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FAREWELL TO THE PARADIGM-CASE  
ARGUMENT

By J. W. N. WATKINS

IN his introduction to *Essays in Conceptual Analysis* Professor Flew writes: "The clue to the whole business now seems to lie in mastering what has recently been usefully named, The Argument of the Paradigm Case" (p. 19). By "the whole business" I take it that Flew means the programme of linguistic philosophy. He is claiming, I think, that the ambitious idea of finally settling numerous perennial philosophical problems by appealing to the ordinary uses of words sheds all its implausibility and becomes obvious and undeniable once you have mastered the Paradigm-Case Argument (as I will call it for short). This is an engagingly optimistic claim. A competent second-year student of philosophy would not find this argument difficult to master or apply, and should therefore be able to settle finally problems which classical philosophers made desperate and often unavailing efforts to solve. And people say that philosophy is not progressive!

But, alas, the Paradigm-Case Argument is useless, as I shall try to show. Used uncritically, it "proves" the existence of far too much. But once the theory of meaning it presupposes has been made explicit, we shall find that the Paradigm-Case Argument appears to prove an embarrassingly large number of synthetic, existential statements only because this theory of meaning has a Delilah-like tendency to render impotent the very statements the argument is intended to prove or disprove, by transforming them into concealed tautologies and self-contradictions.

As I understand it, the Paradigm-Case Argument contains the following steps:

- (1) The meaning of a word is determined by its uses.
- (2) There are typical situations or paradigm cases to which anyone who understands a certain descriptive expression would be prepared to apply it unhesitatingly.
- (3) Such an expression acquires its meaning from its regular application to, and its meaning is usually taught by reference to, such paradigm situations. Thus we teach children the meaning of "red" by pointing to pillar-boxes, etc. As Flew puts it, the meaning of a term "can be elucidated by looking at simple

paradigm cases . . . such as those by reference to which the expression usually is, and ultimately has always to be, explained.”<sup>1</sup>

(4) Suppose that a metaphysician advances the thesis that nothing is really *p*, where “*p*” is some expression in ordinary language, such as (to use Flew’s example) “acting of his own free-will.” Our metaphysician obviously regards his thesis, and therefore “*p*” itself, as meaningful. But, the linguistic philosopher will say, “*p*” has a meaning precisely because there *are* standard situations to which it is applied, because paradigm cases *do* exist which give it its meaning. Therefore there *must* exist instances of *p*. The conclusion is that any metaphysical thesis of the form “nothing is really *p*” must be “*either* just wrong, because there certainly are cases such as our paradigms; *or* misleadingly using the key expression in some new sense needing to be explained” (*New Essays*, p. 151). The innuendo is, I take it, that if the metaphysician has given some extra-ordinary meaning to his expression we need not perplex ourselves over it.

Before attacking this argument I will disclose my motive for doing so. I like philosophy to be interesting. Other things being equal, the more challenging a philosophical thesis is, the more I sit up and attend to it. “Things are not as they seem. ‘Empty space’ is not really empty and where the roulette-wheel will stop is already determined”—that is the sort of thing I enjoy hearing argued. My eyelids begin to droop when a linguistic philosopher retorts that things are just as they seem, that empty space is, of course, empty, and that where the roulette-wheel will stop is, of course, a matter of chance. As I understand it, the Paradigm-Case Argument is a knock-down recipe for killing every interesting philosophical thesis stone dead. “Nothing happens by chance? My dear fellow, the word ‘chance’ gets its meaning precisely from the *existence* of such chancy things as roulette-wheels. How can you say that a meaningful word like ‘chance’—that is, a word with a use—has no use?”

Now to the attack. Accepted uncritically, the Paradigm-Case Argument proves far too much. This can be shown by an *ad hominem* argument. I gather that while Flew *knows* that there are acts of freewill he is sceptical about miracles. But this is inconsistent of him—at least if he allows that “miracle” is meaningful (and I do not see how a philosopher who appeals to ordinary language to settle philosophical issues can do other-

<sup>1</sup> *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, p. 150.

wise). The Paradigm-Case Argument “proves” the existence of miracles—and, indeed, of every other item in the ontological inventory of ordinary language—just as it “proves” the existence of freewill.

