

COMMENTS ON MICHAEL DELLA ROCCA'S *THE ORIGINAL SIN OF ANALYTICAL PHILOSOPHY*

It is a great pleasure to comment on Michael's paper and an even greater pleasure to be cast as the defender of analytic philosophy. While I am not sure what analytic philosophy is, I am pretty sure that most of us here are considered practitioners of that dark art, including Michael. I will do my best defending him against himself.

1. Whence the mystery?

On a textbook view, Cartesian dualism faces an insurmountable difficulty: it posits two substances with nothing in common – pure thought and pure extension – and claims that they somehow interact. How could that be? The sense of mystery is undeniable but, as so often happens with mysteries, the underlying problem is elusive.

Perhaps the problem concerns *causation*. In her letter first raising the problem, Princess Elizabeth writes that to move the body the mind would have to make some sort of impact on it.¹ If impact is a transfer of some quality or quantity from cause to effect the problem is immediate: mind and body have incompatible natures, so nothing can be transferred from one to the other. But it is not clear that Descartes thinks causation works this way, and if he does then that is his mistake. The flagpole is a cause of its shadow, and yet, nothing whatsoever is being transferred from one to the other.

Perhaps then the problem concerns not causation, but *cohesion*. As Ann Conway writes “if spirit and body are so opposed to each other [...] what are those chains and ties which hold them so firmly together and for such a length of time”²? This is a fair question, but a poor candidate for being the source of the mystery. It was certainly not clear at Descartes's time what holds material objects together and it is not clear even today how our beliefs, desires, hopes, and fears make up a self. And yet, the existence a human body or of a human mind does not seem inexplicable in the way the existence of their union is.

Michael thinks the real problem for Descartes is not with causation, or coherence, or any other specific relation substance dualists might posit between mind and body. The problem is that they posit a relation at all. If mind and body are related in some way, we can ask *how* they are related, and the Principle of Sufficient Reason guarantees that this question must have an answer. But nothing in their disparate natures dictates any relation, so the question is ultimately unanswerable.

Not that Descartes does not attempt an answer. He points out that even though as far as the nature of mind and the nature of body are concerned, we could feel damage in the foot anywhere in the world, it is not an accident that we feel it just where the damage is. This is so, he contends, because “there is nothing else which would have been so conducive to the continued well-being of the body.”³ This does tell us something about how material damage and mental response are related and does so without positing a brute fact. Yes, the relation is established by divine imposition, but no, the imposition is not

¹ Atherton, pp. 11-12.

² Conway, *Principles*, 56.

³ Descartes, *Sixth Meditation*, CSM II 60-61.

arbitrary: it is guided by divine concern for the human body. The problem is that the explanation is incomplete: it tells us why we feel pain *where* we do, but it is silent on why we feel *pain* where we do. For the best arrangement of mind and body there must be some feeling where the damage is to make the mind alert to a need in the body, but this leaves the qualitative character of the feeling unaccounted for. For all Descartes told us, it could be that when I stub my toes I should experience sweltering heat or an irritating itch in my toe rather than the pulsating pain I actually do. The mystery that needs explaining is the emergence of a *qualia* and Descartes has nothing whatsoever to offer on that score.

2. Questions of unity

A heap of sand is unmysterious: take a grain of sand, and another, and another, and eventually you get a heap. The grains have their colors, shapes, weights, which, together with their arrangement, determine the color, shape, and weight of the heap. A Manhattan is also unmysterious: two ounces of whiskey, one ounce of vermouth, some bitters, and there you have it. The ingredients each bring their unique character, which blend in a predictable way. Perhaps sentences are also unmysterious: linguists seek to explain what they mean on the basis of the meanings of their constituent words and the syntactic frame into which they are inserted. When this sort of bottom up explanation fails, we say that a composite entity has *genuine unity*: it is somehow more than a mere heap, mix, or assemblage of parts. Genuine unity is mysterious.

Descartes faces an instance of a general problem: how to explain that disparate entities (in this case, a *res cogitans* and a *res extensa*) form a genuine unity, something with emergent properties (in this case, the ability to have bodily sensations). Michael thinks Descartes cannot resolve this problem because no instance of the general schema is resolvable. Non-compositional compounds are always inexplicable. Philosophers whose system admits a genuine unity must accept a brute fact in defiance of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, which, according to Michael, is one of their “darkest hours”. Analytic philosophy was conceived in sin: its founders knowingly (albeit sometimes reluctantly) embraced the darkness. Here are their five transgressions:

1. *Frege on the unity of proposition*. FUNCTION and OBJECT are disparate things but they can form a unity (i.e. a proposition⁴) with an emergent characteristic (i.e. TRUTH).
2. *Frege on the unity of judgment*. CONTENT and ASSENT⁵ are disparate things but they can form a unity (i.e. an act of judgment) with an emergent characteristic (i.e. CORRECTNESS GIVEN THE EVIDENCE).
3. *Russell on the unity of conclusion*. INFERENCE and RATIFICATION⁶ are disparate things but they can form a unity (i.e. an act of conclusion) with an emergent characteristic (i.e. CORRECTNESS GIVEN THE PREMISES).
4. *Moore on the unity of experience*. OBJECT and SENSATION are disparate things but they can form a unity (i.e. an episode of experience) with an emergent characteristic (i.e. VERIDICALITY).

