimed to rule out the possibility of metaphysics altogether have turned out to be invalid. I have not proved the possibility of metaphysics, but I have disproved the current disproofs. In Alvin Plantinga’s useful phrase, I have defeated the defeaters.

\section*{§1.3 Is Metaphysics Necessary?}

Plato was led into metaphysical claims by his moral concerns. At the end of the first book of the \textit{Republic}, Plato has Socrates say εἰς γὰρ περὶ τοῦ ἔπισταμένου ὁ λόγος, ἀλλὰ περὶ τοῦ ὅστις ἐργάζεται χρή ἄν, οὐ γαρ περὶ τοὺς ἐπιστευομένους ὁ λόγος, αὐτὰ περὶ τοὺς ἕναν τρόπον χρή ἄν, he argued that the argument is not about some trivial matter, but about what way one ought to live.\footnote{Republic, 352a5.} Plato was preaching a
gospel of moral seriousness, and postulated the Forms as a metaphysical underwrite to moral objectivity.\textsuperscript{14} Democritus, Epicurus and Lucretius thought that the ultimate reality was constituted by material atoms, and had a different view of how one's life ought to be lived. It makes a difference to our view of ourselves and our obligations if we think that all our doings are known to a benevolent God, or that our whole life is a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing.

The moral impetus towards metaphysical speculation is of great importance. In the first place it should make us cautious. Metaphysicians often are moralists, and form a view of the world that supports their moral prescriptions. It is always possible that the view offered to us has been adopted not on account of the reasons adduced for it, but for the sake of the philosophy of life it would support if adopted. Wishful thinking may engender an optimistic view of the world, malevolence a gloomy one. Bradley once said that metaphysics was the search for bad reasons for doctrines adopted on instinct, and the instincts may be deceitful. We need to be wary, ready to spot the operation of ulterior motives, leading to conclusions not justified by reason or resulting from the disinterested concern for truth. But although it is always possible that the arguments adduced are mere rationalisations, we should not assume that that could be the case always. The man who in his metaphysical thinking is pursuing a hidden agenda could not pass it off as cogent reasoning if no reasoning were ever cogent. We need to be wary, not cynical. Though for some thinkers the conclusions determine the arguments, the whole rationale of argument is for the arguments to determine the conclusion, and at least sometimes with some people that is what actually happens.

Secondly, the moral concern of the metaphysician imports into his thinking the logic of practical choice. Practical reasoning is subject to the principle \textit{Tertium Non Datur}. When I, as a rational agent, am making up my mind what to do, I cannot suspend judgement for long. I must, as I see the enemy advancing, decide whether to fight or flee. During the early years of our life we can try out various ideas and think of different life-choices and various possible careers, but then we will have to decide. We have to choose. Many people would like not to, and would rather take over current attitudes and opinions without thought. But that too is a choice, only

\textsuperscript{14} Republic V, 475c-480.
one based on ignorance rather than the best assessment that can be made of one's real situation. We need a world-view to inform the fundamental choices we each have to make. Although we may also be fired by a strong desire to know the nature of reality for its own sake, yet one abiding theme will always be that expressed in the title of Iris Murdoch's book, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morality*.

The *Tertium Non Datur* of practical decision-making shapes our metaphysical reasoning. We see things in terms of a stark Either-Or, between which we have to choose. Often we embrace one alternative as much because it is not the other as for any positive virtues of its own. Plato, and many philosophers since him, have felt threatened by materialism, the thesis that Things are the only things to exist, and feeling convinced that materialism cannot be true, have embraced the only other available alternative. And, *per contra*, other thinkers, sensing that Platonism cannot be correct, have embraced some other philosophy, less on account of its positive merits than for its not being Platonism.