It is worth seeing just why this is so. Someone uncommitted to the Paradigm-Case Argument might suppose that there are at least three ways in which the word “miracle” might have acquired a meaning. (1) It might have been given a complex theoretical definition such as “an event which is in principle impossible to explain scientifically.” (2) Its meaning might have been indicated by referring to certain *conceivable* situations which *would* be miraculous if they occurred—if, for instance, a man who had been dead for a month were to revive, or if the sun were to stand still for an hour. (3) Finally, one might, I suppose, indicate its meaning by referring to certain *actual* events.

But a philosopher who is committed to the Paradigm-Case Argument is bound to insist that simple descriptive expressions can only acquire their meaning in the third way, from reference to paradigm cases which have actually existed. His aim is to prove that a metaphysician *must* be wrong if he asserts that nothing exists to which a certain familiar and meaningful descriptive term applies. But if the term had acquired its meaning from a complex theoretical definition or from reference to merely imagined paradigm-cases, the Paradigm-Case Argument would break down. Flew is therefore bound to insist that reference to actually existing paradigm cases is not merely a sufficient but a *necessary* condition for the meaningfulness of the expressions to which he applies the Paradigm-Case Argument, if it is to fulfil his high expectations. Thus in a passage already quoted he says that the meaning of a simple descriptive expression “ultimately *has always* to be” explained by reference to simple paradigm cases, and he invariably implies that such cases exist in the world and not merely in imagination. Thus “miracle” must, presumably, have acquired its meaning from *actual* paradigm cases. Thus the meaningfulness of “miracle” implies that miracles have occurred. Thus Flew should conclude that to deny the existence of miracles is either just wrong or perverse and misleading.

After deploying the Paradigm-Case Argument against denials of freewill, Flew remarks that “a moment’s reflexion will show that analogous arguments can be deployed against many philosophical paradoxes.” A further moment’s reflection will show that analogous arguments can be deployed against anyone who denies the existence in the world of a counterpart

to any non-compound noun or adjective in the *O.E.D.* (I will consider the question of compound terms later.)

In the 11th century St. Anselm argued that the idea of a thing than which nothing greater can be conceived entails the existence of that thing. In 1946 Professor Pap argued that the meaningfulness of "red" entails the existence of a red thing because "red" must have been defined ostensively.<sup>1</sup> The Paradigm-Case Argument appears to be a grandiose extension of these ontological arguments from the meaningfulness of a concept to the existence of instances of it.

Something has obviously gone wrong. What? It has been pointed out that the over-used word "use" is seriously ambiguous. Thus Mr. C. K. Grant, in a parenthesis in the course of a powerful paper in which he is stalking bigger game than I am after here, distinguishes (if I understand him right) between "use" in what might be called the syntactical sense that an expression has a function within some language-system, and "use" in what might be called the semantical sense that an expression has an extra-linguistic application.<sup>2</sup> The fact that an expression has a syntactical use does not imply that it has a semantical use—it may be meaningful without referring to anything. Mr. E. A. Gellner has pointed out that while the fact that a certain expression is commonly used in a certain way will *sometimes* imply that it is correctly so used, this is by no means always so. In a society without birth-registers, identity-cards, etc., the fact that someone is *called* Tommy will indeed imply that his name *is* Tommy. But in a more bureaucratically organised society like ours, the fact that someone is called Tommy is compatible with the fact that his real name is not Tommy but Theodosius.<sup>3</sup> It may be important to discover whether the person called Tommy is really Theodosius or not—Theodosius may have been bequeathed a legacy or be suspected of bigamy. Gellner's point was that interesting philosophical arguments are more analogous to an argument between solicitors, employing extra-linguistic criteria, about whether Tommy is really Theodosius, whereas ordinary-language philosophers are more analogous to friends of Tommy who dully insist that Tommy *is* Tommy.

The gist of these complaints about the abuse of "use" could, I think, be summarised by saying that loose talk about

<sup>1</sup> "Indubitable Existential Statements", *Mind*, July 1946.

<sup>2</sup> "Polar Concepts and Metaphysical Arguments", *Proc. Arist. Soc.*, 1955-6.

<sup>3</sup> "Use and Meaning", *The Cambridge Journal*, September 1951.

the meaning of a word being its use tends to blur the old distinction between connotation and denotation so that these two notions get confused together. The theory of meaning behind the Paradigm-Case Argument is that simple descriptive terms must be defined *ostensively* by pointing to paradigm instances. Thus the connotation of such terms is, if not exactly equivalent to, at any rate strictly dependent on, their denotation. According to this theory of meaning, to discover what such a term means we must *first* look at those things in the world which it typically denotes: we cannot first learn what it means and then look around the world to try to discover whether or not anything exists which is denoted by it.