⁴ Frege’s term is ‘Gedanke’, which is typically translated as ‘thought.’ Since Frege distances himself from psychological connotations, ‘proposition’ is a better term to use.

⁵ Frege uses the terms ‘anerkennung’ and ‘fürwahrhalten’. Assent is a mental act conventionally (but defeasibly) indicated by the use of declarative mood in natural languages.

⁶ This is my own term; Russell does not introduce any. I call ratification the mental act conventionally (but defeasibly) indicated by ‘therefore’ in English. I don’t like Michael’s term ‘robust assertion’ because I think the moral of Carroll’s Paradox is that ratification is irreducible to assent.

5. *Russell on the unity of fact.* RELATA and RELATION are disparate things but they can form a unity (i.e. a fact) which has an emergent characteristic (i.e. OBTAINING).

There are ways to reduce the number of transgressions of analytic philosophy. One could identify facts with true propositions and subsume 5. under 1. One could adopt the view that in experience we make a judgment (which is somehow suppressed when we think we are under an illusion) and subsume 4. under 2. One could maintain that to assent to the proposition p is to ratify the inference from p to itself and subsume 2. under 3. So, perhaps the only unresolved mysteries are the unity of proposition and the unity of conclusion. Two transgressions are better than five, but still two more than rationalists would permit.

Michael meticulously documents how Frege, Russell, and Moore confess their sins: they say the relevant unities as primitive and they acknowledge their inexplicability. Of course, inexplicability is not the same as incomprehensibility: the founders of analytic philosophy thought that we understand perfectly well what propositions, judgments, conclusions, experiences, and facts are without any sort of definition or explication of their nature. Descartes thought the same about the union of mind and body, maintaining that we all have a perfectly good grasp on it as long as we are “availing ourselves only of life and ordinary conversations” and “abstain from meditating and studying things that exercise the imagination.”⁷ But for a true rationalist, this is sheer obfuscation.

3. Collapse into nihilism?

Michael is a philosophical radical who cannot be intimidated by conflict with common sense. The position he reaches in his book, *The Parmenidean Ascent, is strict monism*: the denial of any distinction in Being. He gets there by a relentless use of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. But I think he stops one step sort of his true destination.

Michael says that whenever we have disparate things related to one another the Principle of Sufficient Reason demands an explanation of how they are related. That’s surely right. But the mention of disparateness is otiose: whenever we have x and y related via R , we can always ask in virtue of what are they so-related. According to the Principle of Sufficient Reason, this question must have an answer – if *everything* has a sufficient reason then surely x and y being related via R has a sufficient reason, no matter what x , y , and R might be. Let then x and y both be Being, and let R be identity. Strict monists have to face the question in virtue of what is Being self-identical, which (assuming that necessarily, everything is self-identical) is just a version of the Big Question: “Why is there something rather than nothing?” For Michael, Being must be its own explanation.

Michael rejects finite explanatory loops: it can’t be that x_1 explains x_2 , x_2 explains x_3 , ... , and x_n explains x_1 . But a self-explanation *is* a finite explanatory loop, so it is not clear why it should not be allowed. And if Being is self-explanatory there is no principled objection to the usual practice of calling all sorts of trifling truths self-explanatory: that it is raining or it isn’t, that bachelors are unmarried, that $2 + 2 = 4$, that nothing can be at different places at the same time, that happiness is a good thing, and so on and on and on. A rationalism that blurs the distinction between what is obvious and what is self-explanatory cannot use the Principle of Sufficient Reason as Michael wants to: as a bomb to blow up all of

⁷ Atherton, p. 18.

metaphysics. For a true radical, explanation must be irreflexive. For Michael, Being cannot be its own explanation.

There is a way out of the quandary: to abandon monism and embrace nihilism. If there really is nothing, the Principle of Sufficient Reason is unquestionably vindicated – it is vacuously true. The question “Why is there something rather than nothing?” does not arise (since it has a false presupposition), and the question “Why is there nothing rather than something?” is easily answered: there is nothing because the Principle of Sufficient Reason rules out all relations, *including identity*.

That’s the path of unflinching radicalism. For the rest of us, timid philosophers (analytic or otherwise), there is the path of the unprincipled theoretical life. But we don’t have to give up the Principle of Sufficient Reason – it’s enough if we embrace our ignorance. Perhaps there really *are* explanations for everything, even if we can’t imagine what they would look like. For a long time everyone believed that $2 + 2 = 4$ is fundamental truth that can be immediately grasped, but never proved. Leibniz thought otherwise,⁸ and his boldness shifted our thinking about what counts as proof and explanation in mathematics. I believe this could happen to any truth we are inclined to deem inexplicable. Explanations must *halt* somewhere, but they needn’t *end* where we happen to run into some difficulty. What reason would there be for that?

⁸ Leibniz, *Nouveaux essais* IV.vii.10