Metaphysical argument, like practical reasoning, is, as will be argued in the next two sections, messy. It does not have stringent canons of relevance, it is often inarticulate, it lacks a decision-procedure, its arguments are holistic, cumulative and two-sided; altogether it is not academically respectable. Academically respectable disciplines, like mathematics, history, or natural science, can rule out of court various types of argument, and simply suspend judgment if adequate arguments and evidence are not available; but metaphysics cannot be equally brusque, since it cannot indefinitely suspend judgement, but must examine each consideration to see if it has a bearing on how the world should best be viewed. The final judgement is a cumulative, holistic one. Having taken everything into account, the metaphysician has to decide, often unable to articulate an adequate world-view by himself, just choosing to the best of his ability between the ones made available by other men's thought. There is no decision-procedure, no way of being sure that the decision arrived at is the right one. It is a personal decision, though not subjective. Different considerations will point in different directions. The argument will be "dialectical", with a *prima facie* case being rebutted by further arguments, themselves liable to being countered by counter-arguments, leading to a tentative conclusion which will hold, other things being equal, but which may be over-ridden by yet further considerations.
The fact that we cannot indefinitely suspend judgment forces us to relax our standards of stringency. Traditionally, philosophers have sought certainty, and have been prepared greatly to restrict the realm of what can be known in order to secure that what is known is indubitably so. But there is a trade-off between range and certainty: the more stringent the requirements of indubitability, the narrower the range of what can be known. If I want to be absolutely sure, beyond all conceivable doubt, that what I think I know I really do know, then, like Descartes, I shall conclude that I know very little. And if, on the other hand, I realize that I do not have time for unlimited cogitation, but must decide now in the time of my mortal life how best to use the time that remains, I must be prepared to decide under conditions of imperfect information, doing the best I can to decide aright, but aware that I have no copper-bottomed guarantee of not being wrong. We are faced with a choice: we can either despair of ever having any reason at all for preferring one world-view to another, and adopt a stance of resolute agnosticism; or we can try our best, knowing that we may be wrong, but being ready to correct our opinion if some other seems better founded. If we adopt the former, we guarantee ignorance; if the latter, we may be wrong, but are not necessarily so. The latter is therefore a rational strategy to adopt in the absence of convincing arguments that knowledge is in principle unattainable.

§1.4 The Natural History of Reason

Metaphysical reasoning is a form of reasoning. To understand it we need an account of reason generally. Two different approaches may be adopted. We may characterize reason as a phenomenon, or we may lay down principles to which it ought to conform if it is to be worthy of our intellectual allegiance. On the former approach we observe reasoning as a human activity, and pick out its characteristic features. Men reason about what to do, what is likely to happen, what is really the case, what arguments are worthy of acceptance, what is worthy of admiration. We are able to distinguish rational from non-rational activities, and rational from irrational decisions, beliefs, attitudes, procedures, and the like, and reasonable from unreasonable men. A careful examination of cases should enable us to distil the essential features of the rational and the reasonable, and make explicit the grounds of the judgements we already implicitly understand. In so doing, we may come not only to describe but to clarify and amend our practice, in much the same way that the study of language has enabled us to improve our own.
way as Socratic dialogue and discussion leads to our formulating a definition which in turn may lead to a reformed usage.

Most philosophers, however, have spurned the descriptive approach: it may show how men actually think, but men's thoughts are mostly wrong, and are largely prejudices engendered by upbringing and interest. Rather than observe the bad habits of present-day practitioners, they seek to make a fresh start in which we take great care to reason aright, uncontaminated by the errors of previous generations. But if we make a clean sweep of existing practices, we may fail to acknowledge some important types of reasoning; however pure our consequent understanding is, it may well be not reason that we are talking about, but only some part of it, or perhaps, even, something quite different. Any serious examination of reason, therefore, must start with a descriptive approach, in order to anchor the subsequent discussion. Neither approach is adequate by itself; each needs the other to complement it. In this and the following sections we shall survey how we actually reason, and give, as it were, a natural history of reasoning, and then in the next chapter adopt a normative approach.

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Our powers of reasoning are characterized primarily by reference to the way we reason about what to do: for this is the basic and most typical case. Many thinkers have failed to recognize this, and, starting with some other paradigm of reasoning, have found themselves unable to accommodate practical reasoning, and have often been led to discountenance it, as not being a proper mode of reasoning at all. But that is a mistake. We all have to decide what we are going to do, and use our wits to figure out what would be the best course of action in difficult cases. We argue and debate far more about what to do than about mathematics or other academic disputes. Instead of trying to view practical reasoning as a strange type of academic reasoning, we do better to view theorizing as a special activity we undertake, and theoretical reasoning as a special case of reasoning generally; and then we shall find that much the same applies, mutatis mutandis, when the question at issue is not what is to be done, but what is to be believed, what is to be admired, what is to be accepted. Arguments about the truth of statements or the cogency of arguments, are, along with aesthetic arguments, fundamentally evaluative, and not all that different from purely practical ones. Indeed, if to assess a
statement as true, or an argument as cogent, were not to evaluate it, and to recommend that something should be done, namely that the statement be believed or the argument accepted, truth and cogency would be uninteresting concepts. Academic arguments are remoter from the press of urgent business than practical arguments, but are not totally disconnected from practical concerns and the world of action: and if reason is inherently incapable of guiding us on what to do, then it is incapable of guiding us on anything at all; and per contra, if reason is any good at all, then we shall be able to assess its merits when we are wondering what to do, before going on to consider its more specialised applications in aesthetics or the academic disciplines.

We start, then, by examining what people do, both when they act rationally, and in particular when they argue about actions. We note first the similarities between human actions and the reactions of other organisms, and then what it is that differentiates rational action from mere animal behaviour. First, then, we consider all behaviour as a response to a situation. A response is an answer, in this case the organism's answer to the question what to do, if such a question could have been formulated. The future behaviour of the organism—amoeba, earthworm, honeybee, or ape—is at the outset unsettled, and then is settled: the amoeba swims away from a region of greater salinity, the earthworm turns left rather than right at a junction in a tube, the honeybee flies a particular distance in a particular direction, the ape snarls aggressively. In each case we are inclined to say that a choice has been made what to do, although such anthropomorphic language can be misleading: what we can more safely do is to apply the Law of the Excluded Middle and say that one pattern of behaviour rather than another has been manifested; and where the behaviour is homoeostatic and complicated, rather than continuously variable, the Law of the Excluded Middle is peculiarly apt, and we can say either that some sort of behaviour has been manifested or that it has not. Often, although not always, this behaviour can be seen as a response to some stimulus. There is some feature in the environment which has caused it: and very often the behaviour is not only the result of, but a very appropriate response to, an environment characterized by that feature. If an amoeba did not move away from regions of increasing salinity, it would be desiccated by osmosis and die. A worm has often taken the right-hand turn and suffered an electric
shock in consequence; by turning to the left it avoids it. A honeybee, by responding to the dance of another bee in a particular fashion, arrives in the neighbourhood of honey-bearing flowers. An aggressive snarl may trigger off an escape-mechanism in a rival. Different species have evolved, each with a propensity to produce an appropriate response to many of the situations that are likely to arise. And in determining what response shall be given, the organism is likely to be affected by any factor that could be relevant to the range of possible responses. If the choice is between standing one's ground or fleeing, the robin redbreast needs to respond not only to a provocatively red breast of another robin close by but to the feline form stealthily approaching in the distance.

An organism needs to respond to the whole environment, and so do we. Our most basic classifications are in terms of appropriate responses: creepy, sinister, open, welcoming. Babies can recognise the smile on their mothers' faces long before they have ever experienced a sense-datum; and grown-ups are better at recognizing people than either the colours or the shapes of which their faces are said to be composed. Not that similarity of colour or shape are unimportant; we rapidly learn to notice such similarities on account of their use in identifying material objects, and they have a pre-eminent position in our philosophy of nature; but we are agents before we are observers, and our observations are undertaken more as a guide to action than out of idle curiosity. We therefore size up situations in terms of the actions to be performed. We are very quick to notice anything that may be a clue, but overlook irrelevant details. We are asking 'Is this man honest?', 'Is this the man I met last year?', 'Is the road slippery?', 'Can I get round the corner at this speed?', and in such matters our judgement becomes remarkably reliable.

That our assessment of situations is holistic has long been recognised. Plato, in the Protagoras, distinguishes our assessment of a face from that of a lump of metal. When we weigh metals, our measure is simply additive, but when dealing with people we are on the look out for anything that may invalidate initial impressions; a child can often sense untrustworthiness that the social upbringing of adults has trained them not to notice. A flicker of the eyelids, an involuntary tightening of the mouth, may give the game away. When postage stamps were invented, the reason for having

15 Protagoras, 329de. See further below., §2.7, fn.13.
the Queen's head on them was that forgeries would be easier to detect, since everyone would notice the slightest difference of facial expression.

The fact that our assessments are holistic means that they are two-sided. If, when we size up a situation a further factor may entirely alter the appropriate responses, it will constitute a consideration against the original course of action. While on the one hand the succulence of the worm is an argument for staying put, the increasing propinquity of a predator is an argument against. Practical reasoning is two-sided. There are considerations in favour and considerations against, and we have to balance the pros and the cons. Since there is a possibility of a further con, which could prove decisive, we may have to reconsider and change our mind. This distinguishes holistic from deductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning is "monotonic". In deductive logic, adding a further premise may enable some further conclusion to be proved, but cannot invalidate the proof of one already proved; or, more formally,

If \( A \) and \( B \) are axiom systems, with \( A \subseteq B \),
then \( \text{Th}(A) \subseteq \text{Th}(B) \),
where \( \text{Th}(S) = \) the set of sentences that can be proved from \( S \).\(^\text{16}\)

In contrast, the logic of practical reasoning, is not one of incontrovertible proof-sequences but of prima facie arguments and counter-arguments, of objections and rebuttals, of exceptional circumstances and special cases; with the conclusion following not conclusively but only in the absence of further considerations, only provided that other things are equal, and the fundamental connective is not 'therefore' but 'but'. We do not use the logic of the propositional calculus with its necessary and sufficient conditions, where propositions once proved remain so always, but a quite different "dialectical logic" of claim and counter-claim, presumption

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and ceteris paribus clauses, in which truths are seldom established beyond all possibility of further question.\textsuperscript{17}

The fact that our assessments of situations is often non-mono-
tonic has been a considerable embarrassment to advocates of Artificial Intelligence, who reckon that it should be possible, at least in principle, to program a machine to operate according to the rules of formal logic, but do not see how to program a machine to spot and take into account relevant factors that tell against the putative course of action the machine might otherwise undertake. In real life it is essential to be able to take cognizance of any detail: not every detail will be relevant, but any may. The same holds good in practical affairs, in political argument, and most notably in the law courts. Justice should take all relevant factors into consideration, in contrast to legality, which takes into account only those laid down by law. Guided by legality, we subsume the case under the relevant law, and see what follows, period. But often that seems harsh and we appeal to some idea of equity, which allows for a further ‘but’.\textsuperscript{18}

Two-sided logic is inherently fallible. We always may have overlooked some consideration which should have been decisive, had we known of it. Hence it is built into the logic of two-sided reasoning that we might be mistaken. It is hardly surprising, Organisms can behave inappropriately too, and if they do they may pay for it with their lives. To decide is to decide between alternatives, and however generous we are in accepting the decisions of others, we cannot, in regard to our own decisions and at least sometimes in regard to those of others, endorse them all equally: else, there would be no point in agonizing over what we ought to do, and no difference between saying that some decision of another was right and saying that it was wrong. To choose is to exclude, and if it is possible to choose right, then some of the excluded alternatives


must have been wrong, and if actually chosen, would have been wrong decisions. To be an agent is to choose, and to be a rational agent is to try to choose right, and to be open to the possibility of choosing wrong. We are fallible: fallibility is a fact of life—the fundamental fact of life—for agents aspiring to rationality.

With men wrong decisions not only may prove to be mistakes in the event, but are always liable to be criticized. For we can communicate. We not only can act, but can tell others what we are doing, have done, or are going to do. This is what differentiates human actions from animal responses: the agent can, typically, say what he is doing and why he is doing it. In particular he can say what he is doing, and what he is going to do, and another agent can disagree and express his disagreement in words. If two animals assess a situation differently and respond to it in different ways, there is no conflict between them: they go their separate ways, and one may survive and the other not. But we can talk: so we can disagree.

§1.6 Argument and Agreement

"Argument never gets you anywhere", we say, after fruitless wordy debates have degenerated into mere verbal wrangling. We exaggerate. Arguments do sometimes—indeed, quite often—end in agreement. Were it not so, we should have abandoned arguing long ago, and resorted to fisticuffs. People sometimes reach agreement—else they would not waste breath arguing—but not always.

Arguments arise when we do not share a common view. It would be pointless to argue if we did not disagree about something. But it is fruitless, too, to argue if we disagree about everything. We must start with some points of agreement if our discussion is to get us anywhere, and only by taking them as agreed and in the present context unquestionably true can we hope to reach agreement over the point at issue. These points of agreement we often call the facts. On the basis of these we argue and may succeed in reaching a conclusion. If we do reach a conclusion, then this point now agreed between us will be a fact in any further dispute the pair of us may have. It is a point, largely unrecognised, but of great importance, that a fact is a fact relative to a given dispute, or relative to two or more persons at a given time arguing about something. Items both sides accept as true, each side will describe by the word 'fact': items whose truth one side would challenge should not be called facts, unless their truth can be established on the basis of other
facts, premises that is, which are conceded as unquestionably true. The word ‘fact’ is an incomplete symbol; the complete locution being ‘facts in respect of such and such a dispute’. Before we can answer the question “What are the facts?” we need to know, either from the context or by being told explicitly, with respect to what dispute the question is being asked. This runs counter to the widespread assumption that facts are the simple solid elements out of which the whole fabric of our knowledge is constructed. That the word ‘fact’ does not refer to some definite entity is best brought out by Aristotle’s Method of Opposites. We ask “What is it being contrasted with? Is it a fact as opposed to a fiction? Or as opposed to a theory? Or as opposed to an interpretation? Or a question of fact as opposed to a question of law?” The argument can be elaborated, with instances to show the word being used in different, and incompatible, senses, showing that we cannot talk of Facts with a big F. Facts are not fundamental building blocks, but are systematically ambiguous counters in the dialectic of argument, with the consequence that as the issue in dispute varies, so also will the facts. The worship of facts is responsible for many of the obsessions which afflict academics.  

When arguing, we cast round for points on which we can agree, and proceed from them, each adducing facts or considerations or principles which the other recognises as cogent, but not conclusive. I may think I ought to stay and fight, you may counsel against it: we are talking about the same proposed action, and we are contradicting each other about it. And so we argue. I am claiming that my action would be appropriate in the situation, and if you fail to see this I must try and share with you the way I see it. But it may not be easy. There are many difficulties. One is a failure of language. I may not be able either to characterize the situation totally, or to formulate the correlation between the situation as I have characterized it and what I am proposing to do, in such a way as to enable you to see why I regard it as appropriate. We are often at a loss for words even when we are confident we are right: I reckon I am right—λόγον ἔχειν (logon echon)—but cannot give an account in words—λέγον δίδοναι (logon donai).

Our inability to express in words what we inarticulately know is a pervasive feature of thought, which has attracted much attention.

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But I am not completely inarticulate: I can begin to formulate my reasons, but cannot do so completely. If I am minded to stick it out where I am, I may be able to cite some factor in favour of staying put, even though I recognise it falls far short of a complete justification. The very fact that we use language gives us some hope that we may sometimes reach agreement.\textsuperscript{20} There is no particular level at which we must be able to agree any more than there is one at which we cannot but disagree; but we must be able to agree at some level or other; else, we could not speak the same language. Many arguments—many of the most important arguments—take place against a background of many shared assumptions, or agreed criteria of relevance, or canons of cogency. Historians do not reckon that if a thesis is well written it must be true, and lawyers look coldly on pleas of passion. Often we secure agreement by limiting the matter under dispute, or construing it as belonging to a particular discipline, whose premises and procedures we agree to abide by.\textsuperscript{21}

But argument cannot be relied on to produce agreement. There is in most disciplines no algorithm, no decision-procedure which will in every case reach a definite conclusion in a finite number of steps, and tell us what the right answer is. The lack of a decision-procedure in practical reasoning was noticed by Plato, and has often been seen as a disqualification for being regarded as a proper sort of reasoning.\textsuperscript{22} Much more weight has to be put upon the person who is making the decision than would be the case if every decision could be arrived at by anyone using the relevant procedure. So, although we can argue, and may by argument reach agreement, we cannot count on doing so; and where the argument is inconclusive, we have to exercise judgement, and must be prepared in the end to take a decision on our own authority, and carry the can should the consequences turn out ill.

\textsuperscript{20} See below, §2.1.
\textsuperscript{21} See further below, §15.1.
\textsuperscript{22} Plato, \textit{Phaedrus} \textit{263}\textit{ab}.
§1.7 Authority and Autonomy

We disagree, because we are fallible, and do not all always reach a right conclusion about everything. Many philosophers have concluded that since we always may be wrong, we may be always wrong, and cannot really know anything.¹³ The argument is invalid, and the conclusion false. We can know things. But I by myself cannot know them all. Contrary to much modern opinion, knowledge is communal. There are many things that other people know and I do not. If I am to know what they know, I must be ready to accept their considered word for the reliability of what they tell me.¹⁴ I would not have been born if my ancestors had not accepted without question warnings that a predator was approaching, and though I am sometimes tempted by scepticism, the price—almost universal nescience—is too high. I need to adopt what Professor Swinburne calls a principle of credulity.¹⁵ Better sometimes wrong than never mistaken: the ostrich’s safety from false belief is perilous.

It follows that it is often reasonable to accept someone else’s say-so about a matter of fact or about what ought to be done. We believe, approve, or act, on his authority. But authority is not absolute. Not only I, but other people, can be wrong. Unwilling though I should be to disbelief them entirely, I cannot afford to be unreservedly credulous, nor should I expect them always unquestioningly to accept what I say. I need to be prepared to distance myself from their beliefs, as also from those I myself have been holding hitherto, and make a fresh assessment. Professor Waddington sees man’s having “authority-bearing systems” within his mind and some form of “self-objectification” as the springs of conscience and moral action.¹⁶ Certainly, I am often torn between

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¹³ See below §3.2.
¹⁴ See below, §3.2. and §15.3.
a presumption in favour of accepting knowledge-claims of other people and a lingering sense that I am somehow being marginalised, and that in the end it is up to me to make up my own mind about what is right and true.

For I, too, am an authority. It is for me, as an autonomous agent, to decide what to do, and hence I am the relevant authority on my future actions. I know what I am going to do. I also know, as Gilbert Ryle is reported as having said to an art critic, what I dislike. I am the authority on whether I have a headache or not. Similarly in the optician’s chair, I and I alone, am to be believed about how the left-hand letter on the bottom row appears to me. My knowledge claims are not based on my having been through a certified procedure to ensure accuracy or eliminate error; the question ‘How do you know’ is out of place because it is not a question of ‘how’ but of ‘who’. I, because I am me, am the relevant authority on my intentions, my preferences, my pains, my sense experience.

The difference between my first-personal authority and the third-personal authority of others creates tension. I know that I can think wrong. But so can you, so can they. I am rationally reluctant to work on the assumption that I am wrong, but others are not. But they too are rationally reluctant to work on the assumption that they are wrong. Each side feels its authority impugned, and seeks to defend it, adducing incontrovertible arguments in favour of the contention put forward, and probing the arguments of the other side, in order to be able to convict them of error. Instead of the two sides having the common purpose of sharing understanding, they have the opposed purposes of convicting the other side of error. Plato’s διαλεκτική (dialektike) gives way to ἐριστική (eristiké), and in the conflict some fragile flowers of insight are trampled under foot. Maybe they have their reasons, but I have my reasons, of which their reasons know nothing. It could be that they, for all their arguments, are missing something, perhaps because they have altered or distorted the topic under discussion, so that they are no longer addressing the question that is really in issue; or perhaps because they are failing to recognise the understanding I bring to the problem, or give any credence to the insights it generates. Thinkers have noticed this finer sensitivity which on occasion informs our judgements, and talk of empathy, verstehen and humane insight. In popular, unprofessional philosophy, it is called intuition,
and reckoned to be a predominantly feminine ability. Tolstoy devotes a chapter to it in *Anna Karenina.* Levin was far more intelligent than his wife, had read many more books, had pondered great matters far longer, could articulate his thoughts much more clearly: but his wife understood the situation, whereas he did not: she did not have to think, because she knew, whereas try as he might, his thinking could never resolve the problems, never even come to grips with it, let alone come to a conclusion. The feminine sensibility shown by Kitty Levin and Agafya Mkhoyloyna was nearly, but not quite, instinctive. It was like the reactions of animals in its immediacy and sureness, but unlike them in not being restricted to earthbound matters and in being refined by reflection and religion.

The difficulty Kitty Levin had in articulating her thought is due in part to inadequacies of language, but more fundamentally to the shift in viewpoints required. She needed to articulate reasons which seem cogent to her husband for a conclusion she had reached by some over-all assessment that seems cogent to her, though not to him. It is inherently difficult to oscillate between her first-personal viewpoint and his third-personal one, and achieve well-focused binocular vision from widely separated eyes. Intuition is in consequence often seen as giving support to some irrationalist position: but what is really being shown is that reason itself is not all of a piece, but has different varieties. The polemical reasoning that shows others to be wrong, and myself to be indisputably right is inevitably crude, and misses the finer subtleties as I explain every nuance in my agonizing over what to do. Rather than posit irrational powers of the mind, as many post-Kantian philosophers did, we should conclude that the power of reason had been unreasonably circumscribed, and that we could by reason attain an understanding that was sometimes right, though not indisputably so. It is a conclusion reached by many philosophers, but in the nature of the case not one easy to establish by coercive arguments as indisputably true. Tough-minded thinkers have therefore found it easy to ridicule talk of finer flights of reason that go beyond the range of coercive argument, and say dismissively that reasons of which the reason know nothing are not reasons at all. It is difficult to confute *l’ esprit de géométrie* when it is defiantly ignorant of

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27 Pt V, ch. 19.
other sorts of reasoning, but I shall in due course produce a proof *more geometrico* of the truth-fruitfulness of *l'esprit de finesse*.28

Even if we can vindicate the credentials of understanding, insight and judgement, tension remains. Polemical strategy imposes constraints on the free exercise of reason. There is pervasive pressure to formulate, even at the cost of distortion. There is also a preference for derivations—chains of argument, in which each step can be scrutinised separately, and for finitude, so that we can pursue an opponent until we have cornered him, and he must concede defeat, or, contrariwise, make our contention proof against all manner of objection. Coercive arguments can be framed, but at a price. Often the range of topics is limited: mathematicians cannot prove empirical truths, scientists cannot address moral issues. Often the argument is distorted and relevant factors excluded from consideration. And sometimes, especially with moral arguments, resentment is aroused, and we object to being made to do things by some moral law, instead of being able to decide for ourselves what we should choose to do. Coercive reason is all very well when I am telling you where you are wrong, where you get off, or what you have got to do, but inhibits my flights of fancy, my tentative insights, my explorations of the good life. It has its place in our thinking about thinking, because I may be wrong, you may be wrong, we may be wrong, they may be wrong. But it is also possible to think right, and we should be ready to recognise its non-coercive role, in explaining why I did what I did, and in inviting your understanding and support.

Although illuminating, a description of how human beings reason does not give foolproof guidance on how to reason. Human reasoning is fallible. In the face of that fact, it is not enough to maintain, as Strawson and others have done,29 that “ordinary usage is quite all right as it is”, and that since we do, as a matter of fact, reason in certain ways, these ways constitute the standards of what should count as good reasons. That would be to make reason immune to rational scrutiny. And while the presumption that any form of reasoning widely practised must be cogent is strong, it is not incontrovertible. As we have noted, astrology is much practised. Reason is concerned with what we ought to infer, believe, do; it cannot be conclusively decided by actual linguistic practice,

28 In §2.3.

29 See below, §3.4 n.14.
however weighty that may be in guiding our judgement as to what considerations are likely to be cogent. While, as we shall see later, there is nothing wrong with grounding a value judgement on a factual premise, and in that sense deriving an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’, there is something wrong in making the derivation hold by virtue of the way the terms are defined. If we define ‘cogent inference’ as an inference that conforms to the currently accepted standards, then we are committing an intellectual version of the naturalistic fallacy. It is not enough simply to characterize reason as a phenomenon: we need also to consider why we should be guided by reason, and in what way cogent arguments are to be identified, in the absence of any overall decision-procedure. If we address the former question first, and ask, in the words of J.S. Mill, what are the sanctions of reason—that is, what goes wrong if we go against it—we can distinguish different types of argument, and then we can formulate criteria which will enable us, within limits, to distinguish cogent arguments from those that carry no weight.