To this denotative theory of the meaning of descriptive terms Flew admits one class of exceptions, namely compound descriptive terms which are not necessarily ostensively definable, but are built up from simple terms which are ostensively definable. He does not, so far as I know, offer any criterion for distinguishing between simple and compound descriptions. He seems, rather, to apply the distinction in an *ad hoc* way. When he is considering a description like "the first man to run a four-minute mile", which obviously need not apply to anything in the world, he calls it a compound description. But he denies that "acting of his own free-will" is a compound description<sup>1</sup> for no better reason, so far as I can see, than that he wishes to insist that an expression like this, which figures in philosophical debates, *does* have an application, so that a metaphysician who denies that it has any application is necessarily wrong.

But it is far from self-evident that "acting of his own free-will" is a simple, non-compound description. It may be trivial to point out that it is at least verbally complex in that it contains five words. But it is less trivial to point out that the dictionary only rarely refers you to paradigm cases (gold for "yellow", water for "wet", etc.) and that most of the nouns and adjectives in the dictionary are given complex verbal definitions rather than simple ostensive definitions. I have already mentioned "miracle"; and if, to take a random example, one looks up "vacuum" one finds a complex verbal definition, namely "space empty of matter". It may be that each of these three concepts is ostensively definable, but it so happens that their combination is not. Since "vacuum" does not get its meaning from ostensive definition there can be no inference from the

<sup>1</sup> "We are not dealing with some compound descriptive expression. . ." (*New Essays*, p. 150).

meaningfulness of "vacuum" to the existence of a vacuum in the world.

Why should we accept Flew's unargued contention that "acting of his own freewill" is like "yellow" and "wet" and unlike "miracle" and "vacuum" in *having* to be defined ostensively by reference to paradigm cases? I shall shortly offer reasons for rejecting this contention. In the meanwhile let us assume, for argument's sake, that Flew has unerringly picked out for treatment according to his "Paradigm-Case Argument" recipe only simple descriptive expressions which can indeed only be defined ostensively by pointing or referring to paradigm cases. Now if "*p*" has been *defined* by pointing to *a, b, c*, then "*a is p*" is a tautology and "*a is not p*" is a self-contradiction. Thus the Paradigm-Case Argument, which appeared at first sight to give us a new and wonderfully facile way of finding out what exists in the world (*i.e.* by finding out what descriptive words occur in the dictionary), in fact presupposes a denotative theory of meaning which has the unhappy consequence of depriving us of the ability to impart a lot of factual information garnered by examining the world. If "acting of his own freewill" has been *defined* by reference to such situations as that in which a man, under no social pressure, marries the girl he wants to marry, then *neither* the linguistic philosopher who "describes" Smith's marrying the girl of his choice under no social pressure as a free act, *nor* Smith's psychiatrist who, convinced that Smith is acting under an obsessional compulsion, "describes" his marriage as an unfree act—neither this philosopher nor this psychiatrist is making a factual statement about the freedom or unfreedom of Smith's act. The psychiatrist (over-occupied, no doubt, with the mental disorders of other people and insufficiently attentive to his own linguistic disorders) is simply contradicting himself, while the linguistic philosopher is simply uttering a tautology. Flew says that it is metaphysicians who misleadingly use words in new ways, but is not the linguistic philosopher doing just this when he solemnly reassures the student who is worried by the idea that everything people do was pre-determined long ago, that a person who marries the girl of his choice *is* acting freely? This sounds staunchly reassuring, but it is really a miserable tautology. We can apply to philosophers who wield the Paradigm-Case Argument a procedure similar to that which Mr. Hare advises us to apply to ethical naturalists.<sup>1</sup> For instance, we might have pointed out

<sup>1</sup> *The Language of Morals*, pp. 92-3.

to Susan Stebbing that although her whole object was to insist against Eddington that desks *are* solid, by making "solid" *mean* "of the consistency of such things as desks" she denied herself the ability to *assert* that desks are solid. In trying to strengthen her counter-assertion she went too far and transformed it into a tautology. And you cannot rebut anyone with a tautology.

My rebuttal of the Paradigm-Case Argument boils down to the simple and, it seems to me, obvious point that the meaning of most descriptive terms (including most of those which figure in philosophical controversies) cannot be taught merely by pointing to paradigm instances. Consider "spy". Being a spy is a self-effacing property. A large part of a spy's job consists in not displaying the fact that he is a spy. You can teach someone the meaning of "red" by pointing to pillar-boxes, etc., but you could hardly teach him the meaning of "spy" by pointing to spies (and if spies were all 100 per cent successful so that they never disclosed their spyhood to anyone except their employers, you certainly could not teach him the meaning of "spy" in this way). Spy-trials would be peculiar exercises if "spy" *were* defined ostensively. But since the connotation of "spy" is one thing and its denotation is another very different and far more problematical thing, it is a disputable, factual and not a trivial, verbal question whether the man in the dock is a spy.

Flew may protest that I misrepresent him when I say that he *defines* a descriptive expression "*p*" in terms of paradigm cases *a, b, c*. He may say that he only insists that *a, b, c* are obvious exemplifications of *p*. But the Paradigm-Case Argument requires that they should be *unquestionable* exemplifications and not merely *prima facie* illustrations. Everyone would concede that people found guilty of spying in civilised countries are *prima facie* paradigm instances of "spy". But everyone would also admit that it is logically possible that any of these people may have been the victim of a miscarriage of justice and that it is even conceivable that they have *all* been wrongly condemned and that no spy has ever existed. If Flew's paradigm cases are not made *necessary* exemplifications by definition but are merely offered as *prima facie* illustrations, then the metaphysician remains perfectly entitled to ask of any one of them whether it is a genuine example of the predicate in question, and even to ask whether the predicate has any genuine exemplification at all. If Flew wishes to stop metaphysics from assuming the role of



a court of appeal where not only particular commonsense judgements but whole classes of such judgements come up for review, he must insist that *some* commonsense attributions of such predicates as "responsible", "freewill", etc., are not merely plausible but *necessarily* correct. He can only do this by saying that a certain predicate "*p*" means such things as *a, b, c*. And he can only maintain this contention by saying that the predicate *p* has to be defined ostensively in terms of such paradigm cases as *a, b, c*.

We have already seen that this denotative theory of meaning would render Flew unable to assert precisely the things he most wants to assert. I shall conclude by showing that this theory does not apply to the kind of expression to which Flew tries to make it apply.

Most of the key terms which figure in the Freewill-Determinism controversy (and in other perennial philosophical controversies) are like "spy" and unlike "red" in that their meaning *cannot* be taught ostensively. Mosquitoes are *insects* and also the *causes* of bites and malaria. They display their insecthood (though rather less blatantly than red things display their redness) and you might teach someone the meaning of "insect" by pointing to, among other things, mosquitoes. But they do not *display* their causehood and you could not in the same way teach him the meaning of "cause" by pointing, among other things, to mosquitoes. Pointing just will not work here. You should refer him to Galileo, or Hume, or Mill, to a theoretical treatise rather than to "paradigm cases". The making of a path-breaking scientific discovery is an unpredictable happening, but it does not display its unpredictability and again you could not teach someone the meaning of "unpredictable" by referring him to, among other things, the achievements of Newton and Pasteur. You have to *explain* what you mean by "unpredictable". The painting of *The Last Supper* was a creative performance; but if someone were to paint a perfect copy of it, his painting would not *display* its imitativeness any more than Leonardo's *displays* its originality and creativity. You cannot, therefore, teach someone the meaning of "originality" and "creativity" by pointing to, among other things, *The Last Supper*. Nor can you teach someone the meaning of "freewill" by pointing to, among other things, smiling bridegrooms. Words like "cause", "law", "unpredictable", "novelty", "creativity", "freewill" have a theoretical rather than an ostensive meaning, and we cannot infer from their meaningful-

ness the necessary existence of exemplifications of them in the world.

To sum up. The linguistic philosopher who wishes to guillotine metaphysical debates by advancing the Paradigm-Case Argument is confronted by a dilemma. Either the connotation of any expression to which he applies the argument is determined by the chief items among its denotation or its connotation is prior to its denotation—an expression *p* must either be *defined*, or plausibly *illustrated*, by paradigm cases *a*, *b*, *c*. If he opts for the first alternative, he will transform those factual assertions he is most anxious to assert into tautologies, and you cannot kill metaphysics with this sort of paper shot. If he opts for the second alternative, his assertions to the effect that *a*, *b*, and *c* are paradigm instances of *p* will remain factual but also contingent and revisable assertions, and metaphysical debates about their truth or falsity may continue.